

IDENTITY AND THE PARALYSIS OF CHOICE IN SYLVIA PLATH'S THE BELL JAR: THE METAPHOR OF THE FIG TREE

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18113062>

Abstract. This research paper examines the “Fig Tree” metaphor in Sylvia Plath’s semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. It explores the psychological struggle of the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, as she tries to choose an identity in the 1950s. The paper analyzes how the “Feminine Mystique” and social pressure created a “double bind” for women, where they were forced to choose between a career and a family. By looking at the results of Esther’s indecision, this study shows that “madness” was often a result of having no acceptable way to be a successful woman and a creative artist at the same time.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, identity crisis, Feminine Mystique, domesticity, choice, mental illness.

Introduction. In the middle of the twentieth century, American and British women lived in a society that focused heavily on the family. After World War II, women were encouraged to leave their jobs and return to the home. Political leaders like Richard Nixon believed that the “domestic mother” was a symbol of national safety. This culture created what Betty Friedan called the “Feminine Mystique”, a myth that said women could only be happy if they were housewives and mothers.

Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) tells the story of nineteen-year-old Esther Greenwood, who feels trapped by these expectations. Esther is a brilliant student who wins a prestigious internship in New York, but she becomes depressed because she cannot see a future that allows her to be herself. The most important symbol of her struggle is the “Fig Tree”, which represents her inability to choose one single life path. This paper will explain how the pressure to choose led to Esther’s mental breakdown and how Plath used this image to critique the limited roles given to women.

Methods. This research uses a feminist literary analysis and a biographical approach. It examines the text of *The Bell Jar* alongside Plath’s personal journals and letters. The study applies theories from Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir to understand the social environment of the 1950s. The paper also uses the concept of “discursive formation” by Michel Foucault to show how society defines what is normal and what is “mad”. By comparing these sources, we can see that Esther’s paralysis was not just a personal failure, but a result of a society that did not allow women to have “everything”.

Results. The Meaning of the Fig Tree. In the seventh chapter of the novel, Esther Greenwood describes her life branching out like a green fig tree. She sees a “wonderful future” beckoning from every branch in the form of a “fat purple fig”. Each fig represents a different identity:

- **The Domestic Fig:** A husband, a happy home, and children.
- **The Intellectual Fig:** A famous poet, a brilliant professor, or an amazing editor.
- **The Adventurous Fig:** Travel to Europe, Africa, and South America, or having a pack of lovers.

The Problem of Mutual Exclusivity. Esther wants “each and every one” of these figs.

However, she feels that choosing one fig means she must lose all the others forever. In her society, it was impossible for a woman to be a successful professional and a devoted mother at the same time. This is called a “mutually exclusive” choice. Because Esther cannot decide which part of herself to give up, she sits in the “crotch” of the tree, unable to move.

Starvation and Stasis. The result of Esther’s indecision is that she begins to “starve to death”. While she sits there waiting, the figs begin to “wrinkle and go black”. One by one, they “plop to the ground” at her feet. This “starvation” is a metaphor for her loss of identity and her mental breakdown. By not choosing any identity, she loses all potential versions of herself.

Discussion. *The Feminine Mystique and the Double Bind.* The fig tree metaphor is a direct response to the “Problem That Has No Name”. Betty Friedan explained that many housewives felt empty because they were told that being a mother was their only “natural” vocation. If a woman wanted a career, she was labeled “neurotic” or “unfeminine”. Esther faces this “double bind” throughout the novel. When she is in New York, she sees models of femininity that she cannot accept. For example, her boss Jay Cee is a successful editor but is described as “ugly”, suggesting that intelligence and beauty do not go together for women.

The Arrow and the Anchor. Plath uses another metaphor to show this inequality: the “Arrow and the Anchor.”, Esther’s boyfriend, Buddy Willard, tells her that a man is like an “arrow into the future”, but a woman is the “place the arrow shoots off from”. This means the man gets to have the career and the movement, while the woman is just his support system. Esther rejects this idea. She says she wants to “shoot off in all directions” like a rocket. Her struggle to be an “arrow” instead of an “anchor” is what makes her feel “mad” in a world that wants her to stay still. *Double Standards and Purity.* The paralysis of choice is also linked to the double standards of the 1950s.

Esther is frustrated that men can have a “double life” (being sexually active while appearing pure), but women must remain “chaste” to be desirable for marriage. Her mother sends her an article called “In Defense of Chastity”, which tells her that a woman’s only power is her virginity. Esther realizes that marriage in her time is a “transaction” where a woman gives up her independence for security. This objectification makes the “domestic fig” look like a prison to her.

Madness as an Inevitable Choice. In Plath’s culture, being “mentally healthy” for a woman meant accepting a submissive role. If a woman wanted to be a poet, she was seen as “other” or “deranged”. Luke Ferretter argues that to be a woman in that time was to be “on the verge of mental illness”. Esther eventually realizes that the only way to escape the “stifling” domestic role is through the “option of madness”. Her breakdown is a “conscious choice” to reject a life that would choke her creativity. The “bell jar” of madness is a paradoxical place—it traps her, but it also protects her from the social pressures she cannot handle.

Conclusion. The “Fig Tree” in *The Bell Jar* is a powerful symbol of the impossible choices women faced in post-war America. It shows that the “Problem That Has No Name” was not just about boredom, but about a systematic loss of self.

Esther Greenwood's "starvation" reflects the hunger of a whole generation of women who wanted to be more than just "the place an arrow shoots off from". Ultimately, Plath shows that when a society limits a woman's identity to a single role, it drives her to the edge of destruction.

The blackening figs are a reminder that a human spirit needs the freedom to "shoot off in all directions" in order to truly live.

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