

THE PROBLEM OF MATURATION

In *The Catcher in The Rye* by J.D. Salinger, and in

***The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1-10
CHAPTER I: SOCIETAL STRUGGLES.....	11-30
CHAPTER II: THE THEME OF DEATH.....	31-52
CHAPTER III:SYMBOLISM IN <i>THE BELL JAR</i> AND IN <i>THE CATCHER IN THE RYE</i>	53-73
CONCLUSION.....	74-81
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	82-83

INTRODUCTION

In *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, the two protagonists experience a similar sense of alienation and an inability to deal with growing into their gender roles as adults in their society. These novels have in fact been viewed as a mirror image of one another in the Foreword to the 1999 Perennial Classics edition of *The Bell Jar*: “*The Bell Jar* sailed right onto the bestseller list and despite some complaining reviews, it quickly established itself as a female rite-of-passage novel, a twin to *Catcher in the Rye*” (McCullough, xii), and the *New Statesman* review of *The Bell Jar* “perceptively referred to it as a novel like J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*” (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 198-99). Esther Greenwood and Holden Caulfield are at a similar stage in life, facing the struggle of growing into acceptable adult gender roles, and they are both unable to come to terms with their position in society. Readers can see many meaningful similarities between these two famous characters.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the story is told as Holden is looking back at the preceding events from the perspective of the psychiatric institution he has been admitted to, and the final chapter tells the reader how far Holden may have developed: “A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keep asking me if I’m going to apply myself when I go back to school next September. It’s such a stupid question in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you’re going to do till you do it?” (214).

Salinger clearly leaves the reader uncertain about Holden's future at the end of the novel. There are signs that he has stabilized to a certain extent, but he has retained many of his rebellious attitudes and has certainly not yet found a stable, desirable place for himself. Readers are left uncertain if Holden is ready to face his society here at the end of the book. Will he go back to his old pattern of behavior and flunk out of yet another school? Or has he, with some help from his little sister Phoebe, come to realize that even idealists have to compromise from time to time?

Although Esther and Holden go through different journeys, they are both in a precarious position when the novels end. In the final stages of *The Bell Jar*, Esther is leaving the psychiatric institution where she has been living for a while: "I hoped, at my departure, I would feel sure and knowledgeable about everything that lay ahead- -after all, I had been 'analyzed'. Instead, all I could see were question marks"(243). Esther has stabilized and certainly improved at her institution, but her problems were of course much more serious than Holden's to start with. At the institution she seems to have gained new strength, as the bell jar is lifted, at least for the time being. But readers are still left uncertain about her final destiny as she steps into her old environment. It is uncertain if she will succeed in finding a suitable position for herself, when faced with her old struggles. Esther has exhibited a very fragile psyche, and it would therefore not be unlikely to imagine that she would experience another breakdown sometime in the future, although the fact that she has a child at the time of the telling of the story makes us more hopeful that she has finally come to terms with herself.

The Bell Jar is in many ways an autobiographical novel, as it is strongly connected to Plath's own experience of growing up. The author, in fact, explained in the "Biographical Note" to the novel that:

"What I've done is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color--it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown...I tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar"(Ames, 262).

After reading this, Sylvia's mother was reluctant to have the novel published in the United States, as Mason Harris explains in his chapter on *The Bell Jar*: "Her mother thought this admission amply justified blocking publication of the novel in the U.S. on grounds that it contained unkind caricatures of a number of people 'whom Sylvia loved' when she was sane" (Wagner, 34). Sylvia Plath did not herself feel like hiding the fact that this novel was so strongly connected to her own life, as the statement in the "Biographical Note" makes clear. Sylvia's own struggle with depression and her suicide in 1963 are also well known to the public. The novel received strong criticism for its intimate and seemingly factual portrayal of characters not only by Plath's mother: "Jane V. Anderson, a psychiatrist at Harvard, sued the Plath estate in 1987, claiming she was the basis for *The Bell Jar*'s lesbian suicide character, and disclaiming the lesbianism, the seduction, and the suicide"(Macpherson, 80). Because of the author's decision to express herself so openly, she apparently affected those around her strongly, and received strong criticism for it.

Plath and Salinger expressed very different attitudes to the public. Plath is often viewed as a confessional poet and did not hide away from the public, but was very open about her personal struggles and did not object when her personal life was often

compared by critics to her fiction. It seems that she has used her own personality and serious problems intentionally and openly in her works. She has commented that *The Bell Jar* was “an autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past” (261). To write for Plath, then, seemed to be a sort of cleansing process, a way to deal with her personal struggles in order to move on, and this need seemed greater than the criticism she often met as an author and a public persona.

This is quite the opposite in the case of Salinger. In relation to all of his work and especially *The Catcher in the Rye*, he has been determined to remain silent and off limits. It is as if the author could not stand the success and fame that his work produced. Like a true Holden Caulfield, he rejected the media and the public eye, he was an author who wanted to stay invisible behind his work, so it is no wonder that little certain information is known about him. Salinger has been unwilling to share any personal information, or to comment on the book, as Ian Hamilton experienced in his *Search for J.D Salinger*: “

Salinger berated me for harassing his family...He didn't suppose he could stop me from writing a book about him, but he thought he ought to let me know- 'for whatever little it may be worth'-that he had suffered so many intrusions on his privacy that he could endure no more of it-not 'in a single lifetime'”(Hamilton, 7).

Salinger was obviously not delighted about the overwhelming interest and fame he experienced as his novel became so popular. Hamilton finds possible connections between the novel and author after careful investigation, but Salinger himself chose to remain hidden. This attitude may be seen in Holden Caulfield too: “Besides, I'm not going to tell you my whole goddamn autobiography or anything...I mean that's all I told D.B. about, and he's my *brother* and all...Now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute”(1-2). Holden expresses contempt for Hollywood, the film industry, the

movies, and everything mainstream and commercialized. This fits well with the author's persona, as he has chosen to shy away from the spotlight and is annoyed by the overwhelming interest in him and his book.

The need to criticize and often reject what is imposed by their society and surroundings and the inability to live within it, is a strong theme in both novels. The internal and external struggle to grow up in relation to the values that society tries to impose on you, can be seen in both characters, and this constitutes an important part of what leads to their breakdowns. Esther Greenwood and Holden Caulfield experience very different forms of breakdowns, but they are faced with many of the same struggles from their past and present that prevent them from developing into reasonably well-adjusted adults.

Esther's struggle can be seen as primarily internal, since she is going through a psychological illness that eventually leads to her suicide attempt and institutionalization. She can also be seen as a victim of her society, what it entails to be a woman within it, her upbringing and general background. Holden is strongly influenced by but reluctant to live within his surroundings. When Esther, often metaphorically, expresses her internal emotions and sufferings, Holden provides a critique of his society, its institutions and 'phony' characters. His ongoing revolt against all that goes on around him is finally seen to be intimately related to his own internal struggles and a difficult past he has not sufficiently dealt with. It is obvious that when the characters experience internal struggles, their surroundings will often be viewed negatively, but Esther's depression and breakdown should be seen as much more serious than Holden's.

Holden and Esther do, however, have many similarities. Both novels take place in the Northeast, especially New York, during the early 1950's. They seem to come from a similar middle-class background, although Holden's family is more affluent than Esther's. They can both aspire to live prosperous lives as they are intelligent, with a stable economic background and plenty of opportunities to succeed in their environment. These positive things can unfortunately not really help them, since they are both so frustrated and maladjusted. Esther and Holden are both facing a struggle to reconcile with inevitable maturation. To grow into and accept their gender roles and other social roles seems very hard to do. This inability is expressed as a feeling of being stuck or trapped, and in a corresponding desire to flee or isolate themselves. It is to be noted that the novels take place in the early 50's, thus preceding the Protest Movement (1954-1972). Angelean Vandora Smith has observed in her dissertation:

“ The Protest Movement was an attempt by many individuals involved in mass activities to force America to examine its institutions, myths, systems and images as harbingers of inauthenticity and to restructure them so that societal boundary situations no longer existed...The initial components of the Protest Movement were the Civil Rights Movement, the Student Liberation Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement which all became parts of the general Counter-Cultural Movement of the times” (Smith, p 2).

Prior to this time period, the struggles of people like Esther and Holden were hardly recognized by society. The struggle involved in growing into one's gender roles to face adulthood with its fixed expectations, was not in focus on the social agenda, so this became a personal and lonesome struggle. The Women's Liberation Movement of the sixties and seventies made sure that the public started to recognize the inequality of women as a minority to a greater degree, as women united publicly and demanded a change. Still, the problems faced by Esther and Holden were not only in relation to their

own time, as there are numerous examples of the same expressions in contemporary literature, film and music. Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* can be seen as a modern-day version of *The Bell Jar*, as it portrays a young woman's struggle with depression, suicide and recovery. In her Foreword to *The Bell Jar*, Frances McCullough comments on the novel's relevance in contemporary American society:

“And what about the novel's larger relevance to today's younger reader? At a time where Holden Caulfield's sensitivities seem unrelated to the hard edges of today's world for many readers, does *The Bell Jar* still have any meaning? After all, the novel was pre-drugs, pre-Pill, pre-Women's studies. In the survivalist mode of the 90's, suicide may seem like a loser's option. But the adolescent suicide rate has quadrupled since World War II, and if suicide isn't quite as romantic as it was when *The Bell Jar* was first published here, statistics indicate that it's definitely on the rise. Depression has become almost epidemic in America in the meantime” (McCullough, xiii).

These facts should be seen as a good reason for why *The Bell Jar* today still is so widely read by adolescents worldwide. Today, Esther's problems are much more common, and they are recognized to a larger degree in our contemporary society than at her time. The growing number of suicides among young Americans is only one factor that makes this novel relevant to our own day and age. The fact that suicides have quadrupled just goes to show the seriousness of Esther's dilemmas, and this novel illustrates very well the often tragic and troubled state of adolescence in America. The great importance of this novel cannot be overestimated when it is proven to illustrate so accurately such a common and growing problem among young Americans. I would also imagine that Holden's sensitivity is not as unrelated to today's world as McCullough seems to think. The problems Holden experiences in his surroundings have certainly become much greater today as mass media and other aspects of society that Holden is turned off by have become increasingly dominant, and I still think that Holden's view of

his surroundings can be well understood by young readers in American society today. As these factors have become ever more important, readers do not have to have Holden's sensitivity to feel these pressures, and the contemporary audience is therefore certainly able to relate to Holden's character and situation.

This revolt against a superficial society, and how the masses are led and taken in by it, is found in much contemporary, art, music, literature and entertainment. The feeling that one cannot be oneself and develop freely, but have to adjust to more or less meaningless conventions is certainly widely shared in the contemporary world. Holden is disturbed and confused because of these expectations that he feels are constantly put upon him and that in many ways prevent him from developing according to his own values and to figure out who he really is. He does not believe in and is reluctant to live by society's 'phony' rules, but is then struck by a strong sense of alienation, since there is no place for him to belong. He is therefore tempted into delusions and dreams of running away and finding a place for himself outside of all this 'nonsense' as he expresses it to Sally Hayes:

“What we could do tomorrow morning we could drive up to Massachusetts and Vermont, and all around there, see. It's beautiful as hell up there... We'll stay in these cabin camps... I could get a job somewhere... we could get married or something... Honest to God, we would have a terrific time! Wuddaya say?”(132).

He cannot, of course, go through with this. He knows this well, but it is out of desperation that Holden proposes this to Sally. He is fed up with everything and does not know how to live with himself or in his society. In many ways readers will recognize that Holden is not only running away from his society, but from his own traumatic past as well. Holden has a past he has not dealt with in a satisfactory way. His difficult surroundings mirror his troubled psyche. Society has certainly not improved for young

America since Holden's time and there are many contemporary issues in society that can be related to Holden's situation.

In his article "The Holden Caulfield Syndrome", Mark Mordue quotes Peter Kuch on how the time of the novel can be compared with the political situation in contemporary society:

"Whether he knew it or not, when Salinger was writing the book there was also all this stuff going on behind the scenes in America, a lot of misinformation the public was not made aware of. Just as the book was published you're moving straight into the McCarthy era and Cold War paranoia. Now it's international terrorism and new imperialism. There's something in the novel that chimes with these times again. Which is where the connection with Eminem probably comes in too. Because *The Catcher in the Rye* has this language of protest that is not being heard" (Mordue, 5).

Kuch argues that in contemporary America the public is faced with the same kind of looming fear that existed during the Cold War era, at the time the novel was published. This is perhaps why we find so many examples of Holden in literature, music and film in America today. The problems they have with gender, sex and the revolt against society are common contemporary problems, and this is perhaps why these novels are still read and appreciated as much now as they were when they were first published. Also, it is noteworthy that these problems are more commonly accepted and understood today than they were then. *The Catcher in the Rye* was met with criticism and even censorship when it was published in 1951:

"Indeed, censorship and *The Catcher in the Rye* are almost synonymous...early reviews of the novel appeared in *Catholic World* and *Christian Science Monitor* – reviews that condemned Salinger for recounting 'immorality and perversion' – certainly set the tone for the formal censorship that was not far off. In 1960, for example, *Catcher* was removed from the library and recommended reading list at a high school in San Jose, California" (Salzman, 14).

Even though the novel was widely criticized and censored in conservative quarters, the popularity it achieved among its readers could finally not be overlooked. Today the novel is commonly used in high school, has been translated into numerous languages, and is read and admired worldwide.

Esther could be seen as a character who took female suffering upon herself. Her psychological sufferings were not understood even by her own mother: “My mother said the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody who was worse off than you” (Plath, 161). Readers can well imagine that the mother must have felt helpless, but she is obviously oblivious to the seriousness of Esther’s clinical depression. Esther’s first experience with electroshock therapy shows that professionals like Doctor Gordon are equally unable to help her: “with each flash a great jolt dubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done”(Plath, 143). Esther’s depression is not taken seriously at first either, she is in this a ‘test case’ for these inadequate methods, but finally she seems to receive more effective help, as Doctor Nolan takes her under her wings.

CHAPTER I SOCIETAL STRUGGLES

Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood are both strongly influenced by their respective environments. As both novels are set at a similar time in the Northeast, it is perhaps not surprising that they are both experiencing comparable social and political pressures, which can be seen in relation to their struggles. They both come from a similar middle-class background and are constantly exposed to the growing mass-media and the popular culture that imposes its conventional American values upon them. These characters can both be seen as hypersensitive and are therefore so intensely influenced and often emotionally wounded by their surroundings. They can also be seen as characters that choose to be aware of the society around them; they both would rather see the truth and suffer for it than hide behind an imposed mask which represents the accepted norms.

As John Seelye explains in his article called "Holden in the Museum", *The Catcher in the Rye* was written during the late 40's and can be seen in relation to that decade:

"The novel may be identified with the antiestablishmentarian attitude of fifties intellectuals, who contributed to its popularity, as a deposit of cultural stuff it is demonstrably a product of the forties, the period during which *Catcher* was *conceived* and written. Incubated during the last years of the Second World War, published in the middle of the Korean War, and having a definable impact on the literary context of the Vietnam War, *The Catcher in the Rye* is itself a war novel once removed, a subliminal war novel in which not a shot is fired but the process of conscription is well under way" (Salzman, 25).

Readers can see *The Catcher in the Rye* in relation to the unrest within society and could imagine that Salinger was influenced by living in this time of war and strong political pressures when he wrote the novel. The environment in the novel, and the struggles of its

protagonist, can be seen as typical of the postwar period, as James Lundquist explains in his chapter “Against Obscenity: The Catcher in the Rye”:

“What we find out about directly in the novel is, of course what happened to Salinger’s hero-narrator, Holden Caulfield; but we also find out what has happened generally to human ideas on some simple and ultimate questions in the years following World War II. Is it still possible to reconcile self and society? Is it any longer possible to separate the authentic from the phony? What beliefs are essential for survival? What is the role of language in understanding the nature of reality? Is it possible to create value and endow the universe with meaning?” (Lundquist, 37).

Holden can be seen as a typical character of his time, according to Lundquist, and his dilemmas can also be related to his time and place, as he expresses the emptiness and existentialist despair that is so prominent within the postwar environment. Holden is presented as being in a kind of existentialist limbo where he can see no desirable future in his environment as it is, as Lundquist further explains: “In describing Holden’s predicament, one cannot avoid using existential platitudes, for Holden is, undoubtedly, in the midst of an existential crisis”(Lundquist, 38).

Esther Greenwood appears about 10 years after Holden, since *The Bell Jar* was written during the early 60’s and first published in 1963. This novel is influenced by Plath’s personal experience working at a magazine in New York in the early 50’s, and it is often seen as strongly autobiographical. Esther, like Holden, can be seen as a typical character of her time, one who in many ways struggles with problems that are typical of her time and place. Pat Macpherson explains this in her chapter “Coming Apart in the Atomic Age”:

“Esther, like millions of her fellow citizens in the 1950’s, burrows inward to find and repair the sub-atomic psychic fissure responsible for her nervous condition. Identifying the cause and treatment of her maladjustment is the business of a growth industry of experts, from teen magazines to psychiatrists”(Macpherson, 6)

Macpherson here relates Esther's psychological problems to her environment, and while some readers might find Esther's condition caused predominantly by more internal and personal problems, we can see clearly that Esther also finds obstacles that limit her and make her gradually more depressed in her social environment. The pressures she feels in relation to being a woman are seen as a common struggle of women at this time

Seelye explains how Holden can be seen as a typical adolescent of the postwar period:

“The forties finally was our last great age of innocence, and Holden stands at the exit point, trying to hold everybody back from the fifties. Indeed it is very difficult to imagine any role for him in the world of television and rock'n' roll. He is intensely a forties kid, a movie kid, a Bogart boy, and the wonder is the extent to which he could nourish the kinds of kids brought up on television and the Beatles” (Salzman,29).

The *Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951, and thus became popular with adolescents coming of age during that decade. His popularity grew even larger with the baby boomers of the sixties and seventies, and young people still identify with his dilemmas that to an extent are timeless. Seeing Holden at the “exit point, trying to hold everybody back”, brings associations to his catcher-fantasy, where he tries to hold children back from adulthood, and perhaps he can be seen as dreading not only what is to come as one grows into adulthood, but dreading the direction in which society is heading in the next decade. The loss of childhood innocence can then be seen as being parallel to the loss of innocence in the 1940's, as he is heading towards a decade where media, television and technology will make such a loss inevitable.

Holden's critique of things like Hollywood movies can also be viewed as a critique of a society that is built on false or empty values, as Seelye explains:

“The forties was a decade without a distinctive milieu, with very little to call its own, except the Second World War and the Willis Jeep. Cars, costumes, dances, furniture, movies, all were aftereffects of the thirties, furnishing out a long wait for the second explosion of popular culture in the fifties. Salinger’s book, I think, draws terrific power from the emptiness of the forties” (Salzman, 28).

The forties are seen here as an “empty” decade, as a kind of blank space between the thirties and fifties, where the aftermath of the war and social readjustments define the mood of the decade. Holden is lost within this ‘empty’ environment, and he is disturbed by the growing commercialization and materialism that make the emptiness underneath more obvious. Such existentialist despair is typical in much postwar literature, and such pressure increased during the fifties and finally exploded during the sixties, when society finally made some drastic changes.

Holden expresses strong revulsion towards the phoniness he experiences in his society. He is disappointed that his brother D.B. has ‘sold out’ to Hollywood and is part of something that Holden views as fake and shallow. Holden, in fact, constantly experiences this phoniness in people around him, and it seems that this outlook has much to do with his mental state. He is literally sickened by a society he sees as fake, cold and loveless. Children are the only ones not yet corrupted by this phoniness, as he sees it.

He is on the edge of the cliff, holding on to childhood innocence, but he fears that his fall is inevitable. With acute awareness, he reacts to what he sees as the loveless, even perverse, cynicism in his environment, and the pressure to act his part in it becomes greater as he grows older. James Lundquist explains how Holden Caulfield could be seen as a character that rebels against this type of environment in American twentieth-century society:

“ Holden refuses to relate to others the way his society with its idea of ‘other direction’ would have him do. He refuses to go to the football game and cheer his

heart out for old Pencey the way most of his fellow students do. He refuses to participate in classes the way he is expected to. He rejects the attitudes toward sex that he is supposed to learn from the more experienced Stradlater...He is uncomfortable in his twentieth-century social setting and the demands it places on him, and it is his desire to return to the older 'inner-directed' world (his dream is to go out west and live in a log cabin the way people used to do in the nineteenth century). (Lundquist, 65).

Lundquist places Holden within the larger time frame of the first half of the twentieth century, and the developments at mid-century are at least partly responsible for Holden's dilemmas. At this time society can be seen as becoming increasingly fast-paced and impersonal. Values are shifted away from the individual towards the productivity of the masses. In this social setting, growing consumerism and institutionalization leave little room for the individual. People are left with a reduced ability to make authentic choices. As Joyce Rowe explains in his article "Holden Caulfield and American Protest": "Indeed as the century wears on and industrial society assumes its characteristic modern shape, the American sense of despair at and revulsion from the norms of adult life seems to increase" (Salzman, 81). Holden's sensitivity and his resistance against accepting the ideology of the masses leave him with few options for success within this system. Through Holden, Salinger criticizes a society that at this time left little room for the meaningful experiences of an authentic self. In Holden's visit to the museum, the readers realize how he longs for time to stand still and for characters to remain frozen in the past:

"The best thing though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you. Not that you'd be so much older or anything...You'd just be different, that's all."(121).

Holden has fond memories of his childhood visits to the museum. Through the eyes of a child, the museum was obviously a much greater adventure than it can be for him who is approaching adulthood and losing the imagination of the child. Holden can

still remember these great memories and holds on to them in desperation. He wishes he could go back in time to a lost childhood, where he was ignorant of the phoniness in his society. His admiration for children is based on how they express an unselfconscious honesty and ignorance. In Holden's mind, children are the only true, authentic and uncorrupted people in his society. His longing for time to stand still can also be seen as his rejection of the fast growth he sees in his society where many traditional, familiar values seem to be forgotten. In the great industrialized, commercialized city of New York, Holden is in the middle of where it all happens rapidly, and he feels lost and forgotten. He cannot find a way to fit into this environment and he longs to be a child again, because he was then safe and acknowledged by those around him. Holden is attracted to children because they, in a sense, are timeless.

In his journey through New York, it seems that he is on a quest for meaning, but he is constantly confronted with his inability to find a way to be content with his situation. When Holden sees crowds of people on their way to the movies, he gets depressed: "I can understand somebody going to the movies because there is nothing else to do, but when somebody really wants to go...then it depresses the hell out of me"(151). Holden here explains his own dilemma. He is often seen doing things he has previously revolted against, but it seems that he sees no other available options for himself in this environment. He unrealistically dreams of leaving it all behind and living in a deserted log cabin in the woods, but while he is in this environment he feels so out of place in, he has no other choice than to be part of it, although it sickens him.

When Holden is bored or depressed and cannot find a comfort zone for himself, he tries accommodating himself to what he condemns. Holden needs to reassure himself

that he does not fit in, and this leaves him in a constant state of what could be seen as an existentialist limbo. Readers will finally see that Holden finds himself most content when he is at home in the company of his little sister.

We meet Holden as he is flunking out of yet another school, and this is an initial indicator of his non-conformist attitude. His reason for flunking out is certainly not related to his potential, as he is clearly a bright kid. It is rather the environment at Pencey Prep where “Since 1888[they] have been molding boys into splendid clear-thinking young men”(2) that puts Holden off. He does not believe in this showy advertisement and refuses to be part of it and to play by its rules. Pencey Prep supposedly functions to make young boys ready for the *real* system outside of it, and Holden does not want to be fitted into this kind of competitive society where, as he sees it, no true values exist. Students at Pencey Prep are taught competitive skills, and learn how to function in teams. When Holden’s old Professor, Mr. Spencer, tells him that “ Life is a game that one plays according to its rules”, he thinks to himself: “Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right...But if you get on the other side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it”(8). The problem is that Holden has no desire to be a ‘hot-shot’, to succeed in this environment or in his society at large. If he did, he could try a little harder, but it seems clear that it is just these kinds of games that Holden despises. It is within this kind of setting that he sees all the phoniness in his society. Stripped of authenticity, these boys are molded into men that will not only fit into, but contribute to society. In a sense, Holden could be seen as being too smart to play these games. To leave his own authentic self behind and succumb to the

majority position is just not for him. When Holden is with Phoebe, they discuss his future:

“Well, a lawyer- like Daddy and all.” Lawyers are all right, I guess-but it doesn’t appeal to me...All you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot...Even if you *did* go around saving guys’ lives and all, how would you know if you did it just because what you *really* wanted to do was be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you after the goddam trial was over...the way it is in the dirty movies? How would you know you weren’t being a phony? The trouble is, you *wouldn’t*.” (172).

Holden turns away from the prestigious occupation of being a lawyer, because what he sees lying behind these jobs are often shallowness, greed and materialism. Readers may wonder if his father exemplifies this kind of phony lawyer, as we get little indication of Holden having a close relationship with either of his parents. He has little trust in the sincerity of a lawyer’s work, and this may also have been exemplified to him through his father during his upbringing. Then, of course, he brings up the stereotypical lawyer portrayed in the movies, a portrayal most likely based on their fame and wealth. In many ways, readers will see that Holden is extremely influenced and seems to believe in what he sees in movies, and that this strongly influences his view of his environment. Holden needs to sometimes look beyond these stereotypical portrayals to avoid characterizing everyone as phony. We can frequently see that Holden attempts to conform, but the result is constantly disappointing and discouraging. He asks the cab driver in New York: “You know those ducks in that lagoon right near Central Park South? That little lake? By any chance do you know where they go, the ducks, when it gets all frozen over?” (60). These ducks are like Holden himself. He feels helpless as a duck by a frozen lake, without a natural environment and with no viable way to fit into

the society as he sees it. Holden sees his own destiny as potentially being like that of the duck. As Joyce Rowe explains:

“The contrast of freezing and freedom, a keynote of Salinger’s style, reminds us that the spiritual freedom traditionally symbolized by migratory birds is the remotest of possibilities for Holden. From beginning to end of his journey, from school to sanitarium, Holden’s voice, alternating between obscenity and delicacy, conveys his rage at the inability of his contemporaries to transcend the corrosive materialism of Modern American life”(Salzman, 78).

Holden’s unstable state and his revolt are caused, at least partly, by his inability to move beyond the materialistic society he is living in. He is inevitably part of this environment and cannot realistically see a plausible way to change his position within it. His dreams about leaving it all behind are not realistic. His problem lies in that he is linked to this environment that he knows so well, and this is seen clearly in his revolt against activities that he takes part in, like going to the movies. American society with its values and norms is all that this sixteen- year- old boy can realistically conceive of, as Rowe writes further:

“In Holden’s postwar lexicon, America and the world are interchangeable terms. And American global hegemony is given its due in the “Fuck you” expletives which Holden sees as an ineluctable blight spreading through space and time- from the walls of his sister’s school, to the tomb of the Egyptian mummies at the Metropolitan Museum, to his own future gravestone”(Salzman, 79).

This society is Holden’s only conceivable universe. He cannot see a way out of it and is perhaps therefore revolting endlessly against it. He is not doing anything truly constructive with his life, but seems to have rather become stuck in his attitude of rejection, and given up hope for any personal gain on such terms. The reader will also see Holden’s behavior here as being much related to his own mentality and his depressed state of mind. As much as Holden is affected by his environment, his dilemma is also in

important ways linked to his mental state and his traumatic memories of his dead brother Allie.

Esther and Holden both experience a dilemma in trying to fit into the expected gender roles in their society. Holden's male relations at Pencey Prep are like Esther's female relations at her job in New York, not satisfactory. Holden is placed in between two other male characters, Stradlater, his male roommate, who is "the kind of handsome guy that if your parents saw his picture in your Year Book, they'd right away say, 'Who's this boy?'"(27), and at the other extreme, there is Ackley, who is "one of these very, very tall, round-shouldered guys- he was about six four- with lousy teeth" (19). And readers will recognize that Holden feels threatened and challenged by Stradlater, who is popular with the girls and represents the ideal all-American bachelor, while he looks down on poor Ackley, who is more of a misfit and an outsider than himself. After a fight with Stradlater, he leaves Pencey Prep, and as far as we know, never sees these characters again. He does, however, think about them and even miss them in the end: "I sort of miss everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance...Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody"(214). Maybe he realizes at the end that these were regular boys, and despite the issues he had with them, they were his friends. Holden seems to be in a much better place at the end, and to view his life differently, and perhaps he can then see that Stradlater and Ackley were not so bad after all.

Sexuality is a major subject in both novels. Esther and Holden experience a complex relationship to sex, and the social pressure around this issue is seen as quite negative in both characters. Holden's reluctance to have sex is strongly related to his

unwillingness to move beyond childhood innocence and to reach adulthood. It seems, however, quite normal for a 16-year-old boy to be sexually immature, and to therefore experience complexities concerning how to behave, but Holden is especially hesitant on this matter because he is so fond of childhood and children. Lundquist quotes Robert G. Jacobs on this subject in relation to Salinger's writing:

“For Salinger, childhood is the source of good in human life; it is in that state that human beings are genuine and open in their love for one another. It is when people become conscious in their relationships to one another, become adults, that they become ‘phony’ and logical and come to love the reasons for love more than the loved person.”
(Lundquist, 44).

It is obvious that Holden's problems with sex are related to how he feels that many types of sexual relations are seen as obscene and loveless in his environment. He feels that once people reach adulthood, true love is hard to find, or hard to believe in, as people become ‘phony’ and self-conscious, even love and emotional relationships become something superficial and meaningless. Esther Greenwood is drawn into frustrating relationships as an attempt to find a place to belong; to fit into her social setting. Readers will recognize that Esther is experiencing a stronger pressure and is not withstanding it as much as Holden. She does not have an actual sexual experience until the end, but attempts to fit into several ‘relationships’ with men during her time living in New York, and has experiences where she is treated very badly. She is, of course, in her early 20's, naturally more mature than him, and she is a young woman who experiences the added pressures of being a member of “the second sex”.

Esther's fall is obviously much worse than Holden's, and she is more psychologically troubled than him. It is possible to blame much of Esther's troubles on the confined position she experiences as a woman of her time, and *The Bell Jar* is a

feminist novel in many ways as it discusses the specific dilemmas of growing up a woman in this society. Esther is faced with specific pressures and expectations to reach the 'proper' role of a woman, which includes being a mother, wife and housekeeper. She feels sickened by the pressure she feels to give up her individual freedom in order to become a wife and mother. This is Sylvia Plath's own description in the Biographical note to *The Bell Jar*:

“The pressures of the fashion magazine world which seems increasingly superficial and artificial, the return home to the dead summer world of Boston. Here the cracks in her [the heroine, Esther Greenwood's] nature which have been held together as it were by the surrounding pressures of New York widen and gape alarmingly. More and more her warped view of the world around-her own vacuous domestic life, and that of her neighbors-seems the right way of looking at things”(254).

In Plath's own description, it is clear that much of what troubled Esther was linked to her confining environment. Like Holden, she is sickened by what he would call the phoniness in society, and this is closely presented to her when working at the fashion magazine. Esther's problem, like Holden's is that she sees no suitable place for herself in her environment. The pressures she experiences as a young woman through her job in New York City and at home in the suburbs are what confine her inside the bell jar. Her inability to live for herself in this society, the pressure to disconnect from her authentic nature, is what Esther is troubled by, as is Holden in his own way.

We are introduced to Esther as she is working for a few weeks at a fashion magazine in New York City, and she is clearly affected by her current environment and the country's political situation, as the initial sentences of the novel suggest: “ It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know

what I was doing in New York...The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick...I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio...till I couldn't get them out of my head"(1).

This introduction suggests the present state the country is in. The Rosenbergs were electrocuted, since they were scapegoated as spies and communists and a threat to national security. This was a paranoid environment to live within, and people had to make sure they fit the norm, otherwise they might easily be suspected of being communists and traitors to their country. During the nuclear era people were paranoid and suspicious of one another, even neighbors and friends, and they made sure to behave appropriately and innocently themselves. A woman's role at this time was that of being a feminine mother, wife and housekeeper. At Esther's job at the fashion magazine, such norms are constantly demonstrated in articles and in her friends and co-workers. Pat Macpherson comments on Esther's environment in *Reflecting on the Bell Jar*:

TV and film and Magazines screened both the norm(family fulfillment, scientific objectivity) and the Other (adulterous women, effeminate men, commie robots from Outer Space). *Image as norm* was disseminated through the sophisticated visual language of a mass communication system unprecedented in history" (Macpherson, 3).

How people should ideally behave is exemplified through the mass-media, which might be seen as a kind of explosion into American culture at this time. The mass-media and especially television functioned to a large extent to brainwash people, telling them what they needed as consumers; suggesting how they should perform as American citizens, and as women. This constant exposure made the feminine ideal at this time much more apparent, and many young women were slaves to these magazines which offered them the recipe of becoming a desirable woman for the right husband. This appropriate role was something that supposedly came naturally, as Macpherson explains:

“The cruelest assumption...was the paradox that one’s role came naturally, and failure to be fulfilled was a sign of sickness...Paranoia proceeds naturally enough from this basic psychic dishonesty...This, I would argue, is the real ‘enemy within’ that Hoover called forth as communism”(Macpherson, 3-4). Much frustration was also caused by these imposed roles, which meant that people could never truly be themselves, but always had to behave according to strict norms, so that they would not be identified as ‘the Other’, ‘communist’ or ‘an adulterous woman’. What happened in this kind of environment, it seems, is that women would constantly suppress their true needs, aspirations and longings, so they would not be ‘the talk’ of their neighborhood. The strong sense of confinement especially seen in a suburban setting, was common amongst many women of Esther’s time. Esther’s friend Hilda is described as extremely self-conscious:

“ She stared at her reflection in the glossed shop windows as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to exist”(100). Women are taught that they have to look their best to be attractive to the right man, this of course can be seen in our environment today as well, but women were here supposed to leave their own identity, development and independence behind, and to prepare themselves to offer the eligible bachelor what he wanted. Hilda’s frequent check-up in mirrors is to confirm her looks of perfection, and to know that she exists as the ideal woman of her environment. Such obsessive check-ups on one’s appearance can be seen as a natural expression of the overall feeling within this environment. Women cannot be flawed, as the price to be paid for small imperfections can be fatal, as it is easy to be pointed out as a deviant and outsider in one’s society. As Eileen Aird explains, Esther attempts to associate herself with other female characters:

“Esther sees Doreen as sharply sophisticated, socially experienced, unacademic but clever, and is fascinated by Doreen’s freedom...Betsy is sweet and kind, totally unintellectual...Esther envies her normality and her ability to accept her femininity...Esther feels that Jay Cee offers her wisdom while Betsy offers her safety, but prefers the possibility of experience suggested by Doreen” (Aird, 90).

In the beginning of the novel Esther is seen to make various attempts to fit in and make satisfying relations with other female characters in her immediate environment. After her experience out on the town with Doreen where they meet Lenny and Doreen gets very drunk, Esther seems to have lost her fascination with this girl and feels she needs to distance herself from her: “I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing to do with her. Deep down I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart”(22). After this experience, Esther becomes more and more alienated and does not become very close to Betsy either. Readers can easily see that Betsy’s innocence and acceptance of her feminine role does not truly resemble Esther’s troubled state of mind, and that Esther is much more sensitive and affected by the inequality she experiences as a woman in this environment. Esther does not seem to find anyone who can understand her during her stay in New York, and as this becomes clear to her and her previous attempts to fit in are seen to fail, she gradually gives up and sinks more deeply into her own confined space and her depression. The general feeling and the pressure of Esther’s own immediate environment make her feel confined in the role she is supposed to accept as a young woman. Like Holden Caulfield, Esther is sickened by the superficial environment she lives within, and like him she does not seem to find a way to fit into this system or to find a viable place outside it. Esther and Holden share a longing for society to move beyond its role models of housewife, mother, businessman, eligible bachelor and

so on. They want to live within a society that recognizes the authentic self and leaves people free to be different. This was made easier in the succeeding decades and author's like Salinger and Plath can be seen as important agents of such changes through their portrayals of Esther and Holden.

Esther's breakdown comes on as she has finished the school year and is faced with the external pressures of what to do next, when her application to the prestigious summer-school writing course is rejected. It is when returning to her mother's house in suburban Boston, that Esther starts experiencing her breakdown:

“I slunk down on the middle of my spine, my nose level with the rim of the window, and watched the houses of outer Boston glide by. As the houses grew more familiar, I slunk still lower. I felt it was very important not to be recognized. The grey, padded car roof over my head like the roof of a prison van, and the white, shining, identical clapboard houses with their interstices of well-groomed green proceeded past, one bar after another in a large but escape-proof cage. I had never spent a summer in the suburbs before”(114).

In her mother's car on returning home, Esther clearly feels exceedingly imprisoned by the familiar, but confining environment she senses around her. She expresses a need to hide from this environment where she feels at home in one way but at the same time quite alienated. Pat Macpherson comments on Esther's suburban experience in *Reflecting on The Bell Jar* :

“The structure of school and the fuel of winning her way is the structure and fuel of Esther's psyche itself. In the suburbs the structure disappears...devoted solely to domestic maintenance and child-raising, with not one of the familiar supports of 'achievement possible. Esther's feeling the suburban summer world as a gulf and gap points its threat to her psychic as much as social identity”(Macpherson, 42).

Going back to her suburban childhood home, she can no longer rely on her school achievements, and confined within an environment that offers no more for her as a

woman to look forward to than to be a future mother and a housewife. She is back with her mother, feeling confined in her role as a daughter, and is burdened by her mother's expectations of her future. Esther's mother tells her what kind of 'sensible' choices she should make next: "By the end of supper my mother had convinced me I should study shorthand in the evenings. Then I would be killing two birds with one stone, writing a novel and learning something practical as well"(121). For an intelligent girl like Esther who has spent years working on her personal achievements, it seems that to study shorthand would be moving backwards. Her mother's suggestion discredits her achievements and suggests that she should rather accept her role as a woman as one that will never truly be *for* herself. If she learns practical, supportive skills, she will be a perfect wife for the right husband, and this seems to be what her society expects of her as a woman in the end. Macpherson discusses the relationship between Esther and her mother:

"Esther breaks down at the prospect of adopting the mother's identity of selfless sacrifice for the family. Daughterly careerism pays back the mother for her lost career-but also betrays motherhood, rejecting and devaluing it. Daughterly materialism sacrifices all the mother's sacrifices but passes the culturally approved loyalty test of femininity-as-motherly-sacrifice – daughter's learning martyrdom at their mother's already bent knees" (Macpherson, 52-53).

The relationship between Esther and her mother is inevitably dynamic, and Esther is naturally influenced and exceedingly disturbed by living with her mother who embodies what she as a woman is expected to become. She cannot avoid the role her mother is trying to impose upon her and expresses hatred towards her as an attempt to avoid her influence. Psychological problems were not well understood at this time, and Esther's mother shares the traditional views and misconceptions concerning her

daughter's mental state. She seems unable to realize that her daughter has serious problems. After a visit to the hospital, she proves her ignorance: "My mother smiled. 'I knew my baby wasn't like that.' I looked at her. 'Like what?' 'Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at the hospital.' ... 'I knew you'd *decide* [my italics] to be all right again'" (145-46). Esther's mother is incapable of comprehending what her daughter is going through. She seems to be particularly concerned with facades and unwilling to see her daughter in the context of a mental hospital with its typical inhabitants. She seems to think that Esther can make a personal decision to change the state she is in. The unwillingness to accept her daughter's condition is a great mistake on her part and makes Esther's situation worse. Esther's mother exhibits the same attitude in relation to her husband's death; in her unwillingness to grieve and to face the reality of that traumatic situation with her children. Esther, like her mother, has learned to bury traumatic experiences within herself, and as this weight gradually becomes too heavy to bear, it can be seen to cause her depression and breakdown.

Other women in the novel influence Esther as well, and Mrs. Willard can be seen as the typical mother and housewife, flattened underneath her husband's feet like a "kitchen mat"(85), as a slave for the home and family. Buddy has learned from his mother about family relations and tries to impose this view on Esther: "He was always saying how his mother said, 'What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security', and, 'What a man is, is an arrow into the future and what a woman is, is the place the arrow shoots off from'" (72). Mrs. Willard is portrayed as the typical suburban housewife, who is aware and accepting of her role within the family. Her son Buddy is naturally influenced by her opinions, and he is admired and spoiled as the only

son in the household. He is a successful student in the male- dominated field of medicine and is viewed as a great catch for the right woman who is worthy of him. These kinds of opinions are frustrating for a smart girl like Esther, who has been a brilliant, hard working- student her whole life and is suddenly faced with a confining future role as a selfless servant. She is constantly confronted with these norms and is unwilling to accept them, but is left burdened and sickened by what she rightly views as the unreasonable suppression of women in her society. She reads in an article written by a woman lawyer called “In Defense of Chastity” that:

“The best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren’t pure they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex. Of course they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in they would lose all respect for her...the one thing this article didn’t seem to me to consider was how a girl felt”(81)

The general view of women is that they should accede to the desires and wishes of the man, and be innocent and pure for him to keep his image as the dominant and more experienced. To truly be respected by a man, a woman should save herself for marriage, while it is expected that a man might be more sexually experienced. Esther has a personal dilemma with this when she hears that her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, has had an affair with a waitress, “a couple a times a week for the rest of the summer”(71) while she thought he was saving himself for her as well. She is obviously aware of the inequality of women, and perhaps as a form of protest towards this view and her own experience with Buddy, she embarks upon several unsuccessful male relationships before her final breakdown and return to her childhood home. Similarly to Holden Caulfield, Esther sees no possible place for herself within this society and its norms, but for her the problem is strongly influenced by the pressures she feels as a woman.

In her suburban environment, Esther can see her destined future as a woman in her society through women like Dodo Conway:

“Everybody loved Dodo, although the swelling size of her family was the talk of the neighborhood. The older people around, like my mother, had two children, and the younger more prosperous ones had four, but nobody but Dodo was on the verge of a seventh...I watched Dodo wheel the youngest Conway up and down. She seemed to be doing it for my benefit. Children made me sick.” (117)

Esther is feeling trapped in this suburban environment where she is closely exposed to the maternal, domestic role of women. This role makes her feel confined and unable to develop, as the realization of what responsibilities she as a woman should take on, is to her a loss of personal independence. The symbol of the bell jar is obviously vitally important in this novel, and can also be viewed as a symbol of the societal, external pressures that confine Esther and eventually make her unable to function and unwilling to live.

Both Esther and Holden are strongly affected by their respective environments. These two protagonists experience many of the same pressures through advertisement and entertainment, where their personal roles as a man and woman are imposed upon them by their environment. They both share an inability to fit into this role and to find a desirable place for themselves, and this is a prominent reason for their struggles throughout these novels. Esther and Holden are both seen as hyper-sensitive to their surroundings and are therefore deeply affected and bothered by them. Although the psychological state of both characters must be seen as a crucial reason for their struggles, and this especially in the case of Esther, both characters are seen as struggling with various elements in their society that leave them feeling alienated, lost and depressed.

CHAPTER II THE THEME OF DEATH

In *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*, death is a central theme. The loss of close family relations will shape and form a child's identity, and this traumatic experience is seen in relation to these characters' struggles in transition into adulthood and in finding their own identity. The loss of a father for Esther, and the loss of a brother for Holden, created different kinds of emotional and psychological traumas that we can observe in the two novels. These issues will be very prominent during the years of adolescence, at a time when the individual has to define his role in society and find a way to make the transition into the adult world with its many responsibilities. With the loss of a close family member, defining oneself becomes more difficult.

In *The Bell Jar*, death is connected to rebirth and is expressed in the pervasive use of imagery in the novel. Much like Holden Caulfield, Esther Greenwood experiences the transition into adulthood as a kind of void as Mason Harris describes it in his chapter "The Bell Jar": "Erik Erikson has described the transition from childhood to maturity as a daring leap across an abyss; the heroine of the *Bell Jar* finds only a cliff edge with nothing beyond"(Wagner, 36). Unlike Holden, however, the threatening abyss of this cliff has near- fatal consequences for her. Holden is unsteady and confused but hangs on to life, while Esther cannot bear the growing pressures, but succumbs to her suicidal tendencies. Esther's troubled psychological state can be connected to the unsolved trauma of her childhood:

"Then I saw my fathers gravestone...I couldn't understand

why I was crying so hard. Then I remembered that I had never cried for my father's death. My mother hadn't cried either. She had just smiled and said what a merciful thing it was for him he had died, because if he had lived he would have been crippled and invalid for life, and he couldn't have stood that, he would rather have died than had that happen"(167).

Her stifled transition into adulthood is strongly related to her and her mother's refusal to go through the natural grieving process after her father's death. As Ester has not dealt with this tragedy, it has rather been contained in her unconscious mind and has presented itself as numerous psychological issues that she cannot identify. She experiences a sudden, overwhelming feeling of deep grief when she visits her father's grave, as her unconscious mind here takes over and the suppressed memories of childhood trauma are brought to the surface. This is not the only reason for Esther's psychological state, but must be seen as a crucial underlying issue that has not been dealt with, and therefore is a weight never lifted, like a bell jar, that certainly contributes to her depressed state of mind. The bell jar can be seen as a symbol of the exceedingly confined and imprisoned position Esther is in, as unsolved traumas and issues within her are not dealt with. It is what gradually makes her more trapped within her own troubled identity; inside it she cannot really see the world around her, and she becomes withdrawn and alienated from it. This feeling of strangled entrapment is partly what leads to her breakdown and suicide attempts. She does not know how to live in her own mind with its growing, unconscious pressures, also related to the unsolved trauma of the death and loss of a father figure. As Harris explains:

"The ensuing psychosis could be partly explained on the grounds of sexual repression and morbid attachment to her dead father, but it is also true that the men she has known manifest variations on a consistently sick attitude against women and marriage; since no remotely acceptable relationship is available her libido has nowhere to go but backwards"(Wagner, 36).

It seems evident that one of Esther's most significant problems is her stunted development and inability to define herself as a growing woman, and that these struggles are largely due to her past childhood trauma. Esther's relationship with men, as well as her attitude to marriage and children, can be closely related to the loss of a father. She lost a role-model that would have been crucial for her in defining her own relations to men on her own. Her attempts to relate to men and male relations prove unsuccessful and exceedingly frustrating. It is after these attempts that she gives up trying to live on and find a place for herself, and rapidly regresses towards her breakdown and eventual suicide attempt. Her mother's inability to deal with this and to emotionally be there for her daughter in the grieving process has left Esther alone to deal with these problems and to recognize them. Instead of recognizing this tragedy, it has been buried deep inside her, and this has a lot to do with her depressed and suicidal state.

When reading *The Bell Jar*, readers also need to take into consideration the biographical aspect of the novel. Sylvia Plath went through very similar experiences as her fictional character Esther, and while the novel depicts a young girl recovering from a suicide attempt, most readers will know that Plath eventually successfully committed suicide. In much of Plath's poetry, readers can recognize that the author writes in a very personal manner. In the poem "Daddy", she expresses her own connection to her lost father, and how she feels about this personal tragedy in her own life:

"I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you"
(*The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 2751-52).

This suggests the strong connection between Esther and Plath, and when reading *The Bell Jar*, readers can suppose that Esther's death wish is also connected to her long lost father.

According to this poem, she wishes to die to return to him in death. This should obviously not be seen as Esther's only struggle or the only reason for her attempted suicide. Readers who are tempted to use Plath's persona as a kind of synonym for Esther will sometimes be led astray by the events of the novel. These similarities should, however, still be acknowledged, and by looking at much of Plath's poetry we will see that she frequently uses her own personal tragedies in the creation of poetry and fiction. So this biographical aspect and how Plath has used these themes in her other writing are significant in terms of our interpretation of the novel.

The loss of her father is an underlying issue, but her depression and suicide attempt are certainly also triggered by how Esther is unable to define herself within her environment. As her psychological state deteriorates, she becomes less able to define herself and she sees herself as an unknown, deteriorating image: "I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used up I looked...The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian"(18, 112). The foreign image in the mirror reflects her deteriorating psyche. Esther is losing herself, and this is seen in how she becomes less and less in control of herself. She cannot make decisions about her own life or seems just uninterested in it. She is surely aware of her dilemma, as expressed in the fig-tree metaphor: "I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose" (77). As an intelligent, straight- A student, Esther surely has many options, but she is paralyzed by the pressure she feels to succeed in several directions simultaneously. She is not capable of listening only to her own desires, but tries at the same time to find herself within her exterior

environment, based on her mother's and society's expectations. She tries to define herself in accordance with other female characters, and this constantly confirms her inability to fit into the expected role she has as a woman in this society. She throws herself into the dating scene, and after several bad dates, ending with the violent Marco, she eventually approaches her seemingly inevitable breakdown. By chapter 10, as Esther is returning home to her mother's for the summer, she has surely approached that breakdown:

“ I hadn't at the last moment, felt like washing off the two diagonal lines of dried blood that marked my cheeks. They seemed touching and rather spectacular, and I thought I would carry them around with me, like the relic of a dead lover, till they wore off on their own accord” (113).

She here has become completely careless about her appearance, and is no longer able to be concerned with what others will think as she is sitting on the train with a blood-smearred face. She here becomes completely unable not only to make decisions for herself, but also to function on any normal level. She is left with an impressive educational background, going back to her mother who prides herself on Esther's excellent academic skills. She has become unidentifiable to herself, and as this feeling becomes increasingly dominant, she experiences more frequent death wishes, thoughts about suicide, and eventually an unsuccessful suicide attempt. Much like Holden Caulfield, Esther cannot stand the society around her with its growing expectations and pressures, but for her these frustrations have much more serious consequences than for Holden.

Throughout the novel there is a chain of images of babies and of returning to the womb. Esther is not particularly disturbed by the dead babies she is shown by her boyfriend Buddy Willard, who is a medical student: “Buddy took me out into the hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that died before they were born...he [the

baby] seemed to be looking at me and smiling a little piggy smile. I was quite proud of the calm way I stared at all these gruesome things”(63). These babies could be said to mirror Esther’s own strangled development. They have begun to live in the womb and then stopped developing. Esther’s feeling of strangled development is mirrored in the babies who are pickled in the jar, as Harris notes:

“Pleasant baby-images are associated with the joys of regression but the novel is also haunted by the nightmare image of a fetus in a bottle...This aspect of the baby becomes a graphic expression of that sense of strangled development which is the other side of her tendency to regression” (Wagner, 36).

Esther’s urge to return to the womb is mirrored in these babies, who are symbols of her own arrested development. The image conveys a message of comfort, but also entrapment. The way the bell jar descends over Esther is much like how these fetuses are trapped in the bottle. Like them, she is unable to mature, being frozen and trapped in her development. Esther longs for death as a way to disconnect and escape from her environment and troubled psyche. Esther’s problem concerns her own growth into a woman and the expectations put upon her in terms of motherhood and sex. She is not ready for motherhood but longs for rebirth; she wants to return to the safety and comfort of the womb. She seems less disturbed by the sight of these dead babies than the sight of Dodo Conway with all her children: “Everybody loved Dodo, although the swelling size of her family was the talk of the neighborhood...Children made me sick...I crawled back to bed and put the sheet over my head...I couldn’t see the point of getting up”(117). The sight of Dodo Conway with all her children makes her sick and unwilling to get up. This striking reaction to a mother with her babies reveals an important struggle going on in Esther that almost seems to paralyze her and makes her retreat more deeply into her

own troubled mind. This is related to her strangled development, a traumatic and unsolved childhood, and her inability to face up to or accept society's expectations of motherhood as she is inevitably reaching this stage in her life. Esther has worked so hard to become something on her own, and to her motherhood seems like intellectual suicide.

Throughout the novel, readers will see that Esther has a great attraction to water, and experiences a great comfort in the water. Again, this can be viewed in terms of rebirth. She seems obsessed with the idea of purification and renewal. After the experience out with Doreen and Lenny, she feels the need to purify herself from these dirty experiences and has a sense that everything dissolves:

“I said to myself: ‘Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving...The longer I lay there in the clear hot water, the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft white hotel bath towels I felt as pure as a baby’”(20).

The idea of everything around her dissolving as she is purified from all the dirt of her existence is experienced in the bath. The bath is a return to the womb, a symbolic rebirth as her current life is washed away, momentarily forgotten as she steps out of the bath feeling new and fresh like a *baby*. This scene could also be seen as her echoing death wish. She wants to dissolve, to cease to exist, to return as a pure baby. When Esther later has reached her suicidal state, she wishes to drown: “ I thought drowning must be the kindest way to die...Some of those babies that Buddy Willard showed me had gills he said...I thought I could swim out until I was too tired to swim back”(157-158).

Here she expresses strong attraction to water and drowning in relation to rebirth. She wants her old self to dissolve in order to become reborn. As she is looking for her father's grave, the water and bathing metaphors in relation to death are brought up again:

“The stones in the modern part were crude and cheap and here and there a grave was rimmed with marble, like an oblong *bathtub* [my italics] full of dirt, and rusty metal containers stuck up about where the persons navel would be, full of plastic flowers” (166). Her experience in the graveyard confirms the relation she experiences between death and bathing. She sees the grave as a bathtub; the place she always returns to in life, for purification, and as her illness grows worse, as a place of drowning, dying, escaping and eventually of being reborn.

At the end of the novel, Esther faces the suicide of Joan and her own potentially fatal, first experience with sex. Joan Gilling, a previous acquaintance from school, joins Esther in the psychiatric institution. Esther sees Joan as “the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me”(205). Joan is a lesbian, and some critics have viewed this as a significant detail related to Esther’s problems in her environment where she feels pressured to be a mother and wife. Joan, of course, represents another female outsider, and while Esther struggles with these pressures laid upon her as a woman, Joan, as a lesbian the 1950’s, is even further disconnected and unable to become the ideal woman of her society. Through Joan and her final suicide, Plath presents to the reader another misfit, a woman who cannot match the expectations laid upon her in this society. Her suicide occurs at the end of the novel, and her funeral could be seen as an ending not only to Joan’s life, but in connection to Esther’s own symbolic death and rebirth:

“Joan’s parents invited me to the funeral. I had been, Mrs. Gilling said, one of Joan’s best friends...all during the simple funeral service I wondered what I thought I was burying...here and there at the little congregation I recognized other faces of other girls from college and my home town”(242).

This seems to be not only a funeral for Joan, but may also be seen as Esther's own symbolic funeral, her farewell to her troubled past. After this incident, she could be seen as being reborn, as she has recovered, at least for the time being, and is ready to return to her environment as a new person, with new hope for the future. At the funeral she recognizes familiar faces from her past, and this seems to be an experience where Esther not only says farewell to Joan, but to her own troublesome past. This ending of the novel can, however, not be seen as lastingly positive, in terms of Esther's future, as Mason Harris explains: "At her funeral Esther finds some consolation in the fact that she herself has escaped this fate, but the reader knows that her apparent recovery is only a reprieve"(Wagner, 37). At Joan's funeral, Esther may be seen to leave her troubled 'double' behind, as this occurrence is so close to her recovery and release from the institution. But in the end, readers will see that Esther's recovery is rather uncertain, that while we are presented with the positive images of rebirth, Esther's fragile psyche reminds us that her future is uncertain. She has survived some of her previous struggles, and the bell jar is lifted temporarily, but it is no one knows when it might descend over her again:

"To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream...I remembered everything. I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse...maybe forgetfulness, like a kind of snow, should numb and cover them. But they were part of me. They were my landscape" (237).

This reminds the reader that Esther in the end has not left her past, and that her past in a sense will always be with her. The bell jar will still be part of Esther, although it is lifted for the time being, she may recover, but she can not forget her past and cannot secure her future from the underlying threat of the bell jar that will always be part of her

mentality. Esther's first sexual experience also occurs at the end of the novel, and her hemorrhaging becomes a near-death experience. The blood can be seen in relation to death and rebirth, and after this experience Esther indeed seems transformed into a stronger and more assertive woman: "Irwin's voice altered subtly. 'When am I going to see you?' 'Do you really want to know?' 'Very much.' 'Never,' I said and hung up with a resolute click. Irwin's voice had meant nothing to me...I was perfectly free" (241-42). Esther only contacts Irwin to make him pay her hospital bill, but has no interest in any further relations with him. For her this act is part of her liberation process, and she steps out into society shortly afterwards with newfound strength and self-assurance.

Holden experiences something very similar to Esther in this sense, as his psychological state is strongly connected to the childhood trauma of the death of his little brother Allie, who died of leukemia at age 10. Peter Shaw discusses this issue in his article, "Love and Death in *The Catcher in the Rye*":

"Miller 'instead of treating the novel as a commentary by an innocent young man rebelling against an insensitive world or a study of a youth's moral growth' tries to show that Holden's 'rebelliousness is only means of dealing with his inability to come to terms with the death of his brother'" (Salzman, 99).

The origins of Holden's struggles have been widely discussed by critics, and there are several interpretations of this. Some critics have seen his behavior as typical of the adolescent youth he represents. It is, however, notable that Holden's traumatic past exists within this novel as something that surely influences his character. His admiration for children and his own unwillingness to make the transition into adulthood can certainly be seen as related to the death of his beloved younger brother Allie. Holden expresses strong contempt for the phony adult world, and his closest relation is to his little sister Phoebe whom he admires. He is unwilling to adapt or accept the hypocrisy around him,

and the extremely troubled and darkened road he goes down is connected to his own experiences and unsolved traumas of the past. As Shaw notes:

“ E.H Miller’s positing of a life crisis dominated by mourning and guilt over the death of Allie, for example , seems too comprehensive and too definitive. For although Allie’s death might be cited to account for much of Holden’s behavior, no single act or expression of his stands out as inexplicable without reference to Allie. His brother’s death exacerbates rather than constitute Holden’s adolescence crisis” (Salzman, 100).

It seems accurate that the death of Allie is not the only cause of Holden’s problems here. It is true that he should be viewed as experiencing a more general crisis of adolescence, but the intensity of it can be seen as having to do with the death of Allie, and Holden’s experience of this crisis is therefore worse than what is commonly seen in teenagers. The guilt he experiences can be seen in his instant reaction after his brother’s death. As he smashes the windows with his fists, it is as though he needs to punish himself. He may be asking why Allie was the chosen one and not him. Just as the reader can interpret the imagery of *The Bell Jar*, in *The Catcher in the Rye* readers will receive clues about Holden’s psychological state by examining his language, which is often inconsistent. For instance, Holden uses the word killed, without expressing its ordinary meaning:

“One can add that Holden’s disturbed condition is also evoked by a pattern of verbal slips, double entendres, errors, forgetting, accidents, and fallings down. The most striking is his double entendres, redolent both of guilt over Allie’s death and an attempt to fob off that guilt on someone else is a remark about his sister Phoebe containing the words ‘she killed Allie, too’. Of course he means by ‘killed’ that she amused Allie. But his unconscious understanding is that Phoebe like himself is somehow responsible for Allie’s death” (Salzman,100).

Shaw argues that Holden reveals himself through this language. The word ‘killed’ is here used with a deeper, underlying meaning, as his use of words reveals his unconscious feeling of guilt for his brother’s death. Holden could feel guilty to live and

develop when his brother died, and this reaction may be related to his admiration for children and fond childhood memories. The title of this novel is related to this. It is taken from a popular Robert Burns poem/song, where Holden intentionally has mixed up the lyrics. It is supposed to be 'When a body meet a body', as Phoebe tells him, but Holden's fantasy and his avoidance of meeting but desire of catching, have made him create his own meaning for this song. Holden's catcher fantasy is as follows:

"I keep picturing these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around, nobody big, I mean, except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff. That's all I do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all" (173).

Holden's desire to catch or 'save' children is often seen in relation to his desire to make up for his failure to save Allie. Holden's need to save children is also seen as a reflection of his own need to be saved and retained in his life as a child, to avoid the fall over the cliff into adulthood. He hates the hypocrisy of the adult world he experiences around him. That is why he wants to be frozen in childhood and he wants to save the children around him from this inevitable fall: "Certain things should just stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and leave them alone" (122). The strong connection he feels to children and his own inability to leave his childhood behind could be his wish to go back to the time when Allie was still alive. The traumatic experience of his brother's premature death may have 'robbed' Holden of his childhood innocence. After this experience, he was forced to understand the inevitable truths about life and death and could no longer go on living with the natural innocence of a child. Holden not only longs for his brother and may feel guilty for his death, but he also longs for his own lost childhood innocence when the hypocrisy in the

world was not visible to him. What he sees in his society as phony is not present in children, because they are unaware of these adult norms and can therefore express perfect innocence and honesty.

Holden is often contradictory when he acts out so many of the things he has earlier expressed strong revulsion towards. His own inability to resist this environment as a young man disturbs him. He is too involved in the game of growing up to be separated from it. His inability to separate himself leads him through an endless circle of disappointments. He expresses a strong revolt towards his society, but realizes that there is no way for him to stay away from it completely.

Holden is strongly against Hollywood and movies, and yet he finds himself on several occasions sitting by himself in the theatre because he has nothing better to do. His advice to the readers is, however: "I'd tell you the rest of the story, but I might puke if I did...All I can say is, don't see it if you don't want to puke all over yourself" (139). Holden seems well aware of what he is letting himself in for as he seats himself in the theatre. The question is then why he wants to expose himself to what he strongly condemns. He could be viewed as self-destructive, as there are several instances where Holden behaves in a self-destructive manner. He can, however, not be seen as suicidal, but rather as being extremely confused. The movie incident here can also be seen as one of his many attempts to fit in. He tries over and over again to live according to what he sees around him, and he constantly fails and is back in the same predicament of feeling lost, lonely and misunderstood.

It is as if Holden needs to confirm his revolt over and over; he needs to remind himself why he hates things that the phonies around him love so much. But he ends up in

the same state where he aimlessly walks around New York City, with no true meaning or goal in mind. He is in a kind of existential limbo and is not in a state where he is capable of ending his life; instead he is stuck in this unhappy state of constant disappointment and restlessness.

Holden's true dilemma is certainly connected to his own psychological state. He is frustrated by the fake society that he sees around him, but one might think that he could move beyond this if he only came to terms with his inner struggles. Readers will recognize how Holden's criticism of the adult world is often quite accurate and understandable, and many people have experienced a similar contempt for society and its politics and media. This feeling of disconnection to one's society is of course closely connected to existentialist thought, where people will choose to live a life in anguish and forlornness, accepting the truth about their meaningless surroundings. Holden could be seen to go through an existentialist struggle in order to find authenticity, as he is battling with his phony surroundings, that he seems unable to separate himself from.

Although readers will commonly not view Holden as suicidal, he certainly is much concerned with death and sensations of dying. It can be seen as a casual part of his language and not necessarily as an expression that carries deeper meaning when he utters things like: "What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window. I probably would have done it, too, if I'd been sure somebody'd cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn't want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory" (104). Holden here reveals his usual connection to and even concern for his surroundings. This suggests that his inability to be completely careless and

separated from the outside world is actually what 'saves' him from going as far as taking his own life.

He is stuck, therefore, in this limbo where he sees no viable path to take, but there still seems to be hope of a better life for Holden. His constant ambivalence keeps him on some kind of uncertain path where he is always frightened of falling. The metaphors of falling and catching are most commonly connected to the fall into adulthood, but can also be seen in terms of death, as there are elements that 'catch' him when he experiences these thoughts of death and suicide. His little sister Phoebe is someone who can be seen as such a catcher as he thinks of her in the midst of his thoughts of death and dying:

“ I started thinking how old Phoebe would feel if I got pneumonia and died. It was a childish way to think but I couldn't stop myself. She'd feel pretty bad if something like that happened. Se likes me a lot. I mean she's quite fond of me. She really is...I figured I'd better sneak home and see her in case I died and all” (158).

Holden truly loves and admires his little sister. She is seen as a little helper for him, as she is one of the few characters he feels truly and deeply connected to and whom he feels understands him. In his return home to Phoebe, readers will see that Holden does have a home, and a safe place to connect with and return to. After his confused wanderings around New York, he starts to miss this home, and even expresses a wish to be saved from his own confused mind, as he secretly wishes his parents will catch him as he is sneaking out: “I didn't give much of a damn any more if they caught me...I almost wished they did in a way” (180).

Holden here proves that he secretly longs for the security and safety of his childhood home. He wants to return to a safe, innocent childhood where he is not frustrated by society's expectations of him that he experiences as he is so fearfully

reaching adulthood. Like a child, he wants to play and dance with his clever little sister Phoebe; he wants to be safe and without commitments. Such a regressive desire might again be linked to Allie's death. This tragedy was obviously something that affected the whole family and that put a gray, uncertain cloud over Holden's head. He could no longer feel safe at this point and was made aware of his parents' inability to keep their children from harm.

His comments about death and disease might also be connected to his own fear of dying abruptly. As a child, before the death of his brother, he was safe and without worries. The intensity of his adolescent crisis is therefore also connected to his early experience and awareness of human mortality, and his pervasive fear of his own sudden, premature death. When he wishes that his parents would catch him, he wishes he could go back in time to a safe innocent world, where death was still just an abstract. Instead he knows he must now search for a life on his own outside of this safe haven, in a phony society where he feels unable to find his place.

Suicide is touched upon in the novel when a fellow student, James Castle, commits suicide by jumping out of a window because he refused take back what he said to some other kid: "He was a skinny little weak looking guy...finally what he did, instead of taking back what he had said, he jumped out the window...he was dead...blood all over the place...He had on this turtleneck sweater I lent him" (170). Readers can sense that Holden in some way admires this boy for committing suicide in this situation. He is described as weak and thin, and his refusal to take back what he had said and his willingness to stand up to those bigger than him appeals to Holden's sympathy for the underdog. James Castle is in a sense described as a non-compromising character who

stands up to the phonies around him and refuses to succumb to their rules. This would be something Holden would admire in this boy who seems to have been a bit like himself. The fact that he wears Holden's sweater as he lies there in a pool of blood could also suggest a connection between the two boys. Holden would probably not have it in him to take his own life, but might still secretly be fascinated and impressed by James Castle's refusal to compromise his convictions. Holden's past experience with the death of Allie makes him feel strongly affected by this incident, and to remember this boy, like his own brother, as someone special. Shaw notes in his article that,

Holden not only falls inadvertently in minor ways; he is repeatedly drawn toward catastrophic forms of falling. Each time he is searching out self-punishment for his unconscious guilt over Allie's death. The wish to be punished by death accounts for his apparently illogical response to Phoebe's accusation that he doesn't like 'anything that's happening.' 'I do!' he insists. But she challenges him to 'name one thing.' He has trouble 'concentrating' on an answer, but then James Castle pops into his mind: this is a fellow student who leaped to his death. Clearly, Holden is half in love with easeful death. (Salzman, 106).

As Shaw sees it, Holden is capable of 'liking' and even feeling admiration for Castle and his brave, self-inflicted, fall. If he is not 'in love with' death, he could at least be said to be quite obsessed with death, James Castle, suicide and his own fear of becoming sick or dying.

One of the reasons for Holden's original fondness for his old teacher Mr. Antolini, is that he was brave enough to deal with James Castle's death: " He was the one that finally picked up that boy who jumped out the window that I told you about...carried him all the way to the infirmary. He didn't even give a damn if his coat got all bloody"(174). Mr. Antolini is here shown as capable and unafraid of death. The fact that he did not care about the blood on his coat, is something that would most commonly be expected in such a situation, but for Holden it is a mark of bravery and facing up to

reality. As mentioned earlier when Holden thinks about taking his own life, he thinks about jumping out the window exactly like James Castle. His fear is that he will be lying there exposed and 'all gory', and will not be saved from the gaze of others. Mr. Antolini therefore acts as a kind of savior in Holden's eyes as he prevents the dead boy from being exposed to the sensationalist staring of the by-standers.

In Holden's visit to the museum, readers will recognize that he, quite similarly to Esther, expresses a wish to be preserved from change, to return to childhood and perhaps even to seek death. In Shaw's view,

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Holden leads two little boys to the reconstructed pharaonic tomb and its collection of mummies...he finds that he 'liked it' in the tomb: 'it as so nice and peaceful'. Here is a place in which he can finally rest untroubled communication with eternal death: he is alongside mummies preserved as he wishes Allie would be preserved and symbolizing his own wish to be preserved from change (Salzman, 102).

What comes to mind when reading this interpretation of the scene, is Esther's experience with the dead babies in jars, or when she climbs into the confined womb-like space in the basement to attempt suicide. The babies in jars could be seen to have a similar symbolic significance to the mummies in the tomb, as they are all preserved from change and mirror the protagonist's stunted development. Holden seems to have an unconscious longing to be frozen and preserved like these mummies, and this could be seen as a symbolic place for him to end his adolescent struggles with society. Even though Holden cannot be seen as consciously longing for death, he is abnormally attracted to permanence and whatever is unchanging. Although not as explicit as in *The Bell Jar*, there is a theme of rebirth also present in *The Catcher in the Rye*, which can be seen in the famous carousel scene, where Holden starts to see his life and development in a free and more hopeful manner: "The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring,

you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them" (211). This is a moment of revelation for Holden, and his previously gloomy outlook on life is here replaced with a more hopeful and accepting one. This scene occurs after he faints and falls down in the museum, and in James Lundquist's interpretation this is a "fortunate fall" because "Only through coming to terms with the fallen nature of the world through his own fall can Holden achieve release" (Lundquist, 51). In the carousel scene, Holden is released from his previous struggles and is much more accepting about the future. This is illustrated through symbols of rebirth and hope and the carousel's circular movement that mirrors the natural circular movement of life itself. Both Esther and Holden have to reach a bottom, to fall and symbolically to be reborn into a more hopeful existence, and this occurs at the close of both novels.

Both Esther and Holden clearly communicate a wish to be taken out of their troublesome existence, and as death in the family is such a central reality in their own lives, the meeting and fascination with death is a central experience in both novels. As Esther sees the pickled babies, it reminds her of her own wish to be preserved or perhaps reunited with her father in death. Holden feels at rest in the peaceful and unchanging museum where mortality and family traumas seem far away and he is not disturbed by his outside existence. It may even be possible to compare further here and see the tomb-like museum in relation to Esther's wish of returning to the womb. It is at least clear that both characters long for a lost childhood and experience a form of strangled development. When Esther attempts to commit suicide, she goes down to the cellar of her house: "A few old rotten fireplace logs blocked the mouth...It took me a while to heft my body into

the gap, but at last, after many tries I managed it, and crouched at the mouth of the darkness like a troll” (169). Holden and Esther express very similar urges here, in taking refuge in isolation and separation to be preserved from their inevitable growth into adulthood. Esther, of course, makes more explicit death wishes and suicide attempts, but in this scene, Holden is also seen as making a tentative accommodation with death, although he is abruptly woken up to the reality of his existence as he sees the word ‘Fuck you’ scrawled on the wall:

He is driven from the tomb when a scrawled ‘Fuck you’ graffito catches his eye. Not for the first time the insistent reminder of sex drives him reluctantly back into life—this time to the bathroom where he faints in a purgative ritual that marks his first emergence from moratorium (Salzman, 102).

Again, readers will notice a certain resemblance to Esther. If we recall her experience with Doreen and Lenny, she returns to the hotel afterwards to take a bath and purify herself. As Shaw notes, Holden is here ‘woken up’ from his peaceful, secluded experience to face the phony society he lives in. He is reminded of sex, and for him, like Esther, his own sexuality and society’s pressures and expectations are among the difficult, inevitable struggles that he has to face as he is reaching adulthood. ‘Fuck you’ is also obviously a swearword, an example of all the insensitive and perverse characteristics that Holden is so revolted by in his society. He is not allowed a peaceful moment to himself, as the rudeness and carelessness in people are so bluntly exposed to him again. He goes to the bathroom with an upset stomach and faints, and this could be seen as a purification ritual. Both Esther and Holden feel the need to purify themselves from the ‘filthy’ experiences they are constantly exposed to. The lack of love in the function of sex

in their society is seen in both characters as a dirty, disturbing burden they want to be cleansed and preserved from.

The theme of death is a central theme in both novels. This is obviously more dominant in *The Bell Jar*, where the protagonist becomes suicidal, and thoughts and imagery relating to death are widely used throughout the novel. The bell jar itself represents something potentially deadly for Esther, as it functions to separate her from the world around her and finally seems to suffocate her completely as she attempts suicide. In *The Bell Jar* this theme of death is usually seen in a more positive way, in relation to rebirth, which seems to be what Esther finally experiences as she is liberated from her suicidal and depressive state. Although not so obvious, the theme of death is also very central in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Readers can see both novels as carrying central existential themes, and thus death becomes a central dilemma for both protagonists.

These novels are about the struggle it sometimes requires to live, and particularly in this time and place, where these two young Americans have to find a way to make the transition into adulthood. As they experience a form of strangled development, death becomes, in a sense, something very much related to this theme. Holden Caulfield is certainly deeply troubled by his brother's death, and he seems at times to be fascinated with death, and even to feel comfort next to death, such as in the tomb in the museum. Holden is just so frustrated with the life around him and his entire environment. Death can thus be seen as a place of rest, of peace, where these characters can be released from the society they are so bothered by. Holden reveals fewer suicidal tendencies than Esther, and the theme of death in *The Catcher in the Rye* is not experienced on the same serious level as it is in *The Bell Jar*.

It should, however, be noted how death as a theme is frequently used in both novels, often to portray the deep struggles these characters go through, and that the death and loss of a close family member is something that has influenced both characters on a profound level.

CHAPTER III

SYMBOLISM IN *THE BELL JAR* AND *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*

Both Sylvia Plath and J.D. Salinger have used symbolism to convey important themes and messages in their novels. *The Bell Jar* is created through the language of a poet and naturally contains a vivid use of symbolism through imagery and metaphors.

Eileen Aird explains the use of imagery in *The Bell Jar*, in her chapter, “The Bell Jar”:

“Imagery is used in *The Bell Jar* to develop and communicate the inner, subjective world in contrast to the external world...after the suicide attempt the imagery becomes less dense as the novel moves increasingly into the narrative present and the objective world of health begins to replace the world of the bell jar”(Aird, 97).

The bell jar itself is a symbol that covers various aspects in the book, most importantly relating to the confining position that Esther is in. As Esther becomes gradually more depressed, the bell jar descends down over her and shuts her off from the normal communication with the world around her, blurring her vision even as it provides a kind of safety. The imagery in the novel is used to communicate the gradually more confining position Esther is in as she becomes more depressed and suicidal. As Aird notes, when we see that the bell jar is lifted and Esther is released into the ordinary world around her, this type of imagery becomes less prominent. It is evident that the pervasive imagery in *The Bell Jar* is mainly seen to communicate the various elements causing Esther’s depression and alienation from the outer world.

Diane S. Bonds comments on the symbolism and imagery in *The Bell Jar* in her article “The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*”:

“In the first half of the novel, the pervasive imagery of dismemberment conveys the alienation and self-alienation leading to Esther’s breakdown and suicide attempt. In the second half of the novel, a pattern of symbolic rebirth is

superimposed on a narrative which in its details suggests that Esther purchases her 'new' self by the discontinuance of any relations that might threaten by means of intimacy or tenderness the boundaries of a self conceived as an autonomous entity, as a separate and 'separative' self" (Contemporary Literary Criticism, 192).

In Bonds' interpretation, the thread of imagery throughout the novel illustrates how Esther's psychological state develops throughout the book. Bonds notices that the imagery leads up to Esther's suicide attempt and after that is replaced by what she sees as 'a pattern of symbolic rebirth'. The images relating to death and alienation can be seen as a foreshadowing of where Esther is going. This imagery is frequently seen as illusions, for example of her own distorted face in the mirror: "I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me of course" (18). She sees herself as deteriorating, which implies her loss of identity, her loss of control over herself. These images express how she gradually deteriorates mentally and eventually becomes completely disconnected from her outer environment and unable to function. After the suicide attempt, Esther is seen as gradually moving in the other direction, to reconnect to the outer world and to find a way to live within her environment. The imagery of dismemberment is seen through the first part of the novel as distorted images of self in the mirror, the cadaver's head, and the dead babies in jars she sees with Buddy Willard. These images describe Esther's deteriorating psychological state and foreshadow her suicide attempts later in the novel.

Other visual details are presented to her as actual images in the book, like the babies in jars. Through this form of imagery, Plath describes Esther's pathological state of mind, which gradually worsens until she becomes completely unable to function and loses all control over herself and her life. The morbid images can also be seen as a

foreshadowing of her fate, of what direction she is moving in as she gradually gets closer to her suicidal state. She can be seen as being obsessed with death and images of death, and this is implied in the very first page of the novel as she hears about the electrocution of the Rosenbergs on the radio: “I couldn’t get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterward, the cadaver’s head...floated up behind my eggs and bacon for breakfast” (1-2). This incident also foreshadows Esther’s own fate as she will later be given electroshock therapy as treatment for her depression at the hospital. And her first experience with this is indeed very painful: “Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what a terrible thing it was that I had done” (143). Her experience with shock therapy can be seen as similar to what she might imagine an electrocution would be like, and as she wonders what terrible thing she did, she feels as if she is being punished by this treatment. The Rosenbergs were clearly victims of their society, and Esther can also be seen as a product, and in some ways a victim, of her environment.

Eileen Aird comments on some of the imagery of death in the novel:

“Death imagery appears importantly at the end of chapter nine in the episode...where Esther flings her clothes from the hotel roof top, an action which symbolizes her refusal to enter the publishing world or the social one, and her deliberate relinquishing of herself to the mental death in which she is increasingly caught”(Aird, 94).

Readers can certainly see this as a form of symbolic funeral, an end to Esther’s attempt to be part of this environment around her: “Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, *like a loved one’s ashes*[my italics], the gray scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know. In the dark heart of New

York” (111). After this last farewell to New York, she is seen in the beginning of the very next chapter to have become completely disillusioned and careless about her appearance and her surroundings as she sits on the train back to her mother’s house in the suburbs. After this symbolic funeral, Esther is presented as being dead to the world around her, and from here onwards, she is rapidly reaching her suicidal state, since being enclosed within the bell jar, within her own troubled mental state, is obviously too much to bear.

Diane Bonds continues her description of Esther’s situation in New York in the following way:

“She begins to see the city as a collocation of dismembered body parts: ‘google-eyed headlines’ stare up at her ‘on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway’. Her friend Doreen, too, is presented as such a collocation: “Bright white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff and blue eyes like transparent agate marbles...and breasts which pop out of her dress later at Lenny’s apartment...The dismembered animal parts that decorate that apartment...are tokens of the sexual hunt in which it is assumed all the young guest editors at *Ladies’ Day* will gladly play their parts”(Contemporary Literary Criticism, 193).

Esther is in a sense ‘hunted’ by this environment where she feels the pressures on how to behave as a woman. This is an environment where women are after all expected to succumb to the desires of the right man and eventually marry and have children. Other female colleagues at the magazine, like Doreen, confirm this behavior as the “normal” way for a girl her age to behave. Esther is not able to find other female characters around her that she feels close to, with a possible exception of Betsy, but is reminded constantly of how girls in this environment are supposed to behave. Her intellectual side is unable to accept these conventions, and she is left with a feeling of being alienated from this environment as a whole, where she finally sees no hope for personal progress or for a desirable future. With these pressures around her, she retreats into herself, and ultimately

shuts herself off from her surroundings that she cannot bear to be part of. Gradually, the bell jar confines her and makes her unable to handle the pressures. In Bonds' opinion, the imagery of dismemberment tells the reader something crucial about Esther's environment:

“The imagery of dismemberment in *The Bell Jar* does not simply communicate Esther's psychic disturbance or a set of feelings characterizing a certain point in her history; the imagery also implies a certain model of the self. Imagery focusing our attention on part-whole relations (or disrelations) presupposes that the self is a bounded identity, something with a separate and distinct existence...The model of self implied by the imagery of dismemberment...coincides with the model of a bounded self, an autonomous subject, that has dominance in our culture”(Contemporary Literary Criticism, 194).

Esther's society in many ways resembles that of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both Esther and Holden are 'victims' of a society where they are left to their own devices. It is a fragmented society, where people are not showing solidarity to each other, but instead fight and compete against each other. Both protagonists are faced with strong pressures to succeed as an autonomous self, to be the perfect wife/bachelor, student, and so on. When Esther and Holden are heading towards disaster, they are doing this on their own, as they are disconnected from people around them. The lack of a true connection to other people is what makes them retreat into their wounded selves, and the fact that they have no satisfactory human connections is an important reason for their breakdown. If these characters had had a kindred soul, a person to confide in, it might have been the key to gain a healthy psyche. And readers will recognize that the protagonists are at least partially healed through the interaction with Phoebe, for Holden, and Dr. Nolan for Esther. Many of the symbols of fragmentation in *The Bell Jar* could be compared with similar symbolic aspects of *The Catcher in the Rye*, for example when

Holden wonders about the ducks in Central Park, as quoted previously (see p. 18), this kind of concern describes both Holden's caring attitude and his feeling of disconnection from society. Just like Esther, he experiences a strong sense of alienation. Both authors have used symbolic language to describe this shared sense of alienation. Through the demonstration of these images of animals helplessly separated from their home and babies pickled in jars, Salinger and Plath convey a similar message of how Esther and Holden feel at this similar time and place, of how they experience their environment as unnatural and inhumane.

Through symbolic descriptions, readers are made to feel Esther's sufferings more strongly, as they function to give a strong, vivid impression of Esther's alienated and troubled self and to understand the typical norms imposed on her as a woman in her society at this time. Eileen Aird notes that: "Another major group of images is concerned with Esther's sense of impending disaster which presses in on her, accompanied by a perception of the world as a hostile place in which she is losing any sense of individuality"(96-97). From Esther's response when seeing mothers with babies and babies in jars, the reader will understand what kind of pressure this lays upon her. These images she is constantly presented with in her outside environment makes her feel, in a sense, hunted by the demands laid upon her as a woman in this society.

As Esther experiences these deep pressures, she begins to feel paralyzed and unable to make decisions as explained symbolically in the fig-tree metaphor:

"I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig- tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor...I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree,

starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I should choose." (77)

With Esther's depression comes the inability to make choices. She can see lots of options passing her by as she is not able to make up her mind. This great fig-tree with its numerous branches of choices, symbolically represents her inability to make choices, her lack of determination and hope for any desirable future. Readers will see her trying to identify with different characters as she tries to make plans for her future, but she ends up failing in these attempts and becomes gradually more confined within herself, within the bell jar, and is finally unable to make any choices and to function on a normal level. This metaphor tells the reader that Esther is very much aware of her own problems. She acknowledges that this inability to make choices will have serious consequences for her, but she does not have the ability to change her deteriorating mentality. As her attempts to fit in and to find a viable path in life are constantly proven to fail, she gradually becomes less able to find a satisfactory life for herself and is finally led towards a point where she begins to look for ways to die rather than live.

A similar example of Esther's lack of determination and contact with her environment is seen when she explains her environment in New York the following way: "I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus" (2-3). Even in the beginning of the novel the reader can clearly see that Esther expresses a lack of enjoyment and carelessness in her everyday activities, and this state of mind only worsens as she gradually grows more depressed. Symbolically, the trolleybus here represents how she experiences her life in New York as mechanical and meaningless. Aird comments on this prominent type of imagery in the novel:

“ The largest imagistic complex in *The Bell Jar* expresses Esther’s feelings of inadequacy and alienation...Several of them are centered on ideas of movement or progression. Esther’s emotional progress is essentially directionless and beyond her control”(Aird, 95).

As seen in the trolleybus example, this is, as Aird has noticed, a central image of inadequacy and alienation, presented symbolically to the reader, as a way to express the aimless state that Esther is in, a state that worsens as a cause of her depression and that eventually leaves her completely paralyzed. Negative movement is therefore a central symbolic element used to illustrate how Esther becomes gradually more trapped within herself, more paralyzed and powerless as her depression takes over. Eventually this pressure becomes suffocating and near fatal to her, and at this point her movement is completely stifled.

As Esther returns to her mother’s house for the summer, she reaches bottom and attains a state where she actually loses her ability to function normally and to take basic actions needed to survive: “So I told him again, in the same dull, flat voice, only it was angrier this time, because he seemed so slow to understand, how I hadn’t slept for fourteen nights and how I couldn’t read or write or swallow very well”(135). Esther visits Dr. Gordon on her mother’s recommendations as an attempt to do something with her troubled state, but unfortunately receives little or no help from this male physician. Esther has here reached a state where she does not even see the many figs in the fig tree, the options life has to offer her. As she has given up, there seems to be no point in taking care of her basic needs and to take any action to go on with her life. The bell jar has descended over her and makes her unable to move and unable to see any reasons for living. She is at this point completely trapped within her own depressed state of mind.

When Esther recovers, at least temporarily, and is ready to leave the psychiatric institution, Plath uses the image of a worn, patched tire returning to the road of her life: “But I wasn’t getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice-patched, retreaded and approved for the road”(244). This symbolizes how Esther’s mental state has been fixed at, least temporarily, for her attempt to return to a more stable existence. But as this tire is worn and patched, it also implies that Esther will carry some imperfections with her, and that it is not safe to say when the bell jar might descend over her again. She is reborn, but still carries with her this fragile mentality, and the success of her return back into her old environment is seen as questionable.

Critics have seen Esther’s recovery as more or less successful. Diane S. Bonds is one of those who are not very optimistic about Esther’s recovery: “The tire, like a kitchen mat, presents us with a utilitarian object, easily repaired or replaced, as a metaphor for a woman. It is worth observing that a patched, retreaded tire mat be ready for the road, but somewhere down the highway the owner can expect a flat”(*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 195). The metaphor of a tire here gives the reader a message of uncertainty in relation to Esther’s recovery. Bonds argues further that “it is precisely for marriage that Esther seems confusedly to be preparing herself in the final episode as she straightens her seams” (*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 194). Bonds here criticizes the fact that Esther in her opinion is seen to return to her old environment, and succumb to her imposed role as a woman. In my opinion, this is rather questionable, but there is, however, a clue in the novel about Esther’s future: “ I use the lipstick now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with”(3). As already noted, this novel is also largely autobiographical, and this little clue tells the reader that the

narrator, at the time of the telling of the story has become a mother. The way the author has included this detail in such a minor way, does not necessarily explain very much about the future of Esther Greenwood as a fictional character, but it is a well-known fact that Plath herself got married, had children and eventually committed suicide. The ending of the novel is not simple and clear and ultimately leaves the reader uncertain about Esther's future, but we can well imagine that her future life and relations will be affected by her sensitive mentality. There is a clear message of progress in Esther's behavior at the end of the novel, and Plath presents readers with images of hope, but also uncertainty. As she returns to her old environment, she feels "patched and retreaded"(244), but all she can see are "question marks" (243).

This is a new beginning for her, a new chance is given to her and she can only hope for the best. In my opinion, Bonds goes too far when she argues that: "Having rejected all the other women-woman relationships available to her from her experience, Plath turns finally to invention, which-- controlled by stereotype as it is --proves no more successful than autobiographical fact"(*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 199). Bonds seems to imply that Esther succumbs to what she was earlier so troubled by, and that she returns to her environment to become the stereotypical woman who will go out and hunt for the right man. Not only does Bonds mix Plath's own life up with Esther's fate, she also fails to see the different aspects of Esther's troubled psyche. I believe that sexuality and male-female relations are something she will continue to struggle with, even if she seems to have, at least for the time being, gotten a step further. She emerges here at the end of the novel as a stronger woman, and this is also an effect of her relationship with a woman, Dr. Nolan, who clearly helps Esther up on her feet, a fact that Bonds seems to

forget when she argues that Esther “rejected all the woman-woman relationships available to her.”

It is questionable if Esther’s traumatic first sexual experience with Irwin can be seen as solely liberating, when she rejects him afterwards. She here rejects the male ‘oppressor’ in a sense. The fact that Esther has sex with him and then decides to stand on her own feet and to be the one who rejects, may be a way to indicate her new-found self-sufficiency. This sexual experience, and the way Esther deals with it, might have been a way for Plath to symbolize Esther as a new, liberated woman, but it is surely not a final solution to her problems with male relations. Another important symbol of her sexual liberation and control is her decision to get a diaphragm when she thinks: “I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person like Buddy Willard” (223). It seems appropriate to take these actions as signs of Esther’s newborn strength and self- assurance, but readers should also be aware that the seriousness of Esther’s condition cannot be forgotten. In relation to her traumatic, nearly fatal sexual experience with Irwin, the blood can be seen to symbolize death and rebirth, and it is important to notice the coincidence here with Joan’s suicide.

The symbol of water reoccurs throughout the novel and is usually seen in relation to death and rebirth. Readers will recognize that Esther experiences great comfort in water, and often expresses a great need for purification. During her stay in New York water is seen in relation to the idea of dissolving, for instance when she is taking a bath after having been out on the town, as quoted in Chapter I. When taking her bath, Esther feels her whole environment dissolving around her, and this signifies her wish to go beyond her present limitations. When Esther is in the water, time stands still around her,

she feels in a sense pure and free, and can be seen symbolically to return to the safety and comfort of the womb. This experience might be compared to Holden's retreat to the museum tomb, where he also feels sheltered and secluded from the outside world. In this incident, Esther is renewed and cleansed from the dirtiness of her surrounding relations after her bath, and falls into a peaceful sleep. She is, however, awakened by the drunken Doreen in the middle of the night who vomits on the floor of her room. It is noteworthy that this incident can remind us of Holden's experience in the tomb, where he is so abruptly awakened by the 'fuck you' on the wall. Both characters express a great need to be separated from their environments. They both seem to be very negatively influenced by their surroundings, but are not able to remain secluded in these 'hidden' spaces. The phony and obscene world always catches up with them, wherever they try to hide. When Esther becomes seriously depressed and suicidal, she imagines several ways of dying, one of them when she is out swimming: "I thought I could swim until I was too tired to swim back. As I paddled on, my heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears. I am I am I am. That morning I had tried to hang myself" (158). In her severely troubled, suicidal state, Esther imagines relief from her sufferings in water by drowning. Yet, water must also be seen in this novel as a symbol of life, and in relation to water, Esther then expresses a wish not only of a final death, but a hope for a new life. She wants to start over, to be cleansed properly from the dirt of her current existence and to receive the gift of a new beginning.

The title of *The Catcher in the Rye* similarly suggests Holden's dilemma, which is further described in the book as Holden's catcher-fantasy:

"I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around-nobody big, I mean-except me.

And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff-I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them"(173).

Similarly to *The Bell Jar*, the title of this book describes some of the major themes of the book and the main struggles of the protagonist. Holden wants to be the one who catches innocent children who are standing on the edge of the cliff on the brink of adulthood. His dilemma is the phoniness he sees so clearly all around him in adult society, the shallowness, insincerity, and lack of authenticity that he sees exhibited everywhere. This he also wants to save himself from, he is indeed running around (in New York City), not knowing where he is going, trying to postpone the inevitable fall. The title can be related to different aspects of the book. It could also be linked to Holden's longing for his younger brother Allie and his failure to save him, as he died a young child. Therefore he now has this longing to save children, to make up for what he could not do then. The theme of the catcher can also be interpreted on a deeper level, as Peter Shaw has noted in his article "Love and Death in the Catcher in the Rye":

"Holden's catcher in the rye fantasy is usually understood to contain a kind of moratorium idea. The children falling off the cliff are said to symbolize a fall into adulthood, from which Holden imagines himself sparing them even as he would spare himself. But it is possible to be more specific: in psychological terms the 'catcher' passage combines the elements of both falling in love and mourning" (Salzman, 103).

According to Shaw, readers should see the main theme in relation to Holden's deeper psychological struggles. This catcher fantasy symbolically explains Holden's fear of growing up, but also suggests the deeper, underlying reasons for this fear. Falling might also be seen in relation to falling in love, and readers will recognize that this is another

struggle for Holden. Finding a partner is of course another obvious step towards the adult world that Holden fears, and the sexual aspect of this can be related to losing one's childhood innocence. Holden's roommate, Stradlater, is a challenge for Holden, as he is sexually experienced and is going on a date with Jane Gallagher, a girl Holden is attracted to. Before he leaves, Holden tells him: "'Ask her if she still keeps all her kings in the back row'" (34). The symbol of the kings in the back row is related to how Holden used to play checkers with Jane, but it also symbolizes Holden's reluctance to make sexual moves on Jane, and her own reluctance to make this first step. On even another level, we can see the lack of movement on the checkerboard as symbolizing the troubled development into adulthood:

"Jane's withholding her kings may be said to symbolize the suspension of maturation typical of this adolescent period-even as it typifies the static, sexually unthreatening relationship Holden has with her. For, like young people, the pieces on a checkerboard must keep moving forward...By not moving her kings out of the back row, Jane solves the problem presented by this unavoidable process of maturation. She had made it one of *arrested development*. Understandably, this is particularly attractive to Holden" (Salzman, 102-103).

By not moving her kings forward, Jane prevents the maturation process, and stays frozen in childhood, the stage Holden clings to as well. The checkerboard thus becomes a symbol of life, and the lack of movement symbolic of the adolescent reluctance to grow up.

The novel contains several other symbolic instances of Holden's wish to be preserved from change. When he is down in the pharaonic tomb in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he discovers that he likes it: "I was the only one left in the tomb then, I sort of liked it in a way. It was so nice and peaceful"(204). In the tomb, Holden is separated from the environment around him that he struggles with, but the tomb may also

be seen to symbolize death in general and Allie's death in particular. The mummies, who are preserved, also represent how Holden would like to be preserved from change, and this is seen in his visit to the Museum of Natural History as well: "The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those fish" (121). Holden wanders around in the museum, recalling the great memories of his regular childhood visits there. In this static environment, he feels peaceful, and the visits to the museums in the novel symbolically represent his longing to go back in time, to stay frozen and preserved, like the exhibited pieces there. When Holden is in the museum, he is for a moment separated from the society he cannot stand being part of and is in a place where time seems to stand still and old memories are preserved. It is of course appropriate that he is abruptly 'awakened' by the reality of what's out there even while being down in the peaceful tomb: "Then all of a sudden, you'd never guess what I saw on the wall. Another 'Fuck you'. It was written with a red crayon or something" (204). The reality of his immediate environment cannot be ignored, and Holden cannot run away from what he necessarily belongs to. He seeks protection from reality in the museum, but reality inevitably catches up with him, he cannot run away from the phony world he is part of.

There is a similar incident in *The Bell Jar*, when Esther attempts suicide. Like Holden, she feels peaceful in the confined, grave- like space where she lies down to face death: "It took me a good while to heft my body into the gap, but at last, after many tries I managed it, and crouched at the mouth of the darkness, like a troll. The earth seemed friendly under my bare feet" (169). Esther is symbolically seen as retreating into a space

that resembles both a tomb and a womb, to both die and be reborn. Both Plath and Salinger have used similar symbolism here to convey a similar message. These protagonists both have a wish to be separated from the reality of the environment they are part of. Esther reaches more drastically for death, but Holden too expresses strong revulsion towards the society he lives in, and seems to feel at peace in the tomb, where he can ignore the inevitable development he is facing as he goes on living. Holden is fascinated by death, at least partly because of his dead brother, but he is not suicidal like Esther. Still, the tomb where Holden feels comfortable and the confined space in the basement where Esther peacefully faces death are very similar symbolic instances in the two novels.

Michael Cowan explains the symbolic meaning in *The Catcher in the Rye* in his article: "Holden's Museum Pieces: Narration and Nominal Audience in *The Catcher in the Rye*":

"But the exhibits in both of Holden's museums do more than wrestle with time and its onslaught. They are tightly bound up with the problem of who controls what and whom, and by what means...Such experiences and personae...are being represented by what we might call a museum discourse...Holden...tries...to control both the past of his memories and the present of his narrating by gaining at least partial control over past and present audiences...a speaker who tries to preserve himself in part by maintaining control over a narrative that resists control and over an audience that may have in mind other alternative narratives" (Salzman, 36-37).

According to Cowan, the language used in the museum and elsewhere in the novel is deliberately used as a way to control the audience. This is then seen as another strategy used by Holden to achieve control in a world in flux. In this interpretation, the symbolism conveyed in the novel itself is seen to function on a level where it affects the reader directly.

Holden's red hunting hat that he wears backwards is obviously suggestive of a baseball catcher in relation to the catcher theme. But some critics such as James Bryan have read a much deeper symbolic meaning into this.:

“At its deepest level, the hat symbolizes something like Holden's basic human resources-his birthright, that lucky caul of protective courage, humor, compassion, honesty, and love- all of which are the real subject matter of the novel. As the symbolic hat gives Holden 'quite a lot of protection, in a way' and he gets 'soaked anyway' those human resources do not prevent emotional collapse”(Salzberg, 116).

Bryan here identifies the hat as a main symbol in the novel, directly related to the main plot line, as it symbolizes Holden's main dilemma and gives the reader an understanding of the major issues at this point in his life. The most obvious message of the hat is also illustrated through the title and is explained in the novel itself through Holden's catcher fantasy. With the hat on his head, he becomes a symbol of the right kind of catcher, a hero in his own eyes. He wants to save the children around him, and he also wants to save himself. Bryan's observation of how the hat gives a lot of protection, but still gets soaked, is a clear message to the reader of Holden's vulnerability and an illustration of his flawed persona. Holden has unrealistic dreams in terms of his environment, and this can be seen as a way to escape himself and his own struggles, or to escape what bothers him in his own environment. He is, however, time after time, abruptly awakened to what he often views as an obscene reality, reminded of what he is a part of, but his response is usually to retreat back into his fantasies. One of his most memorable fantasies is his vision of moving out into the woods, becoming a deaf-mute. Holden leans on these unrealistic elements, and the hunting cap symbolizes some of the main elements of his fantasy, of his unrealistic view of the world. It seems that Salinger here constantly reminds the reader of Holden's flawed persona. He did not write a novel

about a super- hero or a savior. What attracts so many readers to Holden is exactly the fact that Salinger made him this troubled and confused adolescent figure. As readers we like to relate to real characters, characters that we can believe in. Holden is in many ways a typical character of his time, as he is used to criticize flaws in society and express a deep sense of alienation. Through these wide-ranging symbolic elements, Salinger illustrates the struggles of this young boy as he is growing up, but he also seems to provide severe criticism of American society in the postwar period.

In my opinion, James Bryan goes too far in his interpretation of Holden's relationship to his sister Phoebe, as he seems to imply that Holden has inappropriate feelings for his little sister. Readers will recognize Holden's special relationship to Phoebe, and recognize that Phoebe functions as a kind of mentor and supporter for Holden at times. Phoebe makes Holden realize that it is perhaps something wrong with the way he views his surroundings when she says: "You don't like anything that's happening' ... 'Name one thing.'"(169). This leaves Holden depressed because he has no clear answer, but his conversations with Phoebe also seems to clarify something about his own attitude. Because he trusts and admires his sister and she knows him so well, she has the ability to make Holden receive this personal critique and to help him realize that it is something wrong about the way he sees his environment and his own place within it as so desolate and hopeless. Phoebe therefore is able to bring Holden towards recovery, as she makes him realize that his own outlook on things is at times distorted.

His special relationship to his sister can be related to the death of Allie, who died when he was Phoebe's age, and Phoebe is of course still an innocent and honest child, not yet corrupted by the phony adult world. It is obvious why Phoebe would be special to

Holden, and it seems entirely appropriate that Phoebe is the one who shows Holden a way out of his dilemmas at the end of the novel. Phoebe is definitely someone that Holden will listen to and respect, and through his relationship with her he experiences some sorely needed stability in his life. When Holden decides to run away and Phoebe is ready to go with him, he finally reaches a point where he becomes the more responsible adult, and perhaps also realizes that his view of life is not as realistic as it should be, that he needs stability, and perhaps that he needs to provide some stability for his little sister as well.

Dennis Vail has a different symbolic reading of Holden's hat and also of the ending of the book: "The hat is a badge of Holden's calling and responsibility. Phoebe has the hat while Holden is planning to run away, and only when she puts it back on his head are things finally right"(Salzberg, 118). Vail furthermore views the hat as a sign of Holden's responsibility and his stability in a sense. Vail also sees Phoebe as Holden's mentor in the sense that she leads him in the right direction, that she makes him realize that his life is without direction and that he needs to become more stable and responsible. He comments further on the symbolic elements of the gold ring in the carousel scene:

"The gold ring is most directly a symbol of ideal perfection and truth, the imaginable state toward which all striving tends; and striving involves risks. Holden has been 'trying to grab for the gold ring' throughout the novel, though in a self-destructive way. Mr. Antolini is afraid that Holden is 'riding for some kind of terrible, terrible fall' (p186), just as Holden is afraid that Phoebe will fall from the carousel horse" (Salzberg, 118).

Readers will, however, recognize in this closing of the novel that Holden finally seems to have found a more peaceful state of mind. He seems in some ways to have come to terms with this inevitable fall when he thinks to himself:

“ All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddamn horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them” (211).

In interpreting the significance of this very important symbolic scene, most readers would no doubt see it as Holden's more realistic acceptance of the terms of his life, that he cannot keep children away from growing up, himself included. The carousel itself can be seen as a symbol of the circular motion of life. As the gold ring may well represent the ideal life we try to reach for and hold onto, Holden here seems to a certain extent to have come to terms with his destiny. As he recognizes how 'you just have to let them [the kids] do it, he seems to finally have gotten to a point where he accepts that he cannot stay a boy forever. This could imply that the fall he has been so afraid of, is finally seen in a more accepting manner, and with this realization he can potentially come to terms with the world. James Lundquist interprets the carousel scene:

“Only through coming to terms with the fallen nature of the world through his own fall can Holden achieve release...when he goes to the zoo with Phoebe and sits on a bench in the park watching her ride the carousel, we see that he has left his idea of being a catcher in the rye behind...And suddenly Holden is surrounded by symbols that suggest rebirth, blessing, and hopefulness. It is raining and it is Christmas, and in the carousel's circular movement he obtains a true and vital vision of eternity to replace his old lunatic's love for the mummies' tomb” (Lundquist, 51).

In this crucial symbolic scene, readers will see that Holden's life is transformed, and that he is released from his previous struggles. Salinger presents clearly positive symbols here that suggest that Holden is no longer in his state of despair, but seems to have acquired a general acceptance of his own future. Holden realizes now that he cannot save himself or children from the natural cycle of life with its possible slips and falls. He comprehends that this is a natural, necessary cycle, as is his own growth into adulthood. This should

tell the reader that Holden has reached a more realistic state of mind. He is, as we know, after this incident sent to an institution where he spends some time, but at least he seems here to have reached some kind of conclusion, some kind of peace of mind. The novel is open-ended, but in my opinion, there is a good reason to hope that Holden will be able to make the transition to adulthood without compromising his most cherished ideals.

The carousel scene suggests a similar symbolic significance to Holden that the ascending of the bell jar is to Esther. These are symbols that suggest that the characters are at least partly liberated and free, that their previous burden that made them so troubled is replaced with a newfound hope for a better future.

Symbolism is used in both *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, mainly to explain how these characters are alienated from their surroundings, and how they constantly experience their environment as unfit and at times even threatening to their individuality. The symbols also express how the characters' psychological state and their outlook on the world develop through the novel and how they are seen to reach a more stable state at the end. The main issues seen in both Esther and Holden place them in a very similar predicament, and through the use of symbolism, both Sylvia Plath and J.D Salinger achieve a more powerful description of these characters and their situations.

CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath and J.D. Salinger have focused on similar themes in their portrayal of Esther Greenwood and Holden Caulfield. As young characters both living in the American fifties, these characters are going through similar problems in their transition to adulthood. Esther Greenwood, often seen as closely patterned on Plath herself, experiences deeper and more serious psychological problems than Holden, but the main message of alienation from one's society is seen prominently in both characters. Esther becomes suicidal, which is a development that can be seen as largely due to her suffocating environment, as well as to her personal psychological problems. What sets Esther's deep depression off, is her inability to fit into her expected role as a woman in her society. Holden is similarly unable to fit into his role as a young man, as he is flunking out of school, he is unable to find a desirable direction in his environment. Therefore he exists in a kind of existentialist limbo. He is lost in New York City, trying to find a place to hold on to, something to belong to, but constantly experiencing a deeper feeling of desperation and anxiety, as he fails to connect with people or places around him on any deeper level.

For Esther, the pressure may be seen as being greater than for Holden. As a woman of the 50's, she was expected to find an eligible husband who would be her financial supporter while she would be a stay-at-home housewife. The more Esther is exposed to these examples around her, among her female friends, her mother and so on, the more she experiences this sense of the bell jar descending over her and suffocating her. She feels that her own intellectual growth is suppressed, and as she is faced with her

appointed role, she eventually feels that the pressure is paralyzing, even taking away her will to live. Both Esther and Holden are presented with examples in their environment that make them feel the same sense of alienation and desperation as they cannot find a satisfactory way to be part of it. Holden sees examples of how he is supposed to be as an adolescent boy facing adulthood. In Stradlater he is presented with the physically attractive guy, a guy who is experienced with girls and sex, who is popular and athletic. He represents the all-American young man, the eligible bachelor, and in his narcissistic superficiality he fits perfectly in as an ideal in this environment. Holden, like Esther, is an intellectual and an introvert in many ways. It is not his lack of ability that has him flunking out of Pencey Prep, but his lack of interest in boring subjects and in what awaits him in society after his education. He has no desire to become a successful, wealthy person like his father, he dreams of a simple, unrealistic life, away from the society that he experiences as so fake and meaningless. Esther, on her part, becomes unable to write as she reaches the bottom of her depression and can not see any convincing reason to go on with her life any more. These two protagonists experience a similar society from different angles and with different mindsets, but they also share many views on this society, and are in many ways similarly bothered by what awaits them as they reach adulthood.

Both Esther and Holden share a traumatic past in relation to the death of a close family member. This seems for both characters to be something they have not yet dealt with properly and that prevents them from moving on in their lives. Holden's fascination with children has often been seen in relation to the death of his younger brother who died only 10 years old. The catcher theme can be seen as an expression of Holden's desire to

save young children, as he was never able to save his young brother, for which he has had a guilty conscience ever since, also because he refused to take Allie along on his bicycle trip just before he died. Esther struggles with the loss of her father who died when she was a young girl, echoing Plath's own experience and the subject of several poems, including "Daddy". Esther visits her father's grave, where she suddenly realizes that her family have never gone through a proper grieving process, and she breaks into tears. Her obsession with death should also be seen in this context. Holden exhibits a similar obsession with death at times, for example when he feels so comfortable in the tomb in the museum, but this theme is mainly described through Esther who is more obviously drawn towards death than Holden. It is, however, notable that they both have these traumatic experiences from their backgrounds that have not been properly dealt with and that seem to make their present and future more challenging and confusing than they would otherwise have been.

Both Esther and Holden experience typical existentialist struggles. This can obviously be related to their time period as many writers in the fifties and sixties would express similar attitudes of alienation and the need for authenticity in a growing consumerist society. What Holden views as phoniness within his society, is manifested as the inauthentic behavior he experiences in the characters around him. For a sensitive boy like Holden, this is partly what makes him feel so frustrated and disgusted with his surroundings. However, it is also typical of Holden to frequently exhibit similar behavior to what he has previously revolted against. This could perhaps be seen as his attempts to fit in, to find a way to belong, but he constantly fails in these attempts and is brought back into his state of existential limbo. The phony adult world and his inability to

function in it can be seen as a prominent reason for Holden's lack of stability and direction. He clings to unrealistic ideas that are proven to go nowhere and is lost like the ducks in the pond when it freezes over in winter. Holden's contempt for movies and Hollywood is another example of how he is bothered by what is inauthentic around him. The pretence and hypocrisy he sees in other characters like Stradlater or Sally Hayes bother him, because they show him that these two popular characters are basically insincere and selfish. Stradlater dates young girls without any serious intentions towards them. He goes on a date with Jane Gallagher, and Holden suspects that he will just try to have sex with her, and it bothers him because he is quite attracted to her. Sally Hayes is presented as another superficial character, fascinated with the 'right' movies, and even her language Holden finds to be superficial and fake.

The establishments around him in New York like the Wicker Bar are places where Holden experiences a superficial and inauthentic environment: "It's one of those places that are supposed to be very sophisticated and all, and the phonies are coming in the window"(141). Clearly, what Holden seems to be bothered by in his environment is this superficiality that he calls phoniness that seems to be exhibited around him wherever he goes. One might argue that Holden's basic problems are related to his traumatic past, but it is quite obvious that Salinger also makes a point of criticizing the American society of the forties and fifties.

Plath exposes her contemporary society to a similar criticism in *The Bell Jar*. Esther is predominantly a female victim in her society as she experiences the pressures of being a woman of the fifties. Similarly to Holden, Esther feels alienated by a society that does not seem to notice the individual for her talents and needs. Esther is not a young

woman who is capable of just playing her assigned, stereotypical role. Like Holden, Esther sees and despises this superficial behavior being exhibited around her in other characters like Doreen or Mrs. Willard. The realization of how other women live and her own recognition of how she is expected to follow the norm, make her feel alienated and depressed like Holden. Although Esther's problems become much more severe than Holden's, the reasons for them in terms of how she is affected by her environment are similar to Holden's situation. Working in the women's magazine in New York City, she is brought face to face with the expectations of how women should behave and look in her time and place, and when going back to her childhood home in the Boston suburbs, she sees her projected destiny exhibited all around her in stay-at-home housewives like Dodo Conway with all her children or Mrs. Willard the supposedly ideal wife and mother. Esther is academically brilliant, but as there seems to be no place for her to develop and exhibit these talents or to grow as an intellectual young woman, she gradually becomes more and more trapped within her own depressive state.

In both novels, imagery and symbolism play an important part. As a poet, Sylvia Plath uses a language that is naturally symbolic, and these techniques are thus more prominent and wide-ranging in *The Bell Jar* than in *The Catcher in the Rye*. But although Holden Caulfield's narrative is told in a casual and colloquial way, Salinger has also used imagery and symbolism in many parts of the novel to more accurately express Holden's predicaments. Instances like the ducks in the pond, Holden's visits to the museum, or the carousel scene are all symbolic elements in the novel that convey messages about Holden's psychological state and his view of the world. The titles of both

novels are obviously symbolic, focusing on the main themes and perhaps the main problems of the protagonists.

Unlike Salinger, Plath openly admitted that her novel was closely related to her own experiences growing up. Plath's mother, Aurelia Plath, was strongly against the publication of the novel in the U.S. in the 70's: "as this book stands by itself, it represents the basest ingratitude. That was not the basis of Sylvia's personality; it was the reason she became so frightened when at the time of publication, the book was widely read and showed signs of becoming a success" (Biographical Note, 263). As a confessional poet, Plath admitted that her writing was intimately related to her own life, and it is understandable that her mother was not in favor of the publication of these sometimes intimate details of her daughter's life. Salinger was quite the opposite of Plath in this respect, as he chose to live a very secluded and private life away from the spotlight. But it seems more than likely that such things as Holden's contempt for Hollywood and his brother's decision to 'sell out' to that kind of lifestyle are expressions of Salinger's own personal views. Critics have tried hard to discover some information on Salinger and his life, but without much success. In a sense Salinger has chosen to refuse his environment, while Plath chose to express openly her problems in relation to her role as a woman, and her own psychological dilemmas. Both Esther and Holden are at the end of these novels seen to be in a better place, where they have found a way to accept their inevitable future within their respective environments better. The way they both reach this state can be seen to be through a form of catharsis where they reach a bottom. Esther reaches this bottom through her suicide attempts, and Holden reaches this point when he is seen to have a nervous breakdown walking up Fifth Avenue: "Every time I came to the end of a

block and stepped off the goddamn curb, I had this feeling that I'd never get to the other side of the street. I thought I'd just go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see me again" (197). After they reach this bottom, they both have the experience of being reborn in a sense, and this is seen in the institution with Esther after Joan's suicide and her near fatal first sexual experience, and it is seen in the carousel scene with Holden and Phoebe. After these experiences they are, at least for the time being, transformed into more stable individuals with a more positive future to look ahead to.

The struggles of the two protagonists can be seen as timeless in many ways. The growing pains of adolescence will always have to be faced by young people in our society, and perhaps this is the reason why these books have kept their popularity and are still read frequently around the world. Esther's struggle with depression has become a greater problem in our world today than at her time, and the number of people relying on anti-depressants is growing, while suicide attempts are becoming more numerous. Plath relates Esther's struggles to her position as a woman in her society at the time, and while women have achieved more equality in western societies today, many young women will still be able to relate to the problems she encounters.

Social alienation and the frustration it leads to are important themes in both novels. To a great degree this is related to the growing consumerism and standardization. What especially bothers Holden is the loss of meaningful social contact and acknowledgement of the individual in his environment. Holden also expresses strong contempt for the growing mass-media culture and how it is superficial and not a portrayal of real life and authentic individuals. In our world today, at the beginning of the 21st century, it is easy to see that the power of the media is constantly growing, making

Holden's problems at least as relevant today as in the fifties. And while the situation of women has clearly changed in the fifty years that have passed since then, the problem of choosing your path in life may appear just as complicated for a modern-day woman as it was for Esther Greenwood, standing paralyzed before the fig tree of her disintegrating existence.

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