

Breaking the Bell Jar

*Teaching Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar and Feminist Literary Criticism to Upper
Secondary School Students*



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Abstract

This paper studies how Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* can be read from a feminist perspective and, in turn, what some possible benefits and potential risks of teaching the novel and feminist literary criticism to upper secondary school students of English in Sweden are. This paper also discusses how the novel can be a means to discuss the fundamental values of upper secondary school, in terms of equality, but also the topic of mental health. To do this, the novel has been analysed through close reading, supported by the theoretical framework of feminist criticism. Combined with previous research, the analysis was then used to discuss the benefits of teaching feminist criticism and *The Bell Jar*. The analysis shows that *The Bell Jar* offers many points of discussion in terms of feminist literary criticism, particularly through its depictions of how patriarchal structures and gender roles are reinforced and their detrimental effects on young women. Thus, the novel allows for many discussions about feminism and women's conditions. By discussing this novel, the students can be encouraged to reflect on their own experiences and opinions about the topics discussed in the novel. In turn, teaching the novel through feminist criticism can influence students' worldview and critical thinking and possibly affect their empathy towards other people. Additionally, the novel offers a great source of identification for young women, who can find empowerment in reading and discussing the novel. Lastly, the novel allows teachers to discuss mental health issues in the classroom and possibly support students struggling with their mental health.

Keywords: *The Bell Jar*, feminist literary criticism, mental health, fundamental values

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1 Introduction

In July 2022, a revision of the curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden will be implemented. The revisions are part of the work of the Swedish National Agency for Education to improve each school's work with equality, sexuality, consent and relationships (Skolverket, 2021b). Each school and teacher is responsible for working actively to make visible and counteract gender norms that limit students' learning, choices, and development (Skolverket, 2021c, p. 6). Additionally, teachers should also work to develop students' awareness of gender norms, structures and values and how these can affect people's life choices and conditions (p. 7).

These values should permeate all subjects, although it might be challenging to accomplish. Thus, this paper will attempt to support teachers of English in their work to implement these new and important aspects of the fundamental values. More specifically, this paper will focus on teaching Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963/1999) and feminist literary criticism together, and subsequently, using literature and literary criticism to discuss topics such as equality.

The relevance of researching this topic, I would argue, is manifold. Firstly, it can provide support to teachers about how they can discuss the revised fundamental values and promote equality, which is also stressed in the curriculum (Skolverket, 2021c, p. 7). Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a novel that deals with what it can be like to grow up as a young woman in a patriarchal society. Consequently, teaching this novel through feminist criticism can highlight the patriarchal structures in society and open up for critical discussions, also stressed in the curriculum (Skolverket, 2021c, p. 7). Schools should also encourage students' understanding of other people and the ability to empathise (p. 5). Surveys show that approximately 26% of young women between the ages of 16 and 24 have experienced sexual offences, and as many as 60% of young women the same age have experienced unwanted sexual

acts (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2021, p. 49; Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, 2021, p. 44). Thus, there is a dire need for a heightened awareness of women's living conditions and respect for women's bodies.

Teaching *The Bell Jar* can also provide young women with a valuable source for identification. Highlighting the feminist aspects of this novel in teaching can be a powerful method to empower female students in their journey to become women in a patriarchal society and find answers to their troubles. However, I also argue that some male students also could identify with the struggles with anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts depicted in the novel.

1.1 Aim and research questions

There is plenty of research on *The Bell Jar* and teaching feminist criticism. However, there is little research about these areas combined. Thus, the aim of this essay is to investigate how feminist literary criticism can be applied to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and the implications of teaching *The Bell Jar* and feminist literary criticism together to upper secondary school students of English in Sweden. In addition, the essay will also include a discussion about the depictions of mental health in the novel, as it opens up for discussions about sensitive, but relevant, subjects in the classroom. Due to the size of this essay, the aim is not to provide concrete teaching methods, but rather provide an introductory discussion about the benefits and risks of teaching the novel and feminist literary criticism.

The research questions are:

- How can Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* be read through feminist literary criticism?
- What are some possible benefits and potential risks of teaching feminist literary criticism and *The Bell Jar* to upper secondary school students of English in Sweden?

2 Background

Below, feminist literary criticism, will be presented. Subsequently, previous research about teaching feminist literary criticism and sensitive subjects will be discussed, as well as previous research on *The Bell Jar*.

2.1 Theoretical framework

In this paper, feminist literary criticism will make up the framework that will guide the analysis. The goal is to provide a simplified overview of feminist literary criticism in order to present a framework and analysis suitable to upper secondary school students, while still keeping the essential points.

2.1.1 Feminist literary criticism

Feminist literary criticism was developed in the 20th century as a reaction to the male domination in literature. Kaplan (1988) argued that feminist literary criticism grew from recognition and love for women writers and an urge to display how women have been oppressed and trivialised in works by male authors (p. 37). This developed into a wide range of critical methods for studying portrayals of women and how these reinforce oppression (p. 38). Moi (1997) has also described feminist criticism as “the theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism” (p. 104). Similarly, today, Tyson (2015) describes feminist criticism as the examination of “the ways in which literature . . . reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (p. 79) and that its purpose is to “increase our understanding of women’s experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women’s value in the world” (p. 114).

One important aspect of feminist literary criticism, which can both be beneficial and an obstacle, is that it is highly individual and complex. Kaplan (1988) stressed that there

are nearly as many sub-categories as feminist critics (p. 54). Similarly, according to Moi (2002), a central feature of feminist literary criticism is that it can never be accounted for objectively, as it is always coloured by one's own view (p. xiii). Thus, we might not realise whether our assumptions or interpretations are universal or merely expressions of our subjectivity (Tyson, 2015, pp. 90-91). Therefore, it is nearly impossible to leave ourselves out of the picture. According to Tyson (2015), the best way to deal with this is to make our thought processes clear to the reader. Still, reading and analysing novels through feminist criticism can also allow students to raise their own experiences in response to the novel (Kaplan, 1988, p. 44). Doing this can stress that each person's experience is valuable and how our diverse experiences can affect us.

2.1.2 Patriarchy, traditional gender roles and Cixous' oppositions

Patriarchy and traditional gender roles are concepts central to feminist literary criticism, allowing for a primary introduction to students. These terms, and Hélène Cixous' theory on binary oppositions, will be presented below and are central to the analysis in this paper.

Patriarchy is one of the fundamental terms of feminist literary criticism and describes how women are seen as inferior to men. Tyson (2015) describes patriarchy as "any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles" (p. 81). Subsequently, it endorses the belief that women are inferior to men and that men are the authority (Guo, 2018, p. 454). In turn, people in a patriarchal society are socialised not to see how these traditional gender roles and hierarchy negatively affect people (Tyson, p. 82). In society, this hierarchy can be discerned when men make up the majority of the authority figures in terms of social organisation and control, political leadership, morality and the family (Guo, p. 454). As a result, women brought up in a patriarchal society have often had their perception of their potential power diminished.

Closely related to patriarchy are the traditional gender roles and norms. Essentially, these roles cast men as "rational, strong, protective, and decisive [and] women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (Tyson, 2015, p. 81). Women are in a patriarchal society also associated with frailty, modesty and timidity. Furthermore, they are not expected to be very intelligent, have strong opinions and assert their rights, succeed professionally, earn money, or have a healthy appetite (p. 84). Consequently, these features have been used to justify discrimination that excludes women from equal access to leadership and power (p. 81).

A common denominator in these views is the concept of *biological essentialism*. Biological essentialism is the belief that each person's personality or other specific qualities are innate, rather than a result of socialisation, such as circumstances, upbringing, and culture (Chandler & Munday, 2011). The concept is often argued for by those opposing feminism and those who want women to conform to the patriarchal norms (Moi, 1997, p. 108). Although most feminists would not deny the biological differences between men and women, they do reject the idea that these differences make men innately superior to women, and, therefore, feminists try to dismantle it (Tyson, 2015, p. 82; Eagleton, 1996, p. 146).

To dismantle these ideas, feminist literary criticism, for example, investigates the binary oppositions operating within literary texts. One of the theoreticians who have discussed binary oppositions in literature is Hélène Cixous. One of Cixous' most well-known and accessible theories analyses patriarchal binary thought and lists reigning binary oppositions between men and women (as cited in Moi, 2002, p. 102). Each opposition corresponds to the underlying opposition man/woman and presents a hierarchy wherein the feminine side is always seen as negative or inferior. The oppositions show how women are portrayed, or expected, to be *passive*, while the men are *active*. Furthermore, it is assumed that women are *emotional*, *sensitive* and provide *pathos*, while men display *head*, *intelligibility* and *logic* (p. 103).

Cixous' linguistic theory in its entirety is arguably too abstract or complicated for upper secondary school students. Nevertheless, I argue that this part of her theory could be beneficial in the upper secondary school classroom, as it provides the students with a comprehensible framework, which simultaneously is more advanced than a list of the traditional gender roles. In this case, it would be most suitable for the English 7 classroom, as it requires more complex language abilities. This will be elaborated on in section 3.1.

An example of a literary genre where a patriarchal outlook can be discerned is the classic fairy tales. Tyson (2015) explains how in many fairy tales, young, beautiful girls are rescued by a man, implying that she cannot rescue herself and that marriage is the only guarantee for a woman to live happily ever after (p. 85). Furthermore, women in fairy tales have also been stereotyped into two characters. On the one hand, there are good girls, who are gentle, submissive and virginal (p. 85). On the other hand, there are bad girls, who are aggressive, vain, petty and jealous, for example, the evil stepsister.

This concept, where female characters are restricted to two characterisations; those who conform to traditional gender roles and the patriarchal rules and those who do not, is generally referred to as the Madonna-whore complex (Tyson, 2015, p. 85). These characters are based on patriarchal male desire to control women's sexuality and keep women considered "wife-material" pure (Tyson, 2015, p. 85). The *Madonna* is rewarded for following the patriarchal rules by being modest and nurturing and is completely satisfied by serving her family. She will have to remain uninterested in sexual activity, as women should not have sexual desire. In contrast, the *whore* disrupts patriarchal norms by, for example, being sexually forward in appearance or behaviour. The male characters usually choose the bad girls as sexual partners, but they do not wish to marry them, as they are not seen as being good enough to be their wives or mothers to their children (p. 86).

2.2 Literature review

Below, previous research regarding teaching feminist literary criticism and sensitive subjects will be discussed. Additionally, previous research on *The Bell Jar* will also be presented. This research will support the discussion about the benefits and risks of teaching this novel and feminist literary criticism.

2.2.1 Teaching feminist literary criticism

There are several different reasons to reach feminist literary criticism. Firstly, feminist criticism can develop students' independent thinking. Reyes-Díaz (2019) argues that as students look for deeper meaning while critically reading novels, they also develop deeper learning (p. 110). Additionally, Sharistanian (1979) has argued that it allows students to discover new ideas and information, rather than through the teacher's interpretation or response, which engages students in thinking actively and independently (p. 33).

Secondly, feminist criticism can affect students' views of themselves and their surroundings. Appleman (2015) explains that feminist theory provides a lens for students to interpret their everyday lives through (p. 71). Similarly, Sharistanian (1979) has argued that studying literature through feminist criticism provides the students with a framework of ideas, through which other ideas can be brought forward, both opposing and agreeing (p. 33). Similarly, Reyes-Díaz (2019) argues that feminist criticism can "shake the students' mindsets and recalibrate schemes that have been embedded" (p. 6). Subsequently, it allows students to identify how social structures shape who they are and provides a critical lens to scrutinise the patriarchal view of traditional gender roles (p. 110, 114). How feminist literary criticism allows students to scrutinise social structures also reflects the revised fundamental values related to equality that should be taught to students in upper secondary school.

Teaching feminist literary criticism and feminist novels also allows students to get to know themselves. Spacks has explained that female students often find connections between their own lives and those of characters in fiction written by women (as cited in Kaplan, 1988, p. 44). Spacks identified experiences related to power and passivity, adolescent development, the female artist and independent women as particularly effectual. Lindell (2020) argues that teachers should be encouraged to not only focus on measurable facts and assessing students' ability to produce 'correct' analyses (pp. 45-46). Lindell refers to Biesta, who argues that teaching does not only have to regard qualification and socialisation, but also subjectification and intellectual self-development (p. 48). Consequently, Lindell argues that “reading should be part of students’ reflection on their individual identity” (p. 48). Similarly, Appleman (2015) argues that it is beneficial for students to be allowed to disagree on readings presented by the teacher, as reading with theory does not lead to one particular conclusion, but rather allows various interpretations (p. 77). It is then essential that teachers do not disregard analyses as incorrect, but rather emphasise the weight of how students subjectivity affect their readings. This is also supported by the curriculum for upper secondary school and the syllabus for English, which say that students should be encouraged to reflect on their experiences and apply their knowledge to them (Skolverket, 2021c, p. 9, Skolverket, 2021a, p. 8).

There are also some difficulties surrounding teaching feminist literary criticism. Feminism has for many years been associated with negative connotations, and teachers will likely meet students who have a negative view of feminism or consider themselves antifeminists (Tyson, 2015, p. 79). Appleman (2015) also states that studying feminist literature through feminist literary criticism can make the teaching experience “too overtly feminist for comfort”, especially to male students (p. 79). Appleman argues that it can be helpful to use the term gender instead of feminism to stress that men are also affected by these structures (p. 68).

2.2.3 Teaching sensitive subjects

Talking about *The Bell Jar* and Sylvia Plath in the classroom will inevitably touch upon sensitive subjects, particularly depression, suicide, and sexual assault. Therefore, teachers should consider that discussing these delicate topics is difficult and can present a heavy burden. There has previously been criticism uttered towards the use of *The Bell Jar* in the classroom, especially in terms of its depictions of suicide thoughts and attempts (Wagner-Martin, 1992, p. 14). This, and the ongoing debate concerning suicide contagion, makes it vital for teachers to be aware of the risks.

The responsibility of teachers and schools to discuss topics such as mental health can be debated. However, The Public Health Agency of Sweden (2021) argues that teachers should talk about mental health issues in school. They state that when students are taught about mental health, the risks for mental illness can be decreased. In turn, teachers acting as support for students at risk can also reduce anxiety and depression. As anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms and suicide attempts have been at an all-time high in teenagers in the past years (Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, 2021, pp. 80-81), it is thus more important than ever to talk about these topics.

There are some things to consider when bringing up sensitive subjects. Durfee and Rosenberg (2009) emphasise that discussing sensitive subjects requires teachers to consider the potential impact on students carefully. With many students suffering from mental health issues, and more than half of girls and women between the ages of 16 and 24 having experienced unwanted sexual actions in the last six months (Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, 2021, p. 44), some students in the classroom will likely have negative or traumatic experiences. Consequently, discussing these can evoke strong reactions and emotions. In contrast, discussing these topics can also make students feel safe, as the teacher may appear as an expert or a 'safe' person to confide in (Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009, p. 104).

To support students, teachers can provide them with a list of appropriate resources to turn to or invite people with experience in discussing these topics (p. 114). Durfee and Rosenberg also stress that teachers should not try to solve students' problems, but rather offer resources and, in turn, empower them to solve the problems themselves.

2.2.4 *The Bell Jar*

The Bell Jar was written in the early 1960s by Sylvia Plath and was first published in 1963. Since its publication, *The Bell Jar* has been read frequently. Wagner-Martin (1992) explains how *The Bell Jar* gained popularity from Sylvia Plath's reputation as a cult writer and, nearly, a martyr of women's rights (p. 7). Nonetheless, Wagner-Martin reiterates that the novel is meaningful and important even on its own, most notably in terms of its opportunity for identification, even decades after it was written (pp. 7, 9). The following comment by Wagner-Martin sums up the impact of the novel well:

It is a work that speaks for the disorientation of late adolescence, that confusing time when a person looks 'adult' but is still dependent on parents, family, and teachers. While Esther Greenwood is female, the hesitancy and anxiety she feels are universal, and the novel's willingness to tell about those states of mind in a voice that has an undertone of comedy makes the narrative palatable to 1990s readers. (Wagner-Martin, 1992, p. 7)

The novel also emphasises the relationship between Esther's mental health and the society she lives in. Wagner-Martin has argued that this allows the novel to continually speak for readers who feel excluded by social norms, even though they might not relate to Esther's experiences specifically (p. 12). This speaks for the novel's relevancy still in the 21st century, even though the norms and conditions for women have changed.

The Bell Jar has frequently been read from a feminist perspective, showing that the novel closely relates to feminist criticism. For example, Miller Budick (1987) has argued that Plath creates a literary form that reflects the inherent femininity of a woman's experience, but, instead of making a static presentation of traditional images of femininity, transforms the depiction to "a dynamic process of feminist discourse" (p. 873). The male characters, on the other hand, Wagner-Martin (1992) argued, are embodiments of male sexuality and "represent the patriarchy in all its erotic, financial, and domestic power" (p. 47). The male characters are few, but they often control the direction of the narrative, Wagner-Martin argues. Their misuse of power harm Esther, showing how the patriarchal structures hurt women, physically and emotionally (pp. 47, 50).

Consequently, a significant aspect of *The Bell Jar* is its depictions of how destructive a patriarchal society can be to women. Wagner-Martin (1992) has highlighted how Esther's main dilemma is the choices she has to make (p. 72). Similarly, Boyer (2004) has emphasised that the novel shows how patriarchal structures can break a woman down, arguing that, in most instances, the agency for destruction is male (p. 200). As the novel is set in the 1950s, on the brink of the second feminist wave, it underlines the limiting structures that reigned and mistreated the women trying to break from them. In turn, Boyer argued that the novel stresses how Esther must fight the patriarchal expectations to reach her goals.

Looking at the depictions of mental health in *The Bell Jar* through feminist theory is also a great way to highlight the patriarchal structures in the novel. de Villiers (2019) argues that Plath draws attention to the patriarchal oppression and takes a step from the traditional depictions of madness from a male point of view, and instead, "offers an interpretation of madness as deriving from patriarchal oppression" (p. 2). Similarly to Boyer, de Villier argues that Esther's madness is depicted as a response to the restraining expectations of the 1950s patriarchal society.

3 Material and method

The following section will discuss the material and method of this essay. Firstly, the choice of material, i.e. *The Bell Jar*, will be discussed. Secondly, the choice of method, i.e. close reading, will be elaborated on.

3.1 Material

The material in this essay consists of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. As has been elaborated on in the introduction, this particular novel was chosen as it opens up for a discussion about gender roles, patriarchal structures and feminism through its depictions of a woman struggling with societal expectations. Furthermore, these depictions can allow for a discussion about the newly revised fundamental values described in the introduction. Additionally, it can also fulfil the aim of the syllabus for English that students should be given the opportunity to develop an understanding of others' living conditions (Skolverket, 2021a, p. 1). Additionally, even though the novel brings up possibly sensitive subjects, the depictions of sexual assault, mental health and suicide also open up for a discussion about the effects of being different and how struggles with mental health might look. Considering how many young women have been affected by sexual offences, and how many young people struggle with mental health issues, it is important to discuss these topics with students, which this novel can open up for.

The novel can also be argued for in terms of the core contents of the syllabus for English, particularly English 6 and 7. Firstly, fiction is part of the core contents of all courses, although, it is emphasised that English 6 and 7 should also include older fiction (Skolverket, 2021a, pp. 2, 5, 8). By older fiction, Skolverket (2021d) refer to fiction written before the mid-1900s (p. 16). Even though *The Bell Jar* was written in the early 1960s, I find it can arguably qualify as a piece of older literature, and thus, it might be more suitable for English 6 and 7. The complexity of the language in the novel and the inclusion of literary theory might also make the novel more suitable for English 7, as it might be too difficult for English 5 and 6

students. Secondly, it is also stated in the syllabus that social, cultural, political and historical conditions and values in different contexts and areas where English is used, also in comparison with students' own experiences and knowledge should be part of the core contents of English 6 and 7 (Skolverket, 2021, pp. 5, 8). In turn, this novel can allow for discussions about these topics, both today and historically, and allow students to reflect on them in relation to their own experiences.

3.2 Method

This essay aims to investigate how *The Bell Jar* can be read and analysed through feminist criticism and to highlight the potential benefits and risks of teaching the novel through feminist criticism. To fulfil the aim and answer the research questions, *The Bell Jar* will be analysed through close reading supported by feminist literary criticism.

Close reading goes deeper into texts than regular reading. Brummett (2019) explains that reading, as opposed to close reading, is "an attempt to understand the socially shared meanings that are supported by words, images, objects, actions, and messages" (p. 7), emphasising the importance of finding reasonable and defensible meanings in a text. What separates close reading from regular reading is that close reading also involves critical analysis and is thus often led by a framework to create a deeper understanding of the meanings (p. 9). Thus, in this paper, this method will allow for findings of deeper meanings in the novel related to feminist criticism. Consequently, close reading will be an instrument to apply feminist criticism to the novel.

The main issue in terms of the method and analysis, which is necessary to consider, is how each person's context affects the reading and analysis of a literary text. Brummett (2019) explains that even though reading entails looking for universally shared meanings, it is essential to remember that not all interpretations are universal, but depend on

one's own experiences and prior knowledge. It is, therefore, important not to assume that one's reading of a text is everyone else's reading (Brummett, p. 10). In this case, as the analysis will be centred around feminist criticism, women's conditions, and mental health, it will be affected by my political stance, my experiences as a woman, and my experiences with mental health issues. This also means that the analysis might not raise things a completely different reader would see, which could present a lack in the analysis. However, I would also argue that this makes each reading unique and significant, as each person's reading will highlight different aspects. The subjectivity of feminist criticism and close reading also means that although *The Bell Jar* has been read and analysed frequently, each reading will provide new readings. Nonetheless, it is still important to qualify the readings by accounting for the thoughts behind the claims (p. 10).

The novel will be analysed by looking at how it can be read through feminist criticism and discussing the interpretations. More specifically, by the support of the theoretical framework, I will look at how patriarchal structures can be discerned in the novel, how the characters reinforce these, and how the novel portrays them. The reading of the novel will be *with the grain*. This entails looking at what the text intends the reader to see instead of looking at what the text does not intend (Tyson, 2015, p. 7). In this case, it means highlighting the novel's portrayal as condemning sexist behaviour or patriarchal structures, rather than supporting them. The analysis of the novel and the previous research above will then be used to discuss the benefits and risks of teaching feminist criticism and *The Bell Jar*.

4 Analysis

In the first subsection below, the first research question will be discussed, i.e. how *The Bell Jar* can be read from a feminist perspective. In the second subsection, the second research question will be discussed, i.e. the potential benefits and risks of teaching the novel in upper secondary school.

4.1 *The Bell Jar*

As argued in sections 2 and 3 above and as shown below, close reading and feminist criticism are both suitable for discussing this novel. As Miller-Budick (1987) also has argued, the novel reflects a woman's experience different from the traditional suffocating stereotypes, but rather presents a depiction of feminist discourse. There are many ways in which patriarchal structures can be discerned in *The Bell Jar*, and one effective way to look at them is through the characters. Thus, in the sections below, examples of how the patriarchal structures and traditional gender norms are portrayed and reinforced by the characters and the depictions of the effects of this will be discussed.

4.1.1 The patriarchal society in *The Bell Jar*

I would argue that *The Bell Jar* portrays a patriarchal society and characters that reinforce these norms and structures, but that the novel itself challenges them. Some characters also challenge or struggle to conform to these, especially the main character, Esther. These two stances, i.e. conforming to or challenging the structures, can be discerned through certain groups of people. On the one hand, those conforming to the patriarchal structures are mainly the men and the older women. On the other hand, the younger women are generally those who react to and challenge these structures.

4.1.1.1 The male characters

Throughout the novel, the male characters display authority and a belief in being superior to the women to different degrees. This power dynamic is highlighted by Cixous, who argues that men are generally ascribed the active role, whereas women are ascribed the passive role (as cited in Moi, 2002). This indicates a patriarchal binary portrayed in *The Bell Jar*. Some men do have the power to make decisions and give advice to Esther, for example, Dr Gordon, being her doctor. However, the other men do not have any explicit reason to have power over Esther, which further affirms that they have gained power due to the patriarchal privilege of being male, as opposed to other factors.

One way the male characters display a view that they are superior or authoritative is through their attempts to make decisions for Esther without asking her what she wants or needs. On the one hand, some do this with relatively innocent actions, such as when Lenny tells Esther and Doreen to change their plans and go with him because their plans are boring. On the other hand, there are more candid depictions of this, such as when Marco attempts to rape Esther, which shows that he considers men to be in power to make decisions about women and their bodies and does not allow them to speak their minds. Similarly, Dr Gordon, who is supposed to help Esther, does not listen to her opinions, undermines her feelings and gives her a treatment that hurts her significantly. Mutual to these men is that they disregard women's thoughts and feelings and hurt them in different ways. Additionally, as Wagner-Martin (1992) also has emphasised, the male characters often decide the direction of Esther's life by hurting or changing her in different ways, which further emphasises their power.

As discussed in section 2, the traditional portrayal of women has often been based on two stereotypes where they are either good or bad, a view that can be seen in this novel. However, the novel itself does not adopt this view, as the female characters are more dynamic and multidimensional, but the view can still be seen in some characters. For example, Eric is

portrayed as looking at men and women through the Madonna-whore complex. Eric says that if he loved a woman

it would be spoiled by thinking this woman too was just an animal like the rest, so if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business. (Plath, 1963/1999, p. 84)

Eric sees women as two different types. These are, on the one hand, the good girls whom he would marry and love, but with whom he would not have sex, and on the other hand, the bad girls with whom he would have sex but not marry. This portrayal is an excellent example of this view on women, while the novel still does not promote it, as these views and similar experiences all play a part in Esther's declining mental health.

Esther's boyfriend, Buddy, differs notably from the other male characters. Buddy does not seem to want to take advantage of the patriarchal structures. Instead, he portrays a man who wants to, or feel he needs to, follow the male expectations but is oblivious to the negative effects, as he believes he is correct to do so. For example, he seems oblivious to Esther's dislike towards him when he tries to be authoritative by teaching her things. Examples of this are when he tries to teach her how to ski against her will, which results in her breaking her leg, or when he tries to teach her about sex, but pushes her further away. Towards the end, Buddy displays sensitivity and insecurity, but also a man who wonders why he hurts women when he only tries to do what is expected. Thus, Buddy represents a man who differs from the patriarchal norms and does not benefit from them, which shows that it can be difficult also for men to find their place in them.

4.1.1.2 *The older women*

It is not only the men who conform to or reinforce the patriarchal structures in the novel, but also the older women. This presents an interesting view into how the patriarchal structures are internalised also in women, even though it affects them negatively. This can be seen in Mrs Willard, Esther's mother and the lawyer who wrote the article on abstinence. Below, Mrs Willard will be used as an example of how the older women display a patriarchal outlook.

Mrs Willard, Buddy's mother, tries to reinforce a patriarchal view on men and women to Esther. Particularly compelling is her view on marriage. Mrs Willard says that

"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". (Plath, 1963/1999, p. 38)

This quote presents a view based on traditional gender roles as the man has the active role and the woman the passive role, being submissive and modest, and supports her husband, who works to become successful. However, the novel displays how this view negatively affects even the women who share and conform to these views. The passage that describes Mrs Willard's experience with the rug she spends weeks making, which later is stepped on and ruined beyond recognition, is a striking image of the ingratitude towards women's role and work as wives, which Mrs Willard herself endorses. When she accepts this happening, it highlights her as a patriarchal woman, as she does not see how unfairly she is treated or does not dare raise her voice.

4.1.2 Esther

Esther is a character heavily affected by the patriarchal structures that reign in the society she lives in. Below, how these structures affect her and her mental health and why she is affected by them will be discussed, emphasising how Esther does not fit in with these structures.

One interesting aspect to look at Esther in relation to is Cixous' theory about patriarchal oppositions, presented in section 2, which says that women are presented as emotional and sensitive, while men are intelligible and logical (as cited in Moi, 2002). Throughout the novel, Esther displays little emotion or sensitivity. She seems almost numb and says that she feels as though she cannot react the way the other girls at the magazine are, which accentuates how she strays away from the feminine stereotype. Also, Esther's lack of interest in the things the other women enjoy and that she finds them silly shows that she is different from them. However, seemingly, she wants to be. For example, she enjoys not being sensitive when she visits the hospital with Buddy and looks at foetuses in formaldehyde and says "I was quite proud of the calm way I stared at all these gruesome things" (Plath, 1963/1999, p. 33). Despite this, she also looks up to her friend Jody's cooking skills, as she herself cannot cook. Even though she does not want to be the way it is expected of her, she seems to feel the pressure to do so. This provides an interesting view into how difficult it can be to be different and break norms and how detrimental it can be to someone's mental health.

Another aspect where Esther does not conform to the patriarchal norms is her appetite. As Tyson (2015) presents, the patriarchal gender norms do not allow women to have a healthy appetite. Nevertheless, Esther does have a very healthy appetite. On the one hand, she eats a lot, which is heavily stressed. On the other hand, Esther has an appetite for her future. As Boyer (2004) has pointed out, the novel is set in the 1950s, when women were stuck between limiting structures and emancipation, which emphasises how society limited women's ambitions. Esther is a young woman who has been successful her whole life and, before her, awaits many goals. However, as a woman, the only future that lies ahead of her is one where she has to choose one at the expense of the others. This reflects how the society Esther lives in does not allow women to have an appetite. This experience is presented through the fig tree as a metaphor for Esther's life. In her mind, Esther sees a tree filled with figs, which each represent

the different possible roads for her future. All of the figs interest her, but she knows that she will lose all the others if she picks one. As she cannot decide which fig to pick, the figs start to wrinkle and fall to her feet, and she starves. Esther sees several different possible futures lying ahead of her, but as her appetite has been stilted by society's restrictions, she does not know which to choose, and instead, all her future possibilities disappear. She no longer has a goal to work towards, and she, figuratively, starves and loses her will to continue. This shows how the restrictive patriarchal structures affect Esther's mental health and her hunger for life.

The expectation on women to be maternal is another aspect where Esther differs from the norms. Esther often displays a dislike, or even repulsion, towards the idea of marrying or having children. These feelings seemingly derive from Esther's need for freedom. She explains to Dr Nolan, her psychiatrist, where her fear of getting pregnant originates:

“what I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb,” I had told Doctor Nolan. “A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line”. (Plath, 1963/1999, p. 233)

Esther is not necessarily afraid of the children per se, but rather to be under someone's control. This fear can also be seen in her reaction towards Mrs Willard's image of marriage, discussed in the previous sub-section. Esther says that the last thing she wants is infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. Rather, she wants to be the arrow that shoots off in all directions. As discussed in section 2, according to the traditional gender roles, women are not supposed to think of themselves, but rather take care of others, which Esther does not initially display. This makes Esther depart from the patriarchal norms, as she requires independence and to think of herself, not a family.

When Esther hears these statements about how women and men should be, she gets encouraged to fight the patriarchal norms. As previously discussed, Esther is a young woman who cannot be tied down to the gender norms, but there are people in her life, both men

and women, who tell her how women should be. These instances allow for a noteworthy depiction of a woman who does not want to conform to the expectations. When Esther considers Mrs Willard's views and experiences of marriage, she recognises how wrong it is and how unfairly women are treated. She says she "couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not" (Plath, 1963/1999, p. 86) and realises she will not conform to these demands. I argue that this empowers Esther; it makes her more determined that it is not what she wants.

However, Esther displays that it is also challenging to defy societal structures and expectations. As Esther realises that she cannot, and does not want to, conform to the norms, she realises that society demands something she cannot give, which makes her feel inferior and not enough. In a society that limits women's opportunities to choose their life paths, Esther loses momentum when she has to pick just one. This allows for the interpretation that being told she is not living the correct way makes Esther fall ill.

When Esther recovers, is it particularly telling that the novel takes a stance against the patriarchal structures. As Boyer (2004) has argued, it is apparent in the novel how destructive the patriarchal structures can be to women. Throughout the novel, Esther meets men and patriarchal women who attempt to help her, although it is not until she meets Dr Nolan that she starts to recover. This reflects how destructive the patriarchal men and women in her life are to her health. When Esther is hospitalised, she is sheltered from those people and starts to recover. An interesting parallel here is the traditional fairy tale, discussed in section 2, where a young woman in distress gets rescued by a brave and handsome man, telling young girls that only a man can make them live happily ever after. This novel, instead, presents a narrative where the men could not save Esther, but instead, a woman could. With the support of Dr Nolan and her benefactor, she can get rid of her fear of pregnancy by getting a diaphragm, and by the medical help and guidance of Dr Nolan, she is guided towards recovery from her fears and her

imprisonment in the feminine role. Esther also gains back her ability to read and write, which gives her back her chance to become a poet and live on her own accord; to be the active person. The diaphragm helps her feel free to meet a man and be the person in charge. It does not matter if he thinks he is in charge or wants to take advantage of her; in Esther's mind, she is the one in charge. She says: "[i]t was only after seeing Irwin's study that I decided to seduce him" (Plath, 1963/1999, p. 238), showing she is making the decisions. This presents a compelling opposition to the traditional patriarchal rhetoric where the men are active, while the women passively await their help.

4.2 Teaching *The Bell Jar*

In this section, the second research question will be discussed, i.e. the possible benefits and potential risks of teaching *The Bell Jar* and feminist literary criticism together. This will be discussed with the support of research on teaching feminist literary criticism and sensitive subjects.

As shown in the previous section, *The Bell Jar* allows for many discussion points in terms of feminist literary criticism, showing that they are suitable to teach together. As Kaplan (1988) has explained, feminist criticism grew from a wish to shed light on woman authors and how women have been oppressed and trivialised in earlier works by men, and this novel allows for precisely this. Firstly, through both Plath's and Esther's struggles with writing and the obstacles they meet, the novel allows for conversations about how women writers were not acknowledged for a long time. Secondly, the novel allows for a presentation of why feminist criticism is valid and what it can highlight. In this novel, it highlights the effects of a patriarchal society and mental health struggles from a woman's perspective. As de Villier (2019) also argues, the novel depicts depression and anxiety from a woman's perspective and one that is derived from oppression and restrictive society. This counters male authors' old depictions of

hysteria, and shows how patriarchal structures can affect women's mental health in a way that takes women's struggles seriously. This could be highlighted to students by comparing *The Bell Jar* with older works that portray hysteria in women.

One benefit that is often presented by research on teaching literary criticism is students' independent thinking, which I argue that *The Bell Jar* allows for. Sharistianian (1979) and Reyes-Díaz (2019) argue that feminist criticism can change students' mindsets, improve their critical thinking to help them discern how social constructions shape who they are. Teaching feminist literary criticism with this novel can highlight to students their own experiences and opinions towards the depictions in the novel. Many students might have experiences similar to Esther's but are not aware of the effects or how to handle them, such as feelings of alienation or being misunderstood. As Durfee and Rosenberg (2009) argue, speaking about this can empower female students to stand up against those structures.

The Bell Jar also opens up for identification in students, especially young women. As mentioned in section 2, Wagner-Martin (1992) argues that it provides a compelling portrayal of what it can be like on the brink of adulthood, which can resonate with young adults still. Furthermore, as Spacks has stated, female students can often relate their own situations with those of book characters, especially coming-of-age stories, independent female characters and stories related to power and passivity (as cited in Kaplan, 1988). All of these can be seen in *The Bell Jar*. Even though Spacks made that statement decades ago, I would argue that these topics still are highly present in women's lives. Slut-shaming, sexual assault, pressure to look and act a certain way and expectations to be maternal are things women still experience, making the novel as relevant as ever.

To emphasise to students their identification and relation to these topics, it is essential to allow them to make their own interpretations, as Lindell (2020) argues. Central to feminist literary criticism is subjectivity, which allows each student to interpret literary texts

based on their own experiences. I argue that this should be taken advantage of when teaching this novel. Additionally, allowing students to make connections between their own experiences and knowledge, and developing students' ability to critically evaluate these norms should permeate their education (Skolverket 2021a; 2021c).

Nonetheless, it is not exclusively young women who can be positively affected by being taught *The Bell Jar*, but also the young men. Frequently raised in research about teaching feminist literary criticism is the opportunity for enhanced empathy for or awareness of other people's experiences. Similarly, part of the aim for English is that students should develop their understanding of other people (Skolverket, 2021a). Teaching the novel can encourage boys to understand what many women go through, as well as what women's studies and feminism do, which can provide students with a pair of glasses they may not have looked at the world through before.

As both Tyson (2015) and Appleman (2015) state, there are many misconceptions regarding feminism, and in turn, it has been associated with negative connotations. Thus, some students will likely have a preconditioned negative view on feminism or might find it hard to relate to. In turn, it might be a challenging task for teachers to make the classroom a safe space for all students, which is necessary to consider. One way to do this, Appleman argues, is to emphasise that also men are affected by patriarchal structures. *The Bell Jar's* emphasis on how both men and women are reinforcing patriarchal structures allows for a more neutral approach, as it does not attempt to put the blame exclusively on the men. Additionally, Buddy's struggles can show students that also men can be affected. It should not be forgotten that there are boys who want to break free from the patriarchal structures or feel conflicted about the masculine expectations, but feel unsure about how.

Central to the novel are also the depictions of anxiety and depression. The depictions of Esther's mental health are an effective way to demonstrate how the patriarchal

structures affect her and that they constitute a significant part of her struggles. Today, young women struggle with their mental health more than ever. While Esther does not have to manage pressure from social media and such, she does suffer from depression, performance anxiety and what today would be referred to as *good girl syndrome*. The Public Health Agency of Sweden argues that schools should discuss mental health, as it can prevent mental health issues, further arguing for teachers talking about these aspects of the novel. As young men are also significantly affected by anxiety and depression, this discussion, thus, makes the novel relevant also for male students.

However, teaching a novel like *The Bell Jar* can evoke strong reactions and emotions in students. As Durfee and Rosenberg (2009) emphasise, it is vital that teachers are aware of this and are ready to manage negative reactions and support students who might confide in them. When teaching this novel, it might be things related to mental health struggles, sexual assault or similar. Moreover, it might also entail discerning signs in students who might experience difficulties, but do not feel comfortable confiding in the teacher. Durfee and Rosenberg advise teachers to provide students with resources that they can turn to, rather than actively trying to solve students' issues, as it can empower students to help themselves and walk out stronger.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate how Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* can be read from a feminist perspective and the possible benefits and risks of teaching the novel and feminist criticism to upper secondary school students. The aim has been reached by close reading the novel with the support of feminist literary criticism, as well as secondary literature discussing teaching feminist literary criticism and sensitive subjects.

The first research question asked how *The Bell Jar* can be read from a feminist perspective. This paper and previous research show that feminist criticism is suitable for reading *The Bell Jar*, especially with the grain. For example, it offers a source for discussion about the restrictive patriarchal structures in society and how both men and women reinforce these structures. Additionally, looking at the patriarchal structures portrayed in the novel demonstrates how these can affect women, especially their mental health and living conditions.

The second research question asked what the possible benefits and potential risks of teaching *The Bell Jar* and feminist literary criticism are. Teaching the novel in upper secondary school presents both benefits and risks. As mentioned, *The Bell Jar* offers an abundance of material to teach, in terms of feminist literary criticism. For example, it offers the possibility to discuss the purpose of feminist criticism and how the patriarchal structures have affected women, historically and today. The risks mainly relate to the novel's sensitive topics and the possible negative preconceptions towards feminism.

One specific benefit is that teaching *The Bell Jar* offers the possibility to influence students' worldviews. As mentioned in the introduction, in July of 2022, equality will be emphasised more heavily in the fundamental values of upper secondary school and teaching this novel will provide a way to do this. The possibility to affect students' mindsets and understanding of other people with the help of literary theory is heavily argued for in research. Thus, discussing equality and the destructive structures displayed in this novel can be an

effective way to do so. With as many as 60% of young women having experienced unwarranted sexual advances, it is vital to teach the younger generation empathy and respect for others.

Additionally, teaching the novel allows for an effective way to support students. *The Bell Jar* can be a source for significant identification and empowerment for young women. Young women affected in similar ways to Esther will likely find a friend or sister in Esther; someone who understands how they feel. With studies showing that young women are struggling greatly with their mental health, it is essential that schools act as a source of both support and information, both in terms of mental health and experiences of sexual offences. Moreover, also young men are suffering significantly from depression and suicidal thoughts, and there are young men who have experienced sexual offences. These should not be forgotten in the discussion about the effects of patriarchal structures.

The difficulties of teaching this novel are centred around the possible negative preconceptions of feminism and the risks of discussing sensitive subjects. This offers significant pressure on teachers. As several students suffer from mental health issues, and since the Public Health Agency of Sweden argues for discussions about mental health issues in the classroom, teachers must be prepared to discuss those topics. Thus, for future research, it would be valuable to investigate how to best practically go about bringing up these topics in the classroom in order to possibly educate teachers further about students' mental health issues and how to handle them. This could be done through classroom observation, possibly in collaboration with other research fields, such as psychiatry or sociology. Additionally, as this essay has not covered teaching methods, it would also be valuable to investigate which methods work best when teaching feminist literary criticism or *The Bell Jar* so that the benefits presented in this study can be realised. This could also be carried out through classroom observation or by interviewing experienced teachers. The latter could particularly provide teacher students with valuable advice and insight into real teacher practices.

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