Society, Mental Illnesses And “The Bell Jar” Essay, Research Paper

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Despite the fact that we are all human, each of us is very complex and unique psychologically. As people differ emotionally, sometimes the painful and negative feelings we experience may take control over our lives and bring us into a state of depression or even mental illness. A troubled person may not choose to express their true feelings, but someday they may no longer be able to contain their emotions any longer. But even with these negative feelings, they are still the same person they always were, but with a new and refreshed viewpoint. The novel “The Bell Jar” by Sylvia Plath, demonstrates this idea well, with tone, irony and her use of the first-person narrative. This novel is especially effective because it was written in the early sixties. That was a time where little was known about mental illness and many kept that to themselves because it was seen as unacceptable, but Plath was willing to speak out. This is also an especially effective novel because for the most part, this novel is autobiographical, even though it was written in first person narrative. Through the most difficult time in Ester Greenwood’s life, the novel follows her on a dark, but provocative journey. Many of her insecurities and negative feelings have taken control of her life and put her into a state of depression.

Ester shrugs off her pessimistic and depressive feelings and creates masks to conceal the fact that she is losing the battle to her negative emotions. This is difficult for her because it seems that she has always been a person with different values and opinions than others and always stood strong by her beliefs. It is during the course of the novel, she begins to realize this. In spite of everything, she is the same person, but she simply begins to look at the world differently. This is established as Ester’s tone of voice in the novel is similar all the way through. She is always extremely poetic and reflective towards many issues. For example, while waiting in the subway for her mother she describes some pears in her suitcase: “they cannoned from one end to the other with a special little thunder of their own.” . It is something that carries out through the entire novel, she can find all the beauty from inanimate objects, but not in other people. The way that she interprets humanity varies, but she fundamentally takes the same cynical and sarcastic approach to her daily life as she falls into a deeper depression. She can pull the most negative connotations out of anything, like when she enters a subway, she says is:”A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything, like death.” This demonstrates that almost anyone’s lives can be thrown into a state of turmoil, no matter how emotionally stable and confident a person may be.

Aside from her journey, the irony used in this novel does not only bring images to the mind, but also reflects the way that Ester feels with the emotions and events she is subjected to. Plath was also a poet, and the main character in this supposedly autobiographical novel. This could be the reason why there are so many poetic as well as figurative language used in this novel. For instance, the metaphor used reflects Ester’s emotions. One example is when she is in a very low point emotionally in the novel. Everything around her seems to be crumbling and she feels forlorn and has isolated herself in an effort to regain control of her life. She also decides to write a novel to relieve some of her emotional tension. As she hides under her bed sheets and clutches the book and says: “The thick book made an unpleasant dent in my stomach” . This irony is unexpected because what she thought was supposed to be healing her emotionally hurt her physically. Also, as the novel progresses we find that Ester is suicidal. Her preoccupations with death become more evident, but she still remains pleasant on the outside. There were a few times that Ester attempts suicide in an effort to bring herself into a better and more serene place, but she never succeeded. The ironic part in all her attempts is that she thinks she will be taken to a better place, and the reader is led to believe that perhaps Ester will learn her lesson. But none of these occur and Ester is eventually sent to a mental asylum. The ironic thing about the therapy is that it does not heal her, but it brings her into more pain and confusion about her life, and she becomes all the more reclusive and bitter.

Sylvia Plath’s use of the first person narrative depicts well emotions, such as those mentioned above. Also, as mentioned earlier, this story very closely mirrors Plath’s real life situation. She used her experiences and channeled them into a character with a personality similar to hers. She would not have been able to put all of Ester’s frustrations down on paper so passionately without having experienced them all herself. The novel begins with her explaining how she has won a fashion magazine contest and she is at the top of the social ladder, and she feels:

“I was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America?look what can happen in this country, they’d say?wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car.”

But then, she adds:

“Only I wasn’t steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel and to parties and from parties to my hotel?but I couldn’t get myself to react. I felt very still and empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.”

This not only demonstrates her poetic style of writing, but also that she realizes there is something wrong with herself. When dealing with intense emotions, they can only be described vividly from the basis. The way that the author brings the reader into Ester’s situation simply allows for them to sympathize and understand her.

All of these elements, used beautifully by the author, allow us to realize that even someone whom society has labeled insane and depressed has not completely lost touch with “reality”. Perhaps they simply just have too strong a grasp of reality and cannot handle their large dose of truth. In the novel, we learn that Ester is troubled and all her negative emotions have already begun to leak. The reader experiences all of the frustration she goes through as the author describes the events very vividly. Her main source of frustration is how she feels so confused with herself; but everyone around her is telling her that she is insane and must become “normal”. And all the while, it is obvious to the reader that Ester is the same person and that all the emotions and actions she takes seem justified because she explains everything so well to the reader, but cannot get these thoughts out to others around her. Ester feels inadequate as a person, and she seeks physical comfort and sets out to lose her virginity. She eventually learns that this is not really what she truly desires and it is something more emotionally fufilling. When she is first diagnosed as insane, Ester goes through “shock treatments”, which was really in use at the time. They were painful treatments where people were electrocuted in an effort to alter the way the brain functioned. This method is not in use today, as we have found more humane ways to deal with our emotional burdens. We are no longer quick to judge upon others, as we as a society are more open and we can accept people for their flaws, inside and outside. These outpourings of emotions can be found in songs, poetry and even movies. But it is most importantly that with novels like “The Bell Jar”, people are able to find comfort in knowing that they are not along in their feelings. They are still able to live incredibly fulfilling lives because they really are not that different as people, even if they have become broken and shattered on the inside.