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Examining Mental Illness: A Study of ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ by Virginia Woolf and ‘The Bell Jar’ by Sylvia Plath

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ABSTRACT: Literary works often depict human behaviour, consciousness, and mental illness. It is academically rewarding to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to interpret characters, their motives, and their mental illnesses in works of Literature.

This study explores mental illness by examining two classic novels, “The Bell Jar” by Sylvia Plath and “Mrs. Dalloway” by Virginia Woolf. Both works offer profound insights into the complexity of mental illness and offer distinct viewpoints on the challenges people encounter within social norms. By analysing character development, narrative techniques, and thematic elements, the research attempts to determine how mental illness is portrayed in relation to the historical settings.

The study emphasises how historical and sociological contexts shape these stories, which adds to the larger idea of the portrayal of mental illness in literature. This interdisciplinary approach deepens our understanding of the human experience as it is portrayed in these classic works by combining psychological insights with literary study.

Keywords: Mental illness, Literary analysis, Psychological exploration, Societal expectations

I. REPRESENTATION OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN LITERATURE

1.1 What is Mental Illness

Mental illness is a complicated state of human health. It includes a wide range of illnesses, including mood disorders like anxiety, schizophrenia, depression, and bipolar disorder, along with numerous personality disorders.

The World Health Organization also recognizes the importance of mental well-being in the overall health of a person. According to WHO, mental illness is a serious public health concern that has to be addressed. It advocates for a comprehensive strategy for mental health that encompasses early detection, treatment, prevention, and support for those impacted by mental illness. They stress the significance of tackling the socioeconomic determinants of mental health and incorporating mental health into primary healthcare systems.

“Mental illness, madness or insanity are topics which long has been taboo. In a modern society where people publicly can express their experience with mental illness through social media or blogs and books which more openly discuss illness the shame to talk about it disappears and the taboo is broken” (Larsen, 5).

Beyond just the symptoms, mental illness is accompanied with pain. People who struggle with mental health issues frequently experience prejudice, stigma from society, and a lack of empathy from others.

1.2 How Mental Illness is represented in English Literature with examples.

Literature on mental health offers a powerful tool for delving into the intricate workings of the human brain and offering a comprehensive grasp of the intricacies of emotional and cognitive experiences. “Through the written word, authors have been able to delve into the depths of the human psyche, providing insights into the inner struggles, triumphs, and vulnerabilities of individuals grappling with mental illness” (Prabhat, 1125).

Literary representations of mental illness frequently explore themes of isolation, alienation, and the quest for self-awareness, which mirrors broader societal conversations on mental health. Authors depict the subjective experiences of characters grappling with mental health issues through a variety of narrative techniques. Using fragmented storytelling, unreliable narrators, and stream-of-consciousness writing, authors can thoroughly immerse readers in the characters’ psychological landscapes.

Shakespeare’s drama “Hamlet,” in which the protagonist battles loss, existential concerns, and potential insanity, provides a timeless portrayal of mental suffering. “To be, or not to be, that is the question.” (Shakespeare, 63). The mentioned soliloquy appears to ask Hamlet a series of questions that centre on his personal wish to live or die. Left with his thoughts, he is heavily considering if he should end his life or continue.

The isolation of Bertha Mason as a “madwoman in the attic” in Charlotte Brontë’s “Jane Eyre” raises questions about how nineteenth-century society saw mental illness. “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will” (Brontë, 386).



In modern times, there have been two women writers who have explored mental illness in their literary works. The psychological analysis of Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" sheds light on the consequences of trauma sustained during a conflict. Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar," a moving story about a woman's battle with mental illness, has been compared to the author's personal experiences. These depictions demonstrate how writing that captures the nuances of mental illness can challenge social stigmas and foster empathy.

II. VIRGINIA WOOLF

2.1 About the Author

Virginia Woolf is one of the pioneering writers who put light on this subject and showed how mental illness is seen in society. "Woolf is known for her innovative use of stream of consciousness in novels such as Mrs. Dalloway (1925) and To the Lighthouse (1927)" (Bhushan, 1520). Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was a well-known British writer who used creative narrative techniques and explored modernist themes. She questioned standard storytelling conventions, frequently using stream-of-consciousness narration to dig into her characters' thoughts and feelings. Woolf wrote multiple novels, essays, and non-fiction works, including "To the Lighthouse," "Orlando," and "A Room of One's Own."

2.2 Mental Illness Representation in Virginia Woolf's works

Virginia Woolf's investigation of mental illness in her works is intrinsically connected to her personal experiences and understanding of psychological suffering. Woolf struggled with mental health concerns throughout her life, going through periods of depression and acute emotional instability. These personal hardships surely influenced her work, adding realism and depth to her representation of others facing similar challenges. "Woolf skillfully delves into the complexities of mental illness, examining the effects of trauma and societal stigmatization on one's mental state" (Prabhat, 1126).

In "To the Lighthouse," Woolf examines issues of loss and mourning through the perspective of mental illness. Following Mrs. Ramsay's death, Lily Briscoe faces existential concerns and emotional turmoil. Woolf's depiction of Lily's inner turmoil serves as a meditation on the complexity of loss and how it can shatter one's sense of self and reality. Another famous example of Virginia Woolf's exploration of mental illness is her work *The Waves*. Woolf uses a novel narrative framework in this experimental work, focusing on the interrelated inner monologues of six characters throughout their lives.

Woolf's works challenge standard narratives about mental illness, providing nuanced portraits that resist easy categorization. She avoids simplified representations of crazy in favor of delving into the complex workings of the human mind and the subjective nature of reality.

2.3 Discussion of Mrs. Dalloway

"Mrs. Dalloway" is one of Woolf's best-known books, published in 1925. Set in post-World War I London, the novel features Clarissa Dalloway, a high-society woman getting ready for a party, and Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran who is shell-shocked, struggling with mental illness. Woolf examines themes of time, memory, identity, and the psychological impact of war via the parallel stories of Clarissa and Septimus. Woolf's wide, severe indictment of England's knowledge of mental illness in the years following World War I is obvious in Mrs. Dalloway. Septimus, a distinguished war veteran, suffers from "shellshock" which is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder, causing hallucinations, delusions, and intense feelings of alienation. Woolf uses stream-of-consciousness storytelling to immerse readers in Septimus' shattered mental condition, letting us experience the dissolution of his world and the agony of his internal thoughts. Woolf explores the stigma and misunderstanding surrounding mental illness in Septimus, illustrating the tremendous loneliness and isolation felt by people suffering from it.

The modern reader, who has been exposed to a war story, is likely to diagnose Septimus with significant post-traumatic stress disorder. However, PTSD did not appear in the American Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until the third edition in 1980, in reaction to the experiences of Vietnam and Korean War veterans in the United States. Septimus, coming from the atrocities of World War I, existed in a society that was less conscious and understanding of his situation.

"During the First World War, British military physicians used the term 'shell shock' to denote the dazed, disoriented state many soldiers experienced during combat or shortly thereafter...many military leaders and physicians contended that shell shock was a variety of cowardice or malingering and, further, believed that those who 'cracked' on the battlefield were weaklings" (Scott, 296).

Septimus lives in a world where his mental disorders, if appropriately detected, are connected with weakness. The poor treatment of Septimus illustrates Woolf's displeasure with the British medical establishment, particularly in terms of mental health. The first healthcare professional we see is Dr. Holmes. He confesses that Septimus is in despair. Holmes used his forty years of knowledge to reassure Septimus that there was nothing abnormal about him.

While Clarissa's symptoms are not as severe as those of Septimus Warren Smith, she struggles with her own inner despair and existential angst. Throughout the work, Clarissa's thoughts and observations betray a deep unhappiness and unease with her life and choices. Despite her outward appearance of social success and refinement, Clarissa has emotions of emptiness and alienation. "Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?" (Woolf, 3).

She has moments of great introspection, contemplating the meaning and purpose of her life. Woolf uses stream-of-consciousness storytelling to transport readers into Clarissa's inner world, revealing the complexities of her ideas and emotions. Woolf challenges the cultural restrictions and expectations imposed on women of Clarissa's status and background through her character, Clarissa. Thus, *Mrs. Dalloway* has portrayed mental illness in a way which makes the reader aware of the repercussions of mental illness when left undiagnosed.

III. SYLVIA PLATH

3.1 About the Author

Renowned poet and novelist Sylvia Plath is most recognised for her moving examination of mental illness, especially in her semi-autobiographical book "The Bell Jar." Plath, who was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1932, showed remarkable aptitude at an early age and won numerous awards for her work. Plath's poetry is notable for its painstaking attention to detail and unadulterated emotional impact. Her work is infused with themes of love, grief, identity, and mortality, many of which are reflections of her own inner turmoil and tribulations. Nonetheless, she battled severe sadness and anxiety throughout her life, issues that are present in a lot of her writing. Plath's impact on modern literature is enormous, and her reputation as a bold pioneer and visionary poet is still felt today.

3.2 Mental Illness Representation in Sylvia Plath's works

Themes of mental illness often occur in Sylvia Plath's collection of writing, which mirrors her own battles with anxiety, sadness, and existential crisis. Although "The Bell Jar" is arguably the most well-known example of her investigation of mental illness, other works by her also showcase mental illness. Her poems from the groundbreaking collection, "Ariel" are among the most stunning instances of her examination of mental illness in poetry. Plath addresses themes of trauma, self-destruction, and the quest for identity in the face of intense inner upheaval in poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy." Plath depicts the experience of surviving many suicide attempts in "Lady Lazarus," using vivid and even horrific imagery that suggests a sense of both resistance and resignation anguish that seems extremely difficult to face. "Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time" (Plath, 67).

Similar to this, Plath addresses the legacy of her tumultuous connection with her father in "Daddy," combining themes of revenge, fury, and abandonment. The speaker of the poem battles the psychological scars left by her father's absence, expressing the depth of her emotional agony with strong and occasionally shocking imagery. Overall, Sylvia Plath's portrayal of mental illness in her writing is distinguished by her unwavering honesty and her keen understanding of human nature.

3.3 Discussion of The Bell Jar

Plath's writing was greatly impacted by her own experiences with mental illness, and "The Bell Jar" is a potent illustration of her hardships. The work was published in 1963 using the pseudonym, Victoria Lucas. It reflects Plath's personal challenges with melancholy and suicide ideas by providing a hauntingly honest depiction of protagonist Esther Greenwood's journey into mental breakdown.

On her summer holiday, Esther works at a New York magazine, where she initially exhibits signs of sadness. She lacks enthusiasm and motivation to participate in events. Esther realises that she hasn't felt entirely joyful since she reached the age of nine, the year when her father died, and describes her depression as emotions of exhaustion and melancholy. "I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old" (Plath, 75). She depicts how isolated she feels in a crowded setting and how often she wonders over death. Esther has always excelled academically and earned a college scholarship as well, but she has trouble to make judgements about what lies ahead and feels unworthy. Psychiatrist Aaron T. Beck notes in one of his research projects that Esther is affected by causes of depression. "In the course of development, the depression-prone person may become sensitized by certain unfavorable types of life situations such as the loss of a parent" (Beck,7).

Throughout the narrative, Esther makes three references to her father. In a subsequent scene, she is shown kneeling before her father's cemetery and "howling her loss into the cold salt rain" (Plath, 167). Esther's father passed away too soon, and Plath uses this character's outward absence to highlight the underlying agony that arises from it. Esther finally withdraws and collapses as a result of her incapacity to follow the demands of her own. "I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo" (Plath, 2).



The analogy of the bell jar, which Esther employs to express the feeling of being imprisoned in a suffocating space and shut off from the outside world, is central to her battle with mental illness. Esther's loneliness and captivity are powerfully symbolised by the bell jar, which also highlights the enduring sense of disconnection and alienation that goes along with her despair. Plath skilfully illustrates the crippling effects of mental illness on one's sense of self and reality perception using this metaphor. "Plath writes in Esther's voice – that of a depressive, coming from an author and poet who was no stranger to the disease herself, and is able to provide one of the most accurately biting prescriptions for wellness – an unmercifully realistic case study" (Tsank, 176).

There are moments of remarkable understanding and determination that shine through Esther's tale, despite the gloom and misery that dominate much of "The Bell Jar." In spite of hardship, Plath's portrayal of Esther is complex and broad, able to exhibit both strength and sensitivity. Through her path of self-awareness and ultimate liberation, Esther challenges the stigma and prejudices associated with mental illness and becomes a symbol of hope and resilience.

IV. CONCLUSION

Examining how mental illness is portrayed in Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" and Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar," it is clear that both writers provide accurate evaluations of the subtleties and complexity of the human psyche. Woolf and Plath explore the inner anguish, societal constraints, and existential angst that people dealing with mental illness go through in their separate narratives. Through the comparison of the lives of two main characters, Clarissa Dalloway and Esther Greenwood, in early 20th-century London and 1950s America, the writers offer a moving reflection on the social stigma and marginalisation of mental health concerns.

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