

**Fractured Minds and Feminine Struggles: Psychosis and the  
Feminist Discourse in Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Woolf's  
*Mrs. Dalloway***

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**Abstract**

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory introduces the interplay of two fundamental drives: Eros, the life force, and Thanatos, the death drive. These forces, while distinct, are constantly in conflict, shaping human behavior in both conscious and unconscious ways. Eros propels individuals toward survival and creativity, while Thanatos draws them toward self-destruction and death. This ongoing struggle between life and death is not only a matter of physical survival but also an emotional and psychological conflict. Freud's idea of "unconscious dexterity" suggests that our unconscious minds significantly influence our actions and creations, often in ways we cannot fully comprehend.

This paper examines how the life force of feminist independence and the death drive of psychotic suffering manifest in the lives and works of two of literature's most iconic feminist authors: Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf. Both writers struggled with severe mental illness, ultimately succumbing to suicide, yet they left behind literary works that are deeply reflective of their inner turmoil and the broader social pressures placed on women. By closely analyzing *The Bell Jar* and *Mrs Dalloway*, we can trace the presence of these conflicting drives in their narratives, revealing the tension between feminist liberation and psychological fragmentation.

**Key words:** *Feminist Liberation, Psychological Fragmentation, Dexterity, Mental Illness.*

## Introduction

Freud's model of the human psyche is built upon the dynamic tension between Eros and Thanatos. While Eros drives individuals to survive, create, and reproduce, Thanatos represents the human inclination toward self-destruction and death. These forces are not as disparate as they may appear; they operate in tandem, with Eros ensuring life and Thanatos leading it toward its inevitable end. Freud's observation that "the goal of all life is death" highlights the cyclical nature of existence. The works examined here, written by women who later committed suicide, offer profound insight into the complex relationship between these drives. Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf, two seminal figures in feminist literature, both struggled with mental illness and psychotic episodes that ultimately led them to take their own lives. Their works, however, remain essential contributions to feminist discourse, providing an intimate look at the personal costs of the fight for gender equality.

Both Plath and Woolf worked tirelessly to advance feminist ideals in their writing, advocating for women's independence, intellectual freedom, and emotional authenticity. Despite their efforts to dismantle the societal constraints that oppressed women, they were unable to escape their own battles with depression, psychosis, and the internal conflicts between Eros and Thanatos. Through a close reading of *The Bell Jar* and *Mrs Dalloway*, this paper explores how the authors' personal struggles with mental illness are reflected in their characters, tracing the influence of the death drive on their creative output. Before delving into their novels, however, it is essential to briefly examine the lives of these women, as their biographies provide valuable context for understanding the psychological underpinnings of their works.

## Feminist Identity and Psychological Turmoil in Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* offers a haunting exploration of a young woman's descent into madness, set against the backdrop of mid-20th-century American society. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, navigates a world that stifles female ambition and imposes rigid gender roles, leading to a growing sense of entrapment. Esther's struggle is not merely personal; it reflects the broader societal constraints that confined women during this era. As a modern woman, she grapples with the conflicting demands of career, sexuality, and identity, and these tensions ultimately manifest in a psychotic breakdown.

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath masterfully portrays the insidious effects of societal expectations on women's mental health. Esther's feelings of suffocation are embodied by the novel's central metaphor of the bell jar, a glass enclosure that traps her, cutting off her ability to breathe freely. This metaphor mirrors the rigid gender roles that confined women to traditional domestic roles, while denying them the freedom to pursue intellectual or professional ambitions. For Esther, the external pressures of society are internalized, manifesting as a desire for death that paradoxically becomes a form of liberation.

Plath's critique of 1950s American society is deeply embedded in Esther's psychological struggle. Women were expected to adhere to conservative ideals of purity and chastity, even as men were afforded sexual freedom. This double standard creates a sense of alienation and frustration for Esther, who longs to defy societal norms but is constrained by the moral expectations placed upon women. The character's rebellion against these norms is not driven by

a desire for sexual fulfillment, but rather by a desire to assert her autonomy. Esther's decision to lose her virginity is an act of defiance against the patriarchal standards that judge women's worth based on their sexual purity.

Plath's exploration of mental illness in *The Bell Jar* is also deeply personal. Esther's descent into madness parallels Plath's own struggles with depression and suicide attempts. The novel's autobiographical elements are undeniable, as Plath herself described *The Bell Jar* as an "autobiographical apprentice work." The protagonist's divided identity, torn between societal expectations and personal desires, reflects Plath's own internal conflict between her roles as a writer, mother, and wife. The desire for death, for Esther, is not merely an escape from personal suffering, but a means of rebirth. By the novel's end, Esther chooses life, signaling a defiant rejection of death's pull and an affirmation of her feminist resistance to societal oppression.

### **Feminist Expression and Mental Disintegration in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway***

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* similarly explores the tension between life and death, with the novel's dual protagonists, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, serving as two sides of Woolf's own psyche. Clarissa represents rationality and social conformity, while Septimus embodies the madness and despair that Woolf herself experienced throughout her life. Woolf's own struggles with mental illness are reflected in both characters, particularly in Septimus, whose psychotic episodes mirror Woolf's own battles with depression and suicidal ideation.

Set in post-World War I London, *Mrs Dalloway* examines the lingering trauma of the war, as well as the broader societal anxieties that shaped the period. Septimus, a shell-shocked war veteran, is haunted by the death of his friend Evans, whose ghost he frequently hallucinates. His inability to cope with his grief and trauma leads to a gradual unraveling of his mind, culminating in his suicide. For Septimus, death becomes a form of liberation, a way to escape the torment of his internal suffering.

Woolf's depiction of Septimus' mental illness is deeply empathetic, reflecting her own experiences with psychosis and the oppressive medical treatments of the time. Like Woolf, Septimus is subjected to the rest cure, a treatment that isolates him from the world and exacerbates his feelings of despair. Woolf's critique of the medical establishment is evident in her portrayal of the doctors who fail to understand Septimus' condition, treating him as an object of their control rather than a human being in need of care and compassion.

Clarissa Dalloway, on the other hand, represents the surface-level order and rationality of upper-class society, yet she too is haunted by a sense of existential dread. Like Septimus, Clarissa experiences a form of isolation, though hers is emotional rather than physical. Despite her outwardly successful life, Clarissa is disconnected from her husband and friends, and she contemplates the meaning of her existence. Her reaction to Septimus' suicide—an acknowledgment of his "bravery"—reveals her own latent desire for escape from the constraints of her life.

Woolf's use of death as a thematic device in *Mrs Dalloway* is complex. For Septimus, death is a release from the pain of life, a final assertion of his autonomy in a world that has stripped him of his identity. For Clarissa, Septimus' death serves as a mirror to her own inner turmoil, forcing her to confront the possibility of her own mortality. Woolf's exploration of these themes is informed by her own history of mental illness and her eventual suicide, making *Mrs Dalloway* a poignant reflection on the fragility of life and the inevitability of death.

### Conclusion

The interplay of Eros and Thanatos, life and death, is central to both Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. These novels, written by authors who struggled with severe mental illness, offer intimate portrayals of the psychological conflict between the desire to live and the urge to die. Both Plath and Woolf used their writing as a means of grappling with their own psychosis, channeling their personal suffering into characters who reflect their struggles with depression, societal constraints, and the death drive.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood's rebellion against societal expectations leads her to the brink of death, yet she ultimately chooses life, a decision that echoes Plath's own attempts to resist the pull of suicide. Similarly, in *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith embody different aspects of Woolf's psyche, with Septimus' suicide serving as both a tragic outcome of his trauma and a defiant assertion of his autonomy. Both novels explore the tension between feminist liberation and psychological fragmentation, revealing the personal cost of the fight for gender equality. Plath and Woolf, through their literary works, provide profound insights into the human psyche, offering readers a glimpse into the darkest corners of the mind. Their exploration of the death drive, while deeply personal, serves as a universal reflection on the fragility of life and the ever-present struggle between Eros and Thanatos. Their works continue to resonate with readers, offering solace and understanding to those who may be experiencing similar struggles in silence.

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