



Prescribing Depression

An Analysis of Patriarchal Perpetuation
in *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and
Relaxation*

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Background:

- ▶ According to research dating back as far as the 1960's, women are twice as likely to develop depression than men
- ▶ In response, two theories have become popular in the school of feminist psychology
 - ▶ Social Causation
 - ▶ Social Constructionism

Social Causation –

Patriarchal society puts more pressure on women, making them more vulnerable to depression

Social Constructionism –

Patriarchal values make women more likely to be identified as having depression, not more susceptible to it



The Project:

- ▶ By looking to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Otessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), this project asks: what can fictional literature reveal about women's relationship with depression?
- ▶ The project analyzes the ways in which external social pressures and patriarchal superstructures cause the female narrators of these novels to be increasingly vulnerable to depression.
- ▶ **Method:**
 - ▶ In order to evaluate these social pressures the project first analyzes what the narrators in both novels are seeking to achieve personal fulfillment
 - ▶ This is followed by an analysis of what others "prescribe" the narrators, including literal prescriptions from doctors and figurative "prescriptions" from friends, mothers, and lovers.



Self Fulfillment

The Bell Jar

- ▶ Esther wants to be free from risk of pregnancy so she will not be forced into the status quo and live the unfulfilling life of the women around her
- ▶ Esther wants to pursue a career in writing, but it is discouraged for women to have a career at the time

My Year of Rest and Relaxation

- ▶ The unnamed narrator wants to complete her "experiment" of using prescription pills to sleep through an entire year to experience a rebirth
- ▶ She wants to pursue a career in art that her parents discouraged, and instead pushed her to just be a trophy wife



Friends/Foils

The Bell Jar

- ▶ Joan encourages Esther to perform femininity more and discourages her from pursuing her writing career
- ▶ Joan shows Esther a parallel version of herself, one who is more liked because of her ability to perform femininity and fulfill the external prescriptions
- ▶ Joan kills herself because she is unfulfilled

My Year of Rest and Relaxation

- ▶ Reva is jealous of the narrator because Reva works harder but has less to show
- ▶ Reva fulfills prescriptions but has not personal satisfaction
- ▶ Reva dies unhappy and a slave to the whims of others

The friends show how prescription fulfillment only leads to external validation, and does not exist to help women to be happy. The prescriptions prepare them for the male gaze.



Mothers

The Bell Jar

- ▶ Mrs. Greenwood discourages Esther from pursuing a writing career because it may scare off a suitor
- ▶ Wants Esther to find a husband for financial security
- ▶ She is well intentioned, obtuse, patriarchal perpetuator
- ▶ Outwardly tells Esther to maintain patriarchal standards

My Year of Rest and Relaxation

- ▶ The Mother does not encourage her daughter's dreams, but isn't worried about financial security.
- ▶ Instead she is a "patriarchal woman" who is just interested in perpetuating the ideals she has internalized
- ▶ She only prescribes patriarchal values to the narrator through silent behavior, signaling that patriarchal values are still maintained, they're just more subtle in modern society

The mothers demonstrate how patriarchy has just become more subtle, not that it has disappeared. Both mothers push nuclear family on their daughter, and prepare them for the male gaze in order to validate their own decision.



Findings

- ▶ The novels suggest that the reason why women are historically diagnosed with mood disorders at higher rates than men is because they are discouraged from pursuing personal goals, and are instead taught to uphold patriarchal values through figurative prescriptions.
- ▶ These figurative prescriptions, which are most commonly shared between women, operate as a method of perpetuating patriarchal standards, and generally attempt to make the subject more desirable to the male gaze.
- ▶ Conversely, the novels suggest that literal prescriptions combined with a sort of “feminist therapy,” as outlined by Melva Steen, can actually be productive in dispelling the narrators’ depression.
- ▶ The novels’ parallels propose that patriarchal values are just as present in modern society as they were in 1963; they are just more covert in modern society.
- ▶ In this way the novels propose very real world implications, and offer feminist psychologists an interesting perspective as to why women continue to be disproportionately diagnosed with depression and other mood disorders.