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Existential Angst in the American Novel: A Study of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my mother, who has been an unwavering source of support and inspiration. I am profoundly indebted to my late father, whose steadfast belief in my abilities encouraged me throughout my endeavors. It is with the utmost appreciation that I acknowledge the privilege of being your daughter and express my deepest gratitude for your presence in my life. I also extend my gratitude to my siblings, whose friendship and guidance have been immeasurable. I am the luckiest person to have you all as my family.

Abstract

The study aims to examine how *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and *The Bell Jar* (1963) reinterpret and transform existentialist concepts of angst through the lens of 1950s American youth culture and emerging feminist consciousness. These two novels are set in 1950s American society, a time characterized by fear and paranoia due to the Cold War and the lingering traumas of the inhumane world wars. The popularity of existentialism, which promoted ideas of absurdity, freedom, and meaninglessness, captured the attention of American writers during this period. This thesis is primarily a philosophical and feminist study that examines existentialist themes in the two novels. The focus is on theories and terms concerning the human condition and how the protagonists of the two novels, Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood, navigate themes related to the human condition and mental illness. By exploring these characters' journeys, the study sheds light on the unique challenges faced by young adults in post-war America. Additionally, it investigates how the authors' personal experiences influenced their portrayal of existential angst in their respective works. Subsequently, sections are provided to discuss the novels through a feminist literary critical lens, introducing a social critique of 1950s American society. This multi-dimensional analysis allows feminist theory to complement existentialism, as the latter concerns itself with the human condition and is not gender specific. By combining these philosophical and critical approaches, the thesis aims to provide a rich foundation for examining how existential themes manifest differently across gender lines and individual experiences in post-war America.

Keywords: Existential angst, 1950s American literature, existentialism, feminism, *The Catcher in the Rye, The Bell Jar.*

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General Introduction

This thesis will analyze J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), two classics of American literature with storylines set in the 1950s. The two bildungsroman novels, published approximately a decade apart, share several elements associated with existentialism as they grapple with fundamental questions of human existence. Both novels portray protagonists grappling with intense, unfiltered emotions as they navigate significant life transitions. The novels share a candid exploration of the psychological turmoil accompanying the journey from adolescence to adulthood, presenting an unflinching look at the challenges of finding one's place in a complex and often bewildering society. These characters confront profound experiences of change, loss, and disillusionment while struggling to make sense of the world around them. Through their protagonists, Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood, these novels offer a poignant critique of post-war American society, challenging the prevailing notions of success, happiness, and mental health. Moreover, they provide a unique lens through which to examine the intersection of existentialist philosophy, gender dynamics, and the sociocultural landscape of mid-20th century America.

Although they were both popularized for different reasons, they share similar themes and an angsty teenage tone portrayed by their protagonists, who are often compared to each other. Both novels are coming-of-age stories. Salinger's Holden Caulfield and Plath's Esther Greenwood narrate their journeys to adulthood retrospectively, exploring a universal experience that continues to appeal to readers across generations. The protagonists are anxious adolescents because they are emerging from the habitual ways of childhood, but have not yet reached the point of accepting the adult status quo. They are stepping out of their comfort zones into a new phase of life. They are distancing themselves to reflect on their existence, faced with the reality of the world and the human condition. The universal experience of growing up makes

the two novels relatable and readable even after generations. Their exploration of universal themes and the human condition has allowed them to maintain their significance in American literature. Despite their similarities, the novels offer distinct perspectives on the challenges of adolescence, with Holden's narrative focusing more on societal critique and alienation, while Esther's story delves deeper into issues of gender expectations and mental health. This contrast provides a rich foundation for examining how existential themes manifest differently across gender lines and individual experiences in post-war America.

The two novels explored controversial content for the 1950s American conservative society. The frank discussions of sexuality, mental health, and societal taboos in both books generated controversy, which in turn increased public interest and debate. Both novels offer criticism of societal norms and expectations, particularly those placed on young people. Additionally, mid-20th century American literature was often characterized by angst, which many attribute to factors including the aftermath of World War II and the onset of the Cold War. This period was known for a shift from tradition and conservatism to reform and non-conformism. The rigid conventions created by society were widely questioned. The novels share themes of adolescent angst, death, isolation, depression, melancholy, existential crisis, and the conflict between the individual and society. These works not only reflected the social upheaval of their time but also helped to shape it, giving voice to a generation grappling with unprecedented societal changes and psychological pressures. Their enduring popularity and influence underscore the power of literature to articulate complex cultural phenomena and to challenge readers to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves and their society.

This thesis is a thematic study that explores the concept of existential angst in these two novels as case studies of the postwar American novel. The philosophical and feminist study examines the two characters' psychological states through existentialist theories and further investigates feminist elements in both works.

Pairing a female protagonist with a male protagonist broadens our scope in examining existentialism, as it concerns human existence as a whole. Additionally, both novels critique society, a key element in feminist analysis. Feminism provides a valuable lens for analyzing these novels, highlighting how gender shapes the protagonists' experiences of existential questions and societal pressures. The feminist perspective also enriches our understanding of how the authors use their characters to challenge traditional gender roles and power structures, further emphasizing the novels' critiques of society.

Scholarly books, articles, and theses served as our reading sources. With the use of previous studies, the thesis aims to contribute to the existing body of literature. First, many texts showed the relationship between philosophy and literature. *Existentialism and Modern Literature: An Essay in Existential Criticism* by Davis Dunbar McElroy examines how modern literature depicts existentialist themes and helps philosophers understand these concepts by giving a unique perspective on them, showing how the two fields intersect and enrich each other in the context of existentialism. Similarly, Walter Kaufmann's *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* is considered a crucial text for understanding how existentialist philosophy has been expressed and explored in 20th-century literature. However, the two texts overemphasize European male writers, overlooking diverse voices in existentialist literature.

Furthermore, Alfred Betschart and Juliane Werner's *Sartre and the International Impact of Existentialism* is an edited collection examining Sartre's philosophy's international influence on writers and thinkers. The international post-war surge of the philosophy left impactful traces in history, exerting considerable influence. Sartre has been the center of many studies and takes credit for many existentialist concepts; however, his contributions are the fruits of many philosophers who came before him who are from different backgrounds and nationalities which is what I believe made existentialism global.

Many works have explored existentialism in relation to feminist theory. The article "Feminist Authenticity: An Existentialist Conception" by Siera Aubrey Lee Scott argues that feminist projects are authentic because they are founded upon freedom, a concept also central to existentialism. Furthermore, "Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre", edited by Julien S. Murphy, is a collection of essays by various philosophers that demonstrate the relevance of Sartre's existentialism to feminism. The book discusses the most significant themes in Sartre's works, such as freedom, consciousness, bad faith, and authenticity, and how these concepts are pertinent to feminism, as they concern both men and women. Deniz Durmus's Ph.D. thesis "Existentialist Roots of Feminist Ethics" seeks to bridge existentialist philosophy with feminist ethics, arguing for their compatibility and mutual enrichment in addressing contemporary ethical issues. The core existentialist ideas of freedom, authenticity, and individual responsibility are shown to align with feminist goals and perspectives; however, a more comprehensive analysis might also consider potential tensions or critiques of this relationship, such as existentialism's historical male-centricity or potential conflicts between existentialist individualism and feminist ideas of collective action.

Many works have analyzed Salinger's and Plath's only novels. Erica Lawrence's "Salvation and Rebirth in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*" studies the two main characters' reactions to their circumstances which is referred to as the outwardly directed self, and their internal emotional and mental world which is referred to as the inwardly directed self (50). The article analyzes the two protagonists and concludes that they are searching for ways to salvation and rebirth from their state and find real human connection (61). Moreover, Katrine Eik's "The Problem of Maturation in *The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger and The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath" is a master's thesis that discusses the themes of death, and societal struggles and examines the symbolism in the two novels. "An Existentialist Analysis of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*" is a master thesis that discusses the novel from an existentialist

perspective using Kierkegaard's, Heidegger's, and Sartre's concepts. The thesis perceives Holden as an existentialist protagonist and the novel as existential due to the heavy themes of death, a quest for an authentic self, and alienation.

The existing literature on *The Bell Jar* often focuses on feminist analysis, discussing the portrayal of patriarchal society and its impact on Esther's deteriorating mental state. Similarly, studies on *The Catcher in the Rye* frequently explore themes of alienation, death, and anti-conformism. When these two novels are examined together, they are typically analyzed and compared. This thesis presents a thematic and philosophical study that examines existential angst in post-war American novels, using the two fictional texts as case studies. A significant gap in the existing research lies in the absence of a comparative analysis that examines existential angst in both novels through a gender-sensitive lens. While these works are often analyzed individually or compared on various themes, there is a lack of focused exploration on how existential angst manifests differently or similarly)for male and female protagonists in the post-war American context.

We seek to investigate the protagonists' existential angst through the lenses of existential thought and feminist theory. The study will investigate how these novels, set against the backdrop of a shifting socio-cultural landscape, depict adolescent struggles with death, isolation, depression, and the conflict between individual identity and societal expectations. By analyzing the protagonists' psychological states through the lens of existentialist theories and incorporating elements of feminist analysis, this research aims to shed light on the broader themes of self-affirmation, societal critique, and the human condition in post-war American literature. Furthermore, the thesis will explore how the authors use these characters to illustrate the transition from childhood innocence to adult awareness, particularly focusing on their confrontations with mortality and the harsh realities of the world. Through this analysis, the

study seeks to contribute to the understanding of existential angst as a central theme in mid-20th century American literature and its relevance to the broader human experience

This thesis aims to strike a balance between literary analysis and philosophical discussion while exploring several key questions. It examines how existential angst manifests in the protagonists of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*, and how these manifestations reflect the post-war American experience. The study investigates the extent to which feminist theory can complement existentialist analysis in understanding the protagonists' struggles and development. It also explores how Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood embody existentialist concepts, and how their experiences differ based on gender. Furthermore, the thesis analyzes how these novels critique the social norms and expectations of the 1950s through an existentialist perspective. Finally, it examines how the confessional style employed in both novels reinforces or challenges existentialist themes. Through this multi-faceted approach, the thesis seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these iconic works of literature engage with existentialist philosophy while also reflecting and critiquing the social and cultural landscape of mid-20th century America.

The study employs a multi-faceted methodological approach to provide a comprehensive analysis of the two novels. Initially, each novel is analyzed individually through a thematic study, involving a careful, critical examination of the texts with a focus on language, symbolism, character development, and thematic elements. This is followed by a comparative analysis that brings the two novels together, utilizing existentialist and feminist analytical frameworks. Feminist Literary Criticism is specifically implemented to address existential feminist aspects in both novels, with particular attention given to analyzing Esther Greenwood's character and experiences. Additionally, the study examines historical and sociocultural contexts to gain a deeper understanding of the post-war American milieu and the authors' personal experiences that may have influenced their work. This contextual analysis is crucial

for understanding and critiquing the social norms and expectations of the 1950s as reflected in the novels. By integrating these various analytical approaches, the study aims to offer a nuanced and comprehensive interpretation of these seminal works of mid-20th-century American literature.

The selection of these two novels for existentialist analysis serves to demonstrate the mutual enrichment and interconnectedness between literature and existential philosophy, illuminating how they inform and enhance one another. While these novels may contain existentialist elements, they are not necessarily pure expressions of existentialist philosophy; thus, this thorough existentialist analysis aims to contribute a fresh perspective to the critical discourse surrounding these classic American works. A side-by-side examination of these literary works offers valuable insights into the convergence of existentialist philosophy and feminist thought, uncovering nuanced understandings of how existential concepts intertwine with feminist ideas. Furthermore, an exploration of the post-World War II American society of the 1950s is undertaken to investigate its impact on J.D. Salinger and Sylvia Plath, as well as their respective works, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*. This historical context serves as a crucial lens through which we can better comprehend the societal forces that shaped both the authors' perspectives and the thematic elements of their novels, providing a richer understanding of the complex interplay between literature, philosophy, and social context in mid-20th century America

By conducting a comparative analysis of two influential American novels with male and female protagonists, this research contributes to the scholarly discourse on post-war literature while offering insights into the manifestation of existential themes across gender lines. It contextualizes these works within the shifting cultural landscape of the 1950s and early 1960s, deepening our understanding of how existential philosophy and adolescent psychology intersect in literature. The incorporation of feminist critique adds another layer to the analysis, enhancing

our perspective on gender representation in mid-20th century American writing. Moreover, this interdisciplinary approach, combining literary analysis with philosophical and psychological insights, demonstrates the value of cross-disciplinary studies in literary criticism. The exploration of themes such as alienation, societal pressure, and existential crisis not only illuminates the cultural significance of these novels but also underscores their continued relevance to contemporary readers and scholars. Ultimately, this study serves as a valuable resource for students, educators, and researchers, contributing to our broader understanding of American literature, existentialism, and the cultural shifts of the post-war era.

The thesis is divided into six chapters: three theoretical chapters followed by three analytical chapters focusing on the novels under discussion. Chapter One provides an overview of Western philosophy, then delves specifically into the existentialist movement, examining its various philosophers and prominent concepts. Chapter Two introduces female literary criticism and explores key concepts of second-wave feminism and more specifically existential feminism. Chapter three examines the sociocultural context of the two novels, exploring postwar American despair, the shift to postmodernism in art, literary representations of mental illness, and literature's philosophical significance. The remaining three chapters analyze the novels. Chapters Four and Five examine *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye* individually, employing a primarily philosophical approach while also considering feminist perspectives. This dual approach reflects both the relevance of feminism during the novels' publication and Plath's significant influence on the movement. Chapter Six brings both novels together in a comparative discussion, examining existential angst in relation to each work and highlighting similarities and differences between them. This final chapter synthesizes the insights gained from the individual analyses, offering a comprehensive understanding of existential angst as portrayed in post-war American literature.

Chapter One: The Essence-Existence Debate: Foundations of Existentialist Thought

Introduction

Philosophy is an unending discourse between philosophers of different times and cultures often about the same concerns but presented with various views and theories. This chapter analyzes what constitutes the meaning, or essence of life according to ancient philosophy and then according to existentialism.

This chapter presents the philosophical discourse on human existence and essence throughout three sections. Section one is dedicated to ancient traditional philosophy, representing Western philosophy's start. This section includes an introduction to the philosophical thoughts of Socrates and Plato about essence and existence, two of the most influential pillars of ancient Western philosophy. This section aims to prepare the reader to understand what was before existentialism, and what this movement opposed. Section two further introduces the movement in concern by presenting Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. This section provides a thorough definition of the phenomenon of 'angst', an introduction to Kierkegaard, and his explanation of this condition. This chapter discusses 'angst' and presents Nietzsche's solution to such feelings of despair. Finally, yet importantly, the last section of this chapter presents Sartre's theory of "the look", to further introduce the manifestations of being in in existentialist thought.

This chapter explains, according to existentialism, what is freedom, 'bad faith', angst, and other terms that are close to these terms like conformity, 'leap of faith', and 'herd mentality'. The purpose of this chapter is to have a theoretical background for the theory of existentialism which will be used as a primary approach, along with feminism as a secondary one, in analyzing the classical American novels in concern: J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963).

1.1. Essence and Existence in Philosophy

The search for meaning in life and its purpose is a long-old tradition in philosophy. It is a philosophical inquiry with the main focus of contemplating metaphysical matters in an attempt to understand life and death; ourselves and the other. We, as humans, are more unique than any other creatures in our curiosity about everything, especially curious about ourselves. Philosophy was created to pursue these basic truths about the human condition and to pursue health and happiness. Socrates (c. 470-399 BC), the father of Western philosophy, believed that we cannot have a good life without knowing what it means to be a human being (Kenny 36). It is in our nature, as humans, to seek truths and meanings because we strive to live better and to live happier.

Existentialism brings back that old tradition with a new understanding of it. The 19th-century philosophical and literary movement is concerned with the condition of human existence. Although the term 'existentialism' emerged only in the mid-1940s, some writers and philosophers were precursors of the movement and have manifested the movement's ideas in philosophy and literature since the 19th century. They were labeled existentialists long after they died. The term came to exist only at a colloquium in 1945 by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel. He used existentialism to describe Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas (Flynn 56).

The way we think today is steered by the accumulation of philosophies that we have come to know throughout history. Conventionally, before the emergence of existentialism as a philosophy, people mostly believed that every individual is born into the world with a reason. In other words, the essence or the purpose of existence is predetermined. Therefore, during the course of our lives, we look for that purpose. We may stumble on various paths and various crossroads in life and different choices, but choosing one means one must choose correctly. Our essence is in one of the paths, the rest can lead us to unhappiness and misfortune. To find and

adhere to that essence is to be a good person and live a good life. This means that our lives have right and wrong meanings, and we have to learn what is what. This concept of predetermined essence is a philosophy called essentialism.

1.1.1. Plato's Forms and the Roots of Essentialism

Essentialism is a philosophical theory that presumes every human has an inherent essence. As claimed by this philosophy, human beings are born with a purpose in life given to them by God (Audi 282). In other words, the essence or the purpose of life is not something that you choose for yourself, but rather it is within us since birth. This theory stems from Plato's theory of Forms. He believed that to live well and happy is to find that God-given essence and abide by it. if one pursued perfection by doing theory, great things could be obtained. Every subject has an ideal form which can be said to be a blueprint of how should one act and how should one be (Dreyfus 138).

"The Republic" is a Socratic dialogue that explores the nature of justice, the ideal state, and the role of the philosopher in society. Plato presents the theory of Forms and explains his point of view of the world. According to him, the world we live in is but a shadow or an imitation of the real world he called "The Realm of Forms" (Plato, the philosopher), or also he called Eidos which is the origin of the word ideas (Audi 710). We are living in a world perceived by our senses; therefore, it is not the real world but rather a perception of "The realm of Forms". The latter is an ideal world created by God where everything exists in its perfect Form. It is not a tangible place where we can go to, but rather a world of abstract ideas, yet these ideas are very much real. It is abstract in the sense that we cannot interact with the Forms in our spatial and temporal physical world because these Forms transcend time and space. The Forms are considered real because we can recognize their imperfect manifestations in the physical world, while their true essence remains beyond our direct perception (Plato 25). According to Plato's

Theory of Forms, there exist perfect, unchanging definitions or ideals of concepts such as love, justice, friendship, humanity, beauty, and indeed, all things. These Forms are the ultimate reality, of which the physical objects and ideas we encounter in our world are mere imitations or shadows. We recognize the Forms or Eidos because we got a glimpse of them only before we came to the world of senses or the physical world, that is before our birth as we were souls. Before our existence in the world, before our birth, we knew the real Forms because we were souls with no bodily senses to hinder our understanding of things (Plato 25). We often fail to see the real world because we are contained by our bodily senses and fail to see beyond them. It is the philosopher who can see beyond the illusion of the physical world because he contemplates, meditates, and questions reality and the human condition and is always on the quest for truth piercing through the veil of sensory experience to apprehend the underlying Forms that constitute true reality (Plato 25).

In an attempt to understand essences and meanings, Plato asked a simple question: what is an apple? Apples come in different sizes, shapes, and colors, yet they all go by one name, an apple. In simpler words, if they are different, what is the essence that they all share which makes them the same? (Plato, the Philosopher). He wanted to understand the concept of essence. The example of an apple is useful in questioning what makes something itself. This helped him understand the essence of individuals and objects. According to him, it is by thinking about the ideal Forms of things that we come to know how things should be like, and how things should be done. The Forms present a blueprint useful to come to an understanding of everything, and useful to the conduct of a better life (Plato, the Philosopher). The theory of Forms presents good reasoning at that time. It is by contemplating a simple object as an apple that he explained bigger queries such as what is being human, what's our essence, and why are we here? The answers are already set by God and it is through the philosophers' contemplations beyond the bodily

senses to understand the Forms. These essential properties are unchanging and fundamental, hence why essentialism's premise is essence precedes existence.

Socrates, who is Plato's mentor, had a passion for knowledge by contemplating life and having conversations with strangers. He marked the start of Western Philosophy; therefore, thinkers that came before him were grouped as pre-Socratic thinkers (Kenny 32), as if whatever came before him was prehistoric. He never wrote down a word; however, his name remained because luckily his thoughts were documented mostly by Plato. The latter wrote works in the form of dialogues that Socrates had with different people, and it comprised his ideas that influenced and formed the course of Western Philosophy. The sole meaning of those writings evolved around having a curious mind, examining life, and questioning everything. He was accused of corrupting young people's minds by contradicting the traditions of those times; consequently, the Athenian Court sentenced him to death. His only crime was challenging traditions by questioning everything and mentoring people to start thinking. Allegedly, he had a chance to run away from his death sentence, under the condition of living somewhere else and keeping quiet (Kenny 33). His answer was: "The unexamined life is not worth living." (Qtd. in Kenny 33). He did not hesitate to choose death. He wanted to keep mentoring and sharing his thoughts, but since he could not do it anymore, he preferred to die over being silenced and living an unexamined life. Additionally, his strong conviction of an immortal soul that will live on in the afterlife gave him serenity and enabled him to accept death (Flynn 3).

Aristotle, who is Plato's student, engaged with Plato's theory of Forms in his book *Metaphysics* while developing his distinct approach. He views essence as inherent in objects, not in a separate realm of Forms (Aristotle 39). He argued that essence is not separate from objects but inherent within them. This perspective is often referred to as immanent realism (Cohen and Reeve). For Aristotle, the form or essence of an object is an integral part of its physical existence, not something that exists in a separate realm of ideas like Plato thought.

Instead, they're part of the articles we see and touch in the world around us. Aristotle believed that we can understand the essence of things by observing and studying the physical world around us. He emphasized empirical observation and logical analysis, laying the groundwork for what would later develop into the scientific method (Kenny 1). Ancient Western philosophy holds a variety of theories, terminologies, and philosophers with different perspectives that contemplate essences and epistemology. However, the core concept of essentialism is essence precedes existence which contrasts with existentialism.

However, essentialism seems to fail to capture the complexities of life. It oversimplifies the world into black and white, right and wrong eliminating the grey complex areas of life. The theory of Forms or Aristotle's metaphysics limits freedom and responsibility. If there is an ideal form for everything that we need to contemplate or study to grasp them, it entails having a blueprint to follow and drawing a clear line between what is right and wrong. This view overlooks the grey areas in life where it cannot be black or white. It further entails that individuals are compelled to follow a blueprint set by the philosopher which limits their freedom. Essentialism was a worldview that lasted until the 1800s, and it was dominated by existentialism.

Existentialism revived ancient philosophical questions about the nature of human existence and meaning but approached them through a modern lens. It emphasized individual experience and freedom, challenging traditional notions of predetermined essence or purpose. This new understanding of old questions would go on to profoundly influence philosophy, literature, and wider cultural thought throughout the 20th century and beyond.

1.1.2. The Philosophical Journey to Existentialism

As human beings, we crave meaning and purpose whether it is given to us by others or ourselves. Philosophy, throughout history, has put out multiple and different doctrines and systematic philosophies to present meaning; however, existentialism is not a system nor a doctrine. It is a philosophical movement that contradicts any systematic labeling (Griffin 155). It denied the existence of any blueprint for life and embraced the absurdity of the world. Socrates and Plato were rationalists for they believed in universal norms to explain life. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the fathers of the existentialist movement, had different things to say about the matter. As opposed to Socrates and Plato, the two existentialists believed that "life does not follow the continuous flow of logical argument and that one often has to risk moving beyond the limits of rational in order to live life to the fullest" (Flynn 3). There is no one universal right way to live life; there is no absolute truth to abide by. Life is not conventional, and this is existentialism's premise. It is what Kierkegaard called "truth as subjectivity" (Flynn 3) referring to a personal conviction rather than a universal truth. It is a truth that seemed plausible to the individual and pleased him to the extent that he would bet his life on it as Socrates did with his death sentence because he believed in an afterlife. This truth might not seem so to others, hence why it is called 'subjective' truth.

Existentialism does not disagree with Socrates' thought of the existence of an afterlife, or the immortality of the soul, but disagrees with having his convictions as a universal truth. The conviction that he concluded was not the result of something we could count or measure. If that were the case, it would be "an objective certainty" that deals with a law of nature (Flynn 3). It is rather a subjective truth, which is more of a moral nature. The result he concluded that the soul is immortal is an abstract philosophy that Socrates came to, not only by reasoning arguments but also by emotions. For existentialists, Socrates' reflection on the immortality of the soul is a decision and not a discovery. It is a decision based on the criterion of solid

arguments he came up with through his own contemplations, and he has decided to believe in and not believe in other arguments given by other people's convictions. A subjective truth includes personal and religious beliefs. It is what Kierkegaard calls the "blind leap" of faith, which we will look at as we further introduce existentialism according to Kierkegaard, and other existentialist philosophers.

According to essentialism, individuals are not free because their essence is predetermined before their existence. Existentialism, on the other hand, handles the same concern differently. Meaning in the world does not come already made, rather the individual makes up the meaning of his own existence. Therefore, "existence precedes essence". We exist in the world, and then we figure out our identity and create meaning for our existence. As we figure out the absurdity of the world, we stop pleasing other people by conforming. Therefore, whatever choices we make, we make them according to our own subjective truth. Many ancient philosophers were rationalists and systematic in their theory-making. Existentialism is an anti-system movement. Existentialists do not believe in universal views to explain the individual and his life. There are no universal rules that confine an individual to a predetermined fate, but there are personal choices to make and consequences to follow (Flynn 3).

Jean-Paul Sartre is labeled as an existentialist, and he happily proclaimed it. He was a 20th-century French novelist, writer, and philosopher who developed existentialism and was one of many who popularized it and became known for it both in France and the US and later around the world. His first novel *La Nausée* (1938) made his name and served as an accessible introduction to existentialist themes. His later work *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1943) was renowned as the bible of existentialism (Reynolds 04). This description is widely used emphasizing the book's importance to the existentialist movement, much like how the Bible is central to Christianity. *Being and Nothingness* is the

centerpiece of Sartre's philosophy in which he introduced and discussed his theory on the four related phenomena: freedom, consciousness, authenticity, and bad faith. (Flynn 15). Sartre's exploration of these themes helped to define existentialism as a distinct philosophical approach, emphasizing individual agency and the responsibility that comes with human freedom. His ability to convey complex philosophical ideas through both fiction and non-fiction made existentialism more accessible to a wider audience, contributing significantly to its spread beyond academic circles and into popular culture. Sartre's work not only shaped the discourse on existentialism in France but also played a crucial role in its international recognition and influence.

In *Existentialism is Humanism* (1946), which is a transcript of a lecture he gave in Club Maintenant in Paris, Sartre addresses common misconceptions about existentialism. First, existentialism is often viewed as a bourgeois or quietist philosophy. Since existentialists promote that no action is inherently better than another, they reinforce inaction and encourage passivity. In simpler words, why bother chose or do anything if no choice is better than another. Sartre countered that existentialism promotes action by encouraging conscious decision-making. He asserted that humans constantly shape their essence through their choices and actions. Every choice constitutes an action, and humans are always inventing their essence through their actions. Sartre argues existentialism is among the least quietist philosophies, encouraging resistance and active assessment and transformation of one's situation.

Second, existentialism is mistaken to be a pessimistic worldview. While acknowledging existentialism's focus on challenging concepts like anxiety and meaninglessness, Sartre argued that the philosophy is ultimately optimistic. It empowers individuals by placing the responsibility for their lives in their own hands, rather than attributing it to fate or predetermination (Hardré, 545). The philosophy grapples with difficult themes such as anxiety, alienation, and the apparent absurdity or meaninglessness of life. While existentialism

acknowledges the difficulties and uncertainties of human existence, its ultimate message is one of empowerment and possibility. By placing the onus of creating meaning and purpose on the individual, it opens up a world of potential. It challenges us to face the complexities of life head-on and to actively participate in shaping our existence.

Third, existentialism is accused of a subjectivist and individualistic view of the world. While starting from a subjective perspective and individual consciousness of one's own human condition, Sartre emphasizes intersubjectivity. He argued that we are selves through our relations to others and actions in the world, our choices affect not just ourselves but humanity as a whole, thus connecting individual actions to collective human experience. In choosing for ourselves, we choose for all people, actively creating the human experience. Regarding ethics, while existentialism rejects fixed moral codes, it doesn't advocate for moral chaos. Simultaneously, Sartre doesn't advocate complete moral relativism. Instead, it proposes evaluating actions based on authenticity and how they align with the human condition. Fourth, existentialism is commonly mistaken for a nihilistic movement. Many existentialists are God believers, Sartre in particular is an atheist and presented his own version of thinking. Sartre contended that existentialism is not nihilistic because the absence of a divine plan actually heightens the significance of human life. It allows individuals to create their own meaning and values (Hardré, 546).

In *Existentialism is Humanism*, Sartre explained: "existence precedes essence" (qtd. in Flynn 45) which is the most popular introductory proposition used for this movement. The quote defines existentialism in simple words. We, as individuals, are born into this world without God installing in us a predetermined purpose to do in life. We exist first, then in the course of our lives, and through the choices we commit to do, we define ourselves by ourselves, and put into our lives meaning, and a purpose to live (Flynn 15). existentialism serves as a

practical philosophy for living. It offers guidance on how to navigate the complexities of human existence and find personal meaning in a world that may seem absurd or indifferent.

1.2. "Existence Precedes Essence": Existentialism as a Philosophy of Life

Existentialism is hard to define as it cannot be contained in one finite definition for "there are as many existentialisms as there are existentialists" (Griffin 155). i.e., every existentialist portrays his own existentialism with different ideas. This philosophy does not equate with atheism or theism as there are different existentialists. Even the fathers of existentialism, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, are different from each other. The first was a firm believer in Christ, the latter was an atheist. Every existentialist in history has molded and developed this movement in the way they saw fit and added more terms that characterize their thoughts and points of view.

Existentialist philosophers are different, yet they are grouped under one label. They often discuss the same topics with different views which make up the main tenets of existentialism. Their primary concerns revolve around the contemplation of human existence and the search for meaning in life; the similarities in their thought processes and shared themes are what led critics and scholars to group them under the label of existentialism. They rejected systematic philosophies in favor of more personal, experiential approaches to understanding human existence and exploring the emotional consequences of facing life's fundamental questions and uncertainties. They are labeled as existentialists by other critics and writers, some long after their death, because they showed the same concerns: freedom and its responsibility, the unavoidability of choice, the absurdity of life, the inevitability of death, and so many other contemplations that we will see as we further discuss these philosophers and their contributions.

1.2.1. "Herd Morality", "Bad Faith", and Freedom

Existentialism brought forward ideas that an individual is free. We exist first, and then we create who we are by ourselves. Therefore, the individual is a free creature that can create his identity, and change his life through his actions. People tend to depend on other people's opinions to make choices and follow what is more common and categorized as socially normal. Conformism mostly constrains the individual from seeing his full potential. The individual feels compelled to settle with less thinking he cannot do better, or aim for something that is far from his interest because he thinks he is not free to change his situation. Conformism sets the commonly shared convictions, by one's society, as the right choices. Nonetheless, a conformist is an individual who is negating his freedom. Following blindly society is what Nietzsche expressed as 'herd-morality'.

This concept of 'herd-morality' was one of many influential ideas put forth by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), a 19th-century German philosopher, poet, and cultural critic. His philosophical contributions laid crucial groundwork for existentialism, even though the movement itself emerged after his lifetime. Along with Kierkegaard, he was one of the precursors of the movement. He believed that there are no absolute values people can follow, so he preached that people should have a re-evaluation of all values and their significance to the meaning of human existence. Individuals are free to think outside of what society and what the majority preaches. His philosophy enlightened people to see philosophy not only as metaphysics but also as an agent in the material world and brought attention to the idea that an individual is a responsible person for his own life (De Botton, "Nietzsche"). He said: "You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist." (qtd. in De Botton "Nietzsche").

The “herd morality”, which is also known as “herd mentality”, is a term Nietzsche uses to refer to the mentality of a conformist society that has rigid traditions and style of life, which restrict people into rigid and specific molds. The “herd morality” molds the individual into a “herdman” who follows blindly without any consideration for his situation or his thoughts. It is a metaphor for following society blindly looking for preservation, sameness, and comfort, lacking creativity and individuality (Nietzsche 54). He said: “What we’ve called universal values, what we have called truth, has always only ever been the personal expressions of those who promoted them” (qtd. in Smith). Nietzsche expresses that “the moral code” of society has been fabricated by individuals and then imposed on other people so that society can have control over human behavior (Smith). It is a generalization of existence, where every individual is supposed to look like the other. Although the strict code can protect us from extreme behaviors, it prevents us from creativity and individuality. A flexible code can make us accept our differences and be more mindful of who we are rather than how society wants to perceive us. Nietzsche preached that philosophers should incite people to see beyond the trendy knowledge of the age. He said:

> Today . . . when only the herd animal is honored . . . the concept of greatness’ entails being noble, wanting to be oneself, being capable of being different, standing alone and having to live independently; and the philosopher will betray something of his own ideal when he posits: ‘He shall be the greatest who can be the loneliest, the most hidden, the most deviating, the human being beyond good and evil (Qtd in Flynn 25).

Moreover, Nietzsche's ideas about personal responsibility and the freedom to define one's own values significantly influenced later existentialist thinkers, making him a pivotal figure in the philosophical lineage leading to 20th-century existentialism. “Bad Faith” is Sartre’s expansion of Nietzsche’s notion of “herd morality”. Not using our freedom in creating the life we want to live is what Sartre called “mauvaise foi” or in English “Bad faith” (Churchill 145). Living life thinking that how things are is how things ought to be is living in bad faith.

Because we are free, we can change the status quo. People tend to convince themselves that they are happy about something only because development or change seems complicated or out of reach. Sartre interpreted "bad faith" as self-deception. It is lying to oneself about having no other options to avoid the anxiety that comes with the freedom to choose something else and change (Flynn 70). It is escaping the responsibility that comes with freedom, and following the easy laid out path by others.

In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre explained the concept of "bad faith" with an example he gave about homosexuality. He believed in heterosexuality being the natural state of humans, and that homosexuality is a choice. The homosexual is in "bad faith" for thinking his condition is inevitable or something he is born with, when in fact it is a choice (Murray).

In the same book, Sartre gave another example of a waiter who seemed to be living in "bad faith". The waiter conforms excessively to the role of being a waiter. He embraces it as his own identity. He acts as if his fate is to be nothing else but a waiter. Sartre continues to talk about how professions take over the identity of individuals: "The public demands of them that they realize it as a ceremony; there is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of auctioneer, by which they endeavor to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor" (*Being and Nothingness* 59). Sartre describes every detail of the movement of the waiter as being too eager to convince the surroundings that being a waiter is at his core (*Being and Nothingness* 59). The waiter's situation is what Sartre defined as being-in-itself. The latter is the nature of inanimate things that do not have choices as opposed to humans. Being-in-itself is contrasted to being-for-itself which implies the freedom to choose, change, and evolve into another being-in-itself. The waiter completely embodies his role to his core; therefore, he is focusing on the being-in-itself rather than on being-for-itself. He has the freedom of choice. The man is not only his profession, and by limiting his essence to that role he is manifesting the being-in-itself and consequently living in "bad faith".

Furthermore, his example illustrates how individuals can deny their fundamental freedom by over-identifying with social roles or expectations. The waiter's exaggerated performance of his job demonstrates how people can attempt to escape the anxiety of freedom and responsibility by fully embracing a predetermined role or identity. A waiter thinking of his identity as only a waiter would think that dreaming or even thinking about doing something else is unrealizable and out of his league. Therefore, “bad faith” is lying to oneself about the choices one can make. Even when one is in an undesirable situation, they do not acknowledge their freedom and the being-for-itself; instead, they convince themselves that they are happy. They temporarily relieve their pain; however, the consequences would be missing out on finding one's true authentic self.

The distinction between "being-in-itself" (en-soi) and "being-for-itself" (pour-soi) is crucial here. The waiter, by acting as if he is essentially and unchangeably a waiter, is treating himself as a "being-in-itself" - a fixed, determined entity like an object. However, as a conscious being, he is a "being-for-itself," capable of self-reflection, choice, and change.

Sartre characterizes being-for-itself as a form of self-aware existence that lacks self-identity, leading to a desire for self-identity. This form of being is described as temporally dispersed and self-divided, constantly striving to achieve a sense of unity and meaning. However, being-for-itself cannot achieve the stable, self-identical state of being-in-itself without ceasing to exist as a self-aware, self-making entity. This creates an inherent tension and impossibility in the human condition, as the goal of self-identity combines incompatible characteristics. Sartre suggests that individuals may resort to self-deception or "bad faith" as a way to cope with this impossibility, attempting to believe they have achieved a self-foundation that is always deferred (Churchill 169).

Freedom and Facticity

The representation of the phenomena of freedom in Sartre's book *Being and Nothingness* (1943) harvested a lot of critiques for being inconsistent and too contradictory. Sartre stated that humankind is both free and not free and that freedom is both limited and unlimited. In his defense, David Detmer (1958), a professor of philosophy at Purdue University Northwest, claimed that Sartre was defining two different types or senses of freedom although Sartre never made that distinction (Jones 87). Detmer recognized in the book: "freedom of choice" and "freedom of obtaining" which he chose to name differently, the former renamed as 'ontological freedom' and the latter as 'practical freedom'.

Ontological freedom is a term Detmer created to refer to Sartre's definition of freedom. As for obtaining or practical freedom, it is freedom's meaning in actual situations. For Sartre, freedom is "the inescapability of our being" (qtd in Jones 87). He explains: "My freedom is perpetually in question in my being; it is not quality added on a property of my nature. It is very exactly the stuff of my being; and as in my being, my being is in question" (qtd in Jones 87). Therefore, Sartre is speaking of only one freedom, and Detmer distinguished the definition of the term and the functionality of it in situations. Considering freedom as both limited and unlimited can seem contradictory and trying to explain that by creating two senses of freedom is even more confusing. Sartre's concept of freedom in simpler words is that we are free in the sense that we are in control of the choices we make; however, we are not free for the situation can shape and limit the obtainable choices. We are free to act and choose, but we do not have control over the things that happen to us, either by others or our past actions that influence our present, which Sartre called facticity.

Sartre believed in the freedom of the individual, and he also believed in facticity. We do not have control over the time, place, parents, social class, race, and other people's attitudes toward the individual. These are all factors in one's life that Sartre termed as "facticity" (Jones,

90). According to Sartre, there is no such thing as absolute freedom. His philosophy dictates that after coming to the world, from the moment that we become conscious individuals, we are free to create our lives and our identity; however, under the limitations of facticity. Along with freedom, the environment, as a facticity, contributes to the making of the self (Churchill 171).

Facticity refers to the concrete details of our existence that we cannot change or choose, but must acknowledge and work within like our physical body and its characteristics, our past experiences and decisions, our social and historical context, and our mortality. We are free to choose how we interpret and respond to our facticity, but we cannot simply ignore or transcend it and this is practical freedom or freedom of obtaining that Detmer recognized. With the constraints of the practical freedom, humans exercise an ontological freedom.

Understanding facticity is crucial for authentic living in Sartre's philosophy. It involves accepting our limitations while still exercising our freedom within those constraints. To be conscious of our freedom and embracing it is what Sartre called: 'Authenticity'. (Flynn 74-75) To be different can be hard in a society where everyone wants to fit in. However, being different entails an authentic self that is not hindered by the "herd". To be authentic is to make choices based on the self's principles rather than following society blindly. Sartre wrote: "When operating on the level of complete authenticity, I have acknowledged that existence precedes essence, and that man is a free being who, under any circumstances, can only ever will his freedom" (*Existentialism is Humanism* 49).

The concept of freedom has also been the topic of one of Sartre's lectures, which later made a book with the same title, called *Existentialism is Humanism* (1946). To explain his views on freedom, he told the story of a student who had a question for him. He was indecisive in choosing between two things, and he wanted Sartre to help him choose. This student's father was a war traitor, and his older brother was killed in the war. His mother is devastated by the

betrayal of her husband to their country and hurt because of the death of her son. The student had two choices, whether to join the French army and fight for a noble and patriotic cause, his country, or to stay with his mother because she was old and frail, and he was the only family member left that she could depend on. He wanted to avenge the murder of his brother and the betrayal of his father; however, the risk of never coming back is way too high and his mother would be devastated and left alone (*Existentialism is Humanism* 30).

The first choice seemed like a drop in the ocean. His action is not guaranteed to carry any results or an impact. The second option though will change someone's life. If he joins an army he would be fighting in a patriotic cause, and this is an action directed to a bigger good, to a whole nation; however, it is uncertain that he would make any change or victories before dying. On the other hand, the action of staying with his mother is a certain choice with immediate results. She would not be tormented by the loss of another son in the war, and she would have someone to depend on when she gets weaker. He asked for help from his professor, Sartre. His professor replied that it was his own choice; nobody had the answer but him (Existentialism is Humanism 32). He had to choose by himself. In saying that, making a choice is unavoidable. Even if someone else would have given him a piece of advice on which path he should choose, his choice of the person he asked and whether to listen to the advice or not is in itself a choice. That is why Sartre stated that we, as humans, are painfully free (Existentialism is Humanism 29), which is why freedom is linked with angst. Sartre's concepts are somewhat reintroductions of Martin Heidegger's concepts for he was heavily influenced by his philosophy.

Martin Heidegger is a 20th-century German philosopher known for his contributions to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism. He was heavily criticized because he was a Hitler supporter, but he reconciled his wrong thinking later on. His concept of freedom was attached to his interpretation of society. He is known for his criticism of civilization and what

it has brought like, media, pop culture, and consumerism. His repulsion from civilization led him to spend his life in a hut in nature away from the city (Flynn 51).

Heidegger suggests that we have to interpret ourselves by ourselves. We, as humans, have to make existential choices and thoughtful decisions. We are troubled by the human essence and what it means to be. However, we are all different and unique. However, philosophers took for granted the freedom of individuals to interpret themselves; instead, they have made constructions and metaphysical systems and theories about everything in our lives.

Heidegger's masterpiece *Sein und Zeit* (1927), translated to English as *Being and Time*, influenced European philosophy. His fundamental ontology presented in the book is the backbone of Sartre's famous book *L'être et le Néant* (1943) translated to *Being and Nothingness*; that is why many critics credit Heidegger for the contributions made by Sartre. Although the existentialist terms Sartre introduced are reintroductions, Heidegger's existentialism was less famous because his works are hard to comprehend. His writings are filled with complex compound words making up difficult jargon.

Despite the difficult jargon used, Heidegger presents simple truths about the meaning of life. He concluded that the modern individual suffers from several diseases of the soul. One of which is that we forget we are alive and free. We go about our day-to-day life without looking into the mystery of our existence, or the mystery of what he called 'Dasein' which is German for 'being' and often translated as 'being there'. For Heidegger, human reality, or as he refers to it 'Dasein', is a condition analyzed through the philosophy of phenomenological ontology. He defines Dasein or being as the entity that is concerned with itself. Being refers to mankind who is in constant reflection about the nature of his existence (De Botton, "Heidegger"). According to him, the modern world makes individuals forget to live for themselves and forget that they are free beings. We are so caught up with our daily routines and living that we forget

our being and that we are free. He referred to the constant search for the meaning of our existence, as “Seinsfrage” (Dreyfus 429). We do not contemplate the wondrous nature and the strangeness of everything, and we become robotic in the sense that we do our daily routines and work hard for our goals in life without pausing and questioning and contemplating life. The modern world puts forward shallow knowledge and constant tasks to keep us busy from asking crucial questions about our being.

Our existence has been shaped by others, or as Heidegger said, by “das Man” (Dreyfus 515), which is often translated as Everyman. Dasein is how one lives their life with members of a community. According to Heidegger meaning in the world or meaning of Dasein does not rely solely on a single individual. “Everyman is an existential structure of the world. Dasein as the meaningful structure is impossible without the others, of past and present generations because basically we always live, act, and think as Everyman lives, acts and thinks.” (Philipse 26).

His explanation implies that if one is living according to his own culture’s rules and traditions, they are not themselves and have lost their “self”. Therefore, they are inauthentic. However, how can an individual or a community live without any rules? In his book, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation*, Herman Philipse, a professor of philosophy at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, criticized Heidegger by saying his presentation of the world or society is confused. He pointed out that “the constitutive function of shared practices” (Philipse 27) is very different from conformism. Philipse made use of the example of language. It is part of culture, and it is a system of rules of how to use words and one cannot refute these rules for the sake of being authentic. Conformism, on the other hand, is following blindly rules that are not necessary for the conduct of life but rather for making individuals clones of each other. As an example, gender roles, the perfect age for marriage, and what constitutes happiness or success, are all examples of unnecessary rules that make up

conformism. There isn't necessarily a perfect age for something, and what constitutes happiness for someone does not constitute it for the other (Philipse 27).

In Conclusion, Existentialism is a philosophy of life that promotes individuals to be conscious of their freedom. Existentialists, whether from the 19th century or 20th century, have expressed their views on freedom as part of every individual. Because existence precedes essence, individuals possess the ability to create through their actions and choices their essence and aim for an authentic self. One ought to live authentically when he acknowledges his freedom. We also note that authenticity is the opposite of "bad faith". Being authentic is acknowledging that freedom and leading a life with authentic choices based on subjective truth. Living in 'bad faith' is ignoring one's freedom, instead conforming to society's rules.

Living in conformity is the same as living in "bad faith", or as Nietzsche called living as the 'herd' or having the 'herd mentality'. Conformism is the trendy knowledge of societies, and it is what the surroundings preach on what one should be or act. Despite conformity with the surroundings, humankind is free. According to existentialism, one ought to break through the conforming rules. A well-lived life is carried according to one's authentic choices and authentic self, rather than being controlled by society or the "herd".

As human beings, we are free, but that freedom is both a blessing and a curse. Knowing that we can present meaning in our lives with our actions is a good thing. In addition, knowing that the meaning of our life, our essence, and our identity are products of our choices is also a burden, or as the existentialists call it "Angst".

1.2.2. "Man is Condemned to Be Free": Existential Angst as a Human Condition

Angst is what existentialists call the emotions that a person carries in psychologically critical moments when thoughts about existence and the human condition burden the peace of one's mind. According to the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, "It is a form of anxiety, an emotion seen by existentialists as both constituting and revealing the human condition" (Audi 29). It is a universal feeling that humans experience at least once in their lifetime.

In existentialism, anxiety, dread, and angst are interchangeable terms, especially in the translation of foreign existential works; however, angst is more common in the existentialists' jargon. That is because the term angst is originally a German word borrowed into English in the context of existentialism. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard introduced the term only in the 19th century. He was the first one to use the term philosophically in existentialism and gave this German word a new meaning in the English language.

From the previous definitions and explanations of the terms angst and anxiety, we note that the meanings of these terms are similar but carry different nuances. Anxiety is a more general term for angst. According to the Oxford Dictionary, anxiety is "a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome." (Hobson 22). As a comparison, angst is also "a feeling of deep anxiety or dread"; however, the difference is that it is "typically an unfocused one about the human condition or the state of the world in general." (Hobson 22). Angst is mainly anxiety but more focused on existential matters and the state of the world. That does not prohibit us from using the word anxiety in the context of existentialism, and we will freely interchange the two terms because both angst and anxiety, and also dread, are key terms in the philosophy of many existentialists

and have been, as previously mentioned, interchanged in the translation of many existentialist works.

Angst, in the Cambridge dictionary, has been equated to extreme unhappiness and fear. Those are considered synonyms that we use in common everyday language. However, in existentialism, fear is not equated with angst. Both terms are not to be confused. They are both emotional responses to upcoming dangers; however, fear is a response to some danger known to us, meanwhile, anxiety is a constant feeling of being threatened, but do not know where the danger can arise from (Flynn 133). For Kierkegaard, the distinction relies on the fact that anxiety has no definite object like fear (Moyn 281). One may fear something present and known, angst, on the other hand, is a constant troubling feeling about the unknown dangers, or existential matters that may seem trivial but keep some people awake at night.

Kierkegaard was a 19th-century Danish philosopher and theologian. He is known for presenting a theist version of existentialism. He was a Christian who believed that Christianity is an experience to be lived rather than a doctrine to be taught. He believed that there is no need for external evidence for the existence of God, for people who looked for such proof failed the experience of being true Christians and having that special relationship with God. To believe in God without any proof of His existence is what Kierkegaard called a "leap of faith".

In building his concept of anxiety, Kierkegaard related it to sin, or more specifically the original sin, which is also known in Danish and other languages as "inherited" sin. It refers to the first sin committed by Adam when he ate the forbidden fruit. According to the Christian doctrine, sin is a state we are born with because, as Adam's descendants, humankind has inherited his first sin ("Original Sin"). Nevertheless, Kierkegaard disregarded the notion of it being inherited and passed down from Adam and Eve to all humans. Instead, he believed that individuals are sinful because it is part of the human condition, i.e. Sinfulness is not something

we inherit, but rather a fundamental aspect of our existence. Kierkegaard saw sin as inseparable from the human condition. In his view, to be human is to be sinful Moreover, it is God who assigned the meaning of angst to sin because He wanted to instill in us a means of commitment despite the void of the meaninglessness of the universe. Kierkegaard stated that the fact that Adam chose to eat the forbidden fruit means that he is conscious of his freedom. We have the freedom to choose between good and evil. In consequence, the freedom of choice and the various possibilities and consequences we can get from our actions give human beings worries and anxiety. In short, we have anxiety because we are free. Kierkegaard wrote of anxiety as the "dizziness of freedom" (Hannay 323). Adam was free to choose to obey God but chose otherwise.

Kierkegaard wrote up to 22 books in his lifetime, but *Either/or* (1843), *Fear and Trembling* (1843), and *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) are the three main books that were the highlights of his career. The themes carried in his books are concerned about the human condition, like the inescapable horrors of life and death. In his book *Either/or: a Fragment of Life*, the theme of angst is represented best in this quote:

> Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret both. […] Whether you laugh at the world's follies or you weep over them, you will regret both. […] Whether you hang yourself or you do not hang yourself, you will regret both. This, gentlemen, is the sum of all practical wisdom (72 – 73).

Kierkegaard's view centers on the individual and his own choices. What we can comprehend from this quote is that what torments the mind of an individual is his freedom of choice. The quote is provocative, paradoxical, and pushes readers to confront the complexities and anxieties inherent in human existence. It challenges us to think deeply about how we make choices and find meaning in a world where certainty is elusive. Life is a matter of choices, and there are a lot of different possibilities and only the individual is responsible for the choices that

will make up his life. What Kierkegaard means by regret is that whatever path is taken, one cannot be fully content with their choice. There is always a part of our mind curious about the unchosen path. It is the freedom that is the source of the individual's existential angst. Whatever one does in life, there is no definite and trouble-free answer, yet one is compelled to choose. An individual is free to choose and that is what is frightening for Kierkegaard. The variation of possibilities that can happen to oneself is overwhelming. Therefore, no matter what you decide to do, there is always that sense of regret because there is no perfect trouble-free choice, so one is faced with anxiety.

Although one is free to choose, not choosing is in itself a choice. Sartre stated: "Life is a matter of choice, even not to choose is a choice" (cited. in de Botton, "Jean-Paul Sartre"). In life, whatever we do, we face struggles and troubles, and so questions that start with "what if" intrigue us. Those kinds of questions fuel our anxiety. Therefore, there is not one basic truth that everyone needs to follow. It is up to the individual to see what is best for him. His choices are what will create his purpose in life, and its meaning.

As previously mentioned, the term angst was first attributed to Kierkegaard. In his book *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), Kierkegaard introduced the term "Angst". He wrote, "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom" (61). This book later influenced Heidegger's Angst and Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Langoisse'. They talked of the same phenomenon, but because they are all of different times, different nationalities, and different beliefs; they all expressed it in their unique different manners.

Like Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre also accorded between angst and freedom. Sartre explained that angst or anguish does not come only from the miseries of life, but from bearing the responsibility of the choices that make up our essences. The unlimited number of choices creates "angst". We are "condemned to be free" (*Being and Nothingness* 29). It is a

condemnation because there is no predetermined blueprint to follow and there are numerous choices that life can present to us, and freedom is a responsibility that burdens us. “Constantly having to choose what we are by choosing what we do makes us anxious. We would like to be complete, a being at one with itself rather than a being constantly striving for completion in a future that is never reached” (Churchill 10). It is in the human condition to have anxiety because, with any choices we make, we define ourselves by ourselves, and that in itself is a burdening responsibility.

Sartre asserted that to achieve authenticity is to accept freedom by practicing it without any regrets, even when tempted to be regretful. The constant regret of choices that are already made is not a way to live (Churchill 10). The anxious state is part of the human condition because an individual is constantly looking at multiple options and multiple decisions he has to make. But when an action is done, what is left to do is to move on with no regrets.

Being regretful or lamenting on a facticity is all that Nietzsche urged people to let go of. It is a fact that we are free and we can change the status quo, but some things should be accepted as they are. Wishing to be born in a different race, social class, or gender, or maybe regretting past actions, or lamenting the past and regretting not doing something are all exhaustive ways one can live by. Instead, we should embrace what life throws at us, and accept the inevitable events. This is what Nietzsche called “Amor Fati”, which is translated to “a love of one’s fate”. It is a concept that refutes regrets and incites the acceptance of the events that have happened to one’s life. An individual who believes in Amor Fati is not looking to forget the past, instead accepts all of it, the good and the bad. Nietzsche said: “My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it… but love it.” (Cited in. De Botton, “Nietzsche”)

This does not negate the previous philosophers' arguments about freedom and anxiety. One should concern himself with his free state and the angst that comes with it, and one must acknowledge it to accomplish authentic choices and have an authentic life. Whatever choices one makes, whatever results that may come from them, and the turn of events the individual will find himself in, he should embrace without any regrets because it is his own choices that tailor his life and its meaning.

To sum up, life is absurd because there is no already set path, no already defined meaning or purpose set for everyone; rather, the individual creates his own path and meaning. This is a responsibility that comes with his freedom. We are free to create ourselves, which means there are numerous possibilities that our lives can go through, and it is only the individual with the steering wheel. Therefore, we have angst as a human condition because we have such responsibility.

1.3. "The Look": Manifestations of Being in the World

The concept of being is a central theme in the philosophies of existentialists. Heidegger believed that being, or as he termed it 'Dasein', is in constant relation with its surroundings. For Heidegger, being is highly influenced and shaped by others. Individuals are not detached from other human interactions. Heidegger defines being or dasein as being in the world, and it has a care for the world. His perspective on being was revolutionary despite the simplicity of the notions he presents because philosophers often describe being in a separation between the outside world and the inside subjective perception of the world. Heidegger's phenomenological approach is to perceive human existence as the phenomena of being and being in the world without any separation. Sartre's theory on being in his book *Being and Nothingness* is based on Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Heidegger's being-in-the-world is similar to what Sartre describes as being-for-others. While Heidegger's concept of Dasein revolutionized the philosophical understanding of being, Sartre further developed these ideas in his own unique direction.

Building upon Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world, Sartre introduced his theory of 'the look' to explore how individuals perceive and are perceived by others.

First, we need to understand Sartre's theory of the look often translated as the gaze. This theory is his explanation of how a person would perceive others as a subject and being perceived by others as an object. The way that a self recognizes itself from the other is by the look. Every individual is the center of their own experience; they are the subject. The presence of another entity gives the sense that that entity is the center of its own experience, and the self is not in control of existence but its own experience of existence. Even with the presence of other centers in the universe, the self is the center of their own, and it gives the sense of being a subject as opposed to an object. The self immediately collapses and is no longer a subject when they are observed which is what Sartre called the gaze. The self becomes the object of the gaze when it is observed and recognizes the other as the subject. The look is not necessarily someone directly looking at you, but it is the feeling of someone else's presence that can be looking at you. Having established the concept of 'the look', Sartre then elaborates on how this interpersonal dynamic manifests in three distinct modes of being.

According to Sartre, being is manifested in three main ways: being-for-itself, being-in-itself, and being-for-others. Being-in-itself is anything that does not have a consciousness and needs others to define its essence. Simply, it is all that is not human and categorized as objects, animals included that cannot define themselves. Being-for-itself is a mode of existence for individuals because each person has a consciousness of himself or herself and a self-awareness that enables them to define themselves. Being-for-itself is a subject that does the defining and being-for-itself is an object (*Being and Nothingness* 222).

According to Sartre, an observer is a subject but becomes an object in the presence of others. Being an object is being-for-others because it creates a perspective that only the other experiences and it cannot be mediated to the object. A person is unable to see how other people

perceive them, which creates what Sartre defined as shame. The look makes the object feel shame, and it can manifest in pride; however, for Sartre, it always comes down to shame for being an object.

> Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being an object; that is, of recognizing myself in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an original fall, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have "fallen" into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am. (*Being and Nothingness* 289)

Sartre uses the example of someone spying through a keyhole to illustrate how the awareness of being observed by another person (the Other) can dramatically alter one's sense of self and situation. When the individual becomes aware of being watched, they suddenly shift from being an active subject in control of their actions to feeling like a vulnerable object under scrutiny. This awareness often triggers an emotional response, such as shame. Importantly, Sartre notes that this feeling can occur even without the actual presence of another person; the mere suspicion of being observed can elicit the same response. This phenomenon demonstrates that our experience of the world and ourselves is not simply that of an isolated subject in a neutral environment. Instead, it reveals the profound influence that the possibility of other conscious beings has on our self-awareness and emotional states. This insight challenges the idea of a purely individualistic existential experience and highlights the inherently social aspect of human existence (Churchill 185).

The object of the look can never experience how the other sees them. The object can never experience a part of themselves in other people's subjectivity. In a sense, others have access to the self that is unmediated and that the self can never experience and have no control over. The inability to see myself as others see me is what Sartre describes as shame.

These existentialist ideas emerged in the aftermath of two world wars, when traditional values and beliefs were being questioned. Heidegger and Sartre's philosophies offered new ways of understanding human existence in a world that seemed increasingly chaotic and meaningless. Their emphasis on individual experience and responsibility resonated with a generation grappling with profound social and political changes

In conclusion, Heidegger and Sartre's existentialist theories of being offer a rich framework for understanding human existence and interpersonal relationships. By emphasizing the fundamental interconnectedness of individuals with their world and with others, these philosophers challenged traditional notions of an isolated, autonomous self. Their ideas continue to influence contemporary thought in philosophy, psychology, and social theory, prompting us to reconsider our understanding of self, others, and the nature of human existence. While their theories may not provide a complete picture of human experience, they offer valuable tools for exploring the complexities of consciousness, identity, and social interaction in an ever-changing world.

Conclusion

The essence of being, or the meaning of life, has been a heated and continuous topic since the start of Western Philosophy. Existentialism is engaged with that same concern but defies traditions and conventional philosophies and presents a new perspective on life. In an existentialist view, what constitutes the purpose of life is only something the individual himself is responsible for creating.

Existentialism looks at the world as an absurd reality. The individual is the sole responsible for creating essence, and that responsibility generates angst. I.e. The meaning of one’s life is for him to create. The rules that exist in the world are all man-made, and following a certain rule without questioning it and leading a life that society incites is living as a herdsman,

denying one's freedom is living in 'bad faith'. Who we are is what we choose and what we do. Therefore, it is unavoidable and part of the human condition to have angst. We, as humans with a consciousness, define ourselves and that is what makes us, in Sartre's terms, a being-for-itself; however, we cannot control other's perception of ourselves so we become an object in the presence of the gaze of others; therefore, we become a being-in-itself. Being the object of the gaze, we perceive ourselves as a being for others. For Sartre, the more one gets older, the more rigid the being-for-itself becomes and it becomes harder for a person to consciously define the meaning of their existence. In death, the dead person loses completely the ability of being-for-itself and the person becomes open to interpretation as a being-in-itself.

A life well lived is a life that acknowledges their freedom, and despite the angst that comes with that freedom, as Nietzsche advised, one has to believe in 'amor fati'. One has to accept and love his fate because life is way too short for regrets and laments. In the existentialist framework, human beings are fundamentally characterized by their inescapable freedom, which consequently entails an inherent existential anguish. This pervasive anxiety is intrinsic to the human condition, arising from our fundamental state of being-in-the-world without predetermined essence or inherent meaning. Our existential predicament is further compounded by the burden of choice and the relentless pursuit of significance in an ostensibly indifferent universe. The human subject, thrust into existence without prior consent, is compelled to navigate the labyrinth of possibilities, perpetually striving to make judicious decisions and construct meaning in the face of cosmic silence. This ceaseless endeavor to authenticate one's existence amidst the void of intrinsic purpose engenders a profound and persistent existential disquietude

The philosophical examination of literature has been a persistent endeavor throughout the history of Western thought, evolving from ancient Greek critiques to modern existentialist interpretations. This intellectual journey reveals the complex and often contentious relationship

between philosophy and literary expression. From Plato's skepticism towards poetry, rooted in his theory of Forms and conception of the human soul, to the humanist belief in literature as a reflection of universal human nature, we see a spectrum of perspectives on the value and function of literary works. Sartre's existentialist approach, distinguishing between the utilitarian nature of prose and the interpretative freedom of poetry, further complicates our understanding of literature's role and potential.

These diverse philosophical viewpoints underscore the multifaceted nature of literature and its profound impact on human thought and society. While Socrates saw art as potentially harmful to reason, humanists viewed it as a testament to our shared humanity. Sartre, in turn, recognized literature's capacity for social and political engagement, particularly through prose. The ongoing debate and reinterpretation of these ideas by subsequent literary movements and critics highlight the dynamic nature of literary theory. It suggests that our understanding of literature is not fixed but continually evolving, it is shaped by philosophical discourse and changing social contexts.

Ultimately, this philosophical exploration of literature invites us to engage critically with both the written word and the ideas that shape our perception of it. It challenges us to consider not just what literature is, but what it can do, and how it relates to our understanding of reality, humanity, and social change. As we continue to grapple with these questions, we find that literature remains not just an art form, but a vital arena for philosophical inquiry and human expression.

Chapter Two: Feminist Literary Criticism and Existential Feminism

Introduction

Feminism is a Western movement that started with an emphasis on equality between men and women. As it went through waves and phases since it was first pronounced in the 1800s in Europe and America, feminism spread throughout the world, and feminist demands evolved. This movement started with the fight for women's suffrage and then asserted demanding equality between men and women in all areas of legal, economic, political, and social affairs. Feminism is a wide term that enraptures the ideas of other schools of thought that match well with its primary premise of equality.

This chapter aims to explore the intersection of feminism and existentialism, particularly as they relate to women's literary expression and identity formation. It argues that existentialist thought when applied to feminist theory, provides a powerful framework for understanding women's experiences, challenges, and creative outputs in a patriarchal society. By examining the historical context of feminism, the female literary tradition, women's identity struggles, and existential feminism, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that women's contemplation of existential matters is not only valid but also crucial to a comprehensive understanding of the human condition. Furthermore, it posits that the existentialist emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility offers valuable insights into women's efforts to transcend societal constraints and assert their authentic selves in both life and literature.

This chapter focuses on the feminist movements and theories, and existential feminism. The first section provides the history of feminism which sets a foundation for the preapprehension of the sections to come. It explains the two different movements that feminism went through in the 19th and 20th centuries and the main demands the feminist movements are condoning. The second section is dedicated to the exploration of the woman writer and what

constrains her writing. This section discusses Virginia Woolf's thoughts and her perspective on "killing the angel in the house". It also presents Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism and further discusses the female literary tradition and constraints female writers face. The third section discusses the situation women face when they are confused about their identity amidst society's influence. The situation women face is what Betty Friedan calls 'the problem with no name'. The fourth section discusses Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism and studies existential terms in the women's situation.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that women, as full participants in the human condition, engage with the same profound questions of meaning, choice, and identity that have long been attributed to male philosophers and writers. By recognizing and examining women's existential contemplations, we gain a richer, more inclusive understanding of human experience and literary expression.

2.1.History of Feminism

Although the first wave is dated during the 19th and 20th centuries, feminist thought in the Western world can be distinguished as early as medieval France with Christine de Pizan, a prominent moralist, and a political thinker. She was an advocate for women's right to receive a proper education. De Pizan is best known for *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* in which she prompted her strong belief in educating women. Similarly, in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft, an 18th-century English writer and philosopher, advocated in favor of women's education. Its thesis is that women only appear inferior to men because they lack proper education. Knowledge is power, and since women were prohibited from going to schools to learn, they were powerless and controllable.

These early voices set the stage for the first wave of feminism, which gained momentum in the mid-19th century. The first wave of feminism originated in the United States and the United Kingdom with the establishment of The Seneca Falls convention in 1848. Interestingly, the abolition of slavery and the subsequent granting of voting rights to African American men catalyzed middle-class white women to demand their own legal rights, particularly land ownership and suffrage. After the Civil War in 1865, the United States abolished slavery, and African American men were granted their right to vote. They, who were considered to be of a lower class than the white race, actually had more rights than middle-class white women at the time. The ratification of the 15th Amendment that granted African men the right to vote triggered middle-class white women to demand their legal rights. Their demands were focused on owning land and suffrage, and they were only granted in 1920 with the signing of the 19th Amendment. It took a lot of time to see the fruits of the movement, which is all due to society's traditional and conformist culture at that period. Even with the suffrage movement, women still faced a lot of discrimination and still had to fight for a lot more.

Progress was slow in a society deeply rooted in traditional gender roles. The Victorian era, in particular, focused on gender roles and displaying a picture-perfect of well-behaved and good-mannered wife. It was a popular thing to publish in newspapers, magazines, or TV manuals about the right conduct that women should follow. *Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms: A Guide to Correct Writing* (1888) is a manual of conduct that presents the presumed best etiquettes and duties for men and women in different life situations. According to the manual, it is the duty of the wife to never "display her best conduct, her accomplishments, her smiles, and her best nature, exclusively away from home." (Hill 167). As for the husband, he should not "interfere with the duties which legitimately belong to her." because "the home is the wife's province. It is her natural field of labor." (Hill 167). Many media outlets of the time conveyed similar messages that attempted to shape society into a conventional image.

However, numerous feminists have argued against the absurdity of these gender roles. Second-wave feminists, in particular, challenged these prescribed gender norms by producing a canon of feminist literary criticism, which is explored in detail in the following sections of this chapter. This critical approach, however, did not emerge in isolation but evolved from earlier feminist writings and activism.

As the suffrage movement gained traction, it began to influence in profound ways The 1890s and early 1900s saw a shift from lyrical protest to more direct political action in feminist writing. This transformation was not without its complexities, as evidenced by the divergent views of prominent Victorian women writers. While some initially distanced themselves from the suffrage movement, including Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, others embraced it wholeheartedly, leading to the formation of the Women Writers Suffrage League in 1908. Members included Elizabeth Robins, Cecily Hamilton, Bessie Hatton, and others. Suffrage-themed literature proliferated, including novels, plays, poems, and essays. Notable works included Elizabeth Robins' play/novel "Votes for Women"/"The Convert". Robins' work was particularly influential, depicting the suffrage struggle as a bitter sexual combat between men and women (*A Literature of Their Own*, 216). This new wave of politically charged writing not only reflected the changing social landscape but also actively sought to shape public opinion on women's rights. The suffragettes recognized the power of the written word as a tool for social change, using literature to challenge prevailing attitudes and rally support for their cause. As a result, the literary world became a battleground for gender equality, with women writers leveraging their talent and platforms to advocate for their right to vote. This period marked a significant shift in the role of women writers, as they transitioned from being mere observers and commentators to becoming active agents of social and political change.

One fascinating figure in this period was Mary Augusta Ward, better known by her pen name Mrs. Humphry Ward, who was a complex figure in the late 19th and early 20th century women's rights movement. While she ardently supported women's education and social reform, she found herself at odds with the suffrage movement, eventually becoming the first president of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League in 1908. Ward's perspective was deeply rooted in the Victorian ideals of womanhood and social responsibility. She believed that educated women had a moral duty to work for the betterment of less fortunate women and children. However, she viewed the demand for women's voting rights as potentially divisive, fearing it might lead to what she termed a "sex-war." Her stance, while controversial even in her time, stemmed from a genuine concern for social harmony and a belief in gradual, rather than radical, change. Ward was apprehensive about the suffragettes' militant tactics and their demands for personal freedom, which she felt might undermine the fabric of society (*A Literature of Their Own*, 228).

Despite her anti-suffrage position, Ward's works and personal life revealed a more complex engagement with feminist ideas. Her novels often portrayed strong bonds between women, which some literary critics interpret as reflections of the emerging female subculture of her time. Moreover, she shared a profound sense of women's unity with suffragettes through the shared experiences of childbirth and motherhood. Ward's own difficult pregnancies and health struggles significantly influenced her views on women's roles and responsibilities. Rather than advocating for political and systemic changes, she channeled her empathy for women's struggles into charitable work and social reform efforts (*A Literature of Their Own*, 229). In her novels, moments of feminist insight often arose from depictions of physical pain related to childbirth or illness. However, these insights were usually redirected into portrayals of feminine altruism and sacrifice, reflecting Ward's belief in women's unique capacity for nurturing and social improvement (*A Literature of Their Own* 229). The complexity of Ward's

position highlights the diverse spectrum of thought within the women's movement of her time. While opposing suffrage, she engaged with feminist ideas and concerns in her own way, advocating for women's education, social reform, and cultural influence. Her story reminds us that historical figures often held multifaceted, sometimes contradictory views, shaped by their personal experiences and the social context of their era (*A Literature of Their Own* 229).

The second wave of feminism in the 1960s brought about a broader focus on reclaiming female identity and addressing daily issues faced by women. The 1960s's feminism focused on critiquing the patriarchal, rigid, and conformist society and brought awareness to the autonomy women lacked. Moreover, feminist literary criticism is a product of 20th-century literature, which is a feminist approach to re-evaluating literary works that represent women and expose explicit or implicit misogynistic ideas. Feminist literary criticism is the feminists' way of regaining the power of representation. It is an approach to reinterpreting female literature by feminists in favor of establishing a female literary tradition, which has been constrained by patriarchal interpretations.

However, the feminist movement of the 1960s had significant limitations in its perspective and inclusivity. Its focus was largely centered on the experiences of white, middle-class women in Western countries, particularly the United States. This narrow view failed to account for the diverse challenges faced by women of different races, cultures, and economic backgrounds around the world (Buckett, "The Second Wave of Feminism"). This lack of inclusivity led to the emergence of alternative movements, such as womanism, which sought to address the unique experiences and needs of Black women and other women of color. These offshoots highlighted the main movement's failure to represent all women adequately.

Another criticism of 1960s feminism was its heavy emphasis on sexual liberation. Critics argue that this focus overshadowed other crucial aspects of women's lives and

experiences. These neglected areas might have included economic equality, political representation, or balancing career and family responsibilities. Some critics went further, suggesting that the movement's push for sexual liberation seemed less about genuinely improving women's lives and more about rebelling against traditional values for its own sake. This perception led to accusations that the movement was more interested in dismantling existing social structures than in addressing the real, practical concerns of many women (Burkett, “The Second Wave of Feminism”)

As feminism continued to evolve, it reflected ongoing debates about social contexts and challenges. Various trends have emerged in recent feminist discourse, each with different levels of public acceptance and impact. The advent of social media platforms like Twitter has played a significant role in amplifying feminist voices and concerns. Notable examples include the #MeToo movement, which provided a platform for victims of sexual assault to share their experiences, as well as related campaigns such as #TimesUp and #MenToo. These digital movements have contributed to broader discussions about gender equality, sexual harassment, and societal norms. Simultaneously, other initiatives, like the Free the Nipple campaign, have sparked controversy and debate about bodily autonomy and gender-based double standards. The diverse nature of these movements reflects the complex and multifaceted character of contemporary feminism.

It's important to note that feminism, as a movement, cannot be confined to specific start and end dates. Like other social movements, it emerged from the need for change and the desire to articulate pressing issues within particular temporal and cultural contexts. At its core, I contend that feminism is fundamentally a humanist movement. It strives to normalize equality between sexes and addresses social issues while also addressing existential needs. This is achieved through an exploration of the essence and significance of female existence. A seminal work exemplifying this perspective is Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which addresses

what she termed "the problem that has no name." It underscores their growing awareness of a need to seek personal fulfillment and meaning beyond the confines of traditional homemaking. Literature serves as a powerful medium for expressing all these notions, offering a rich platform for feminist ideas, critiques, and explorations of the female experience. We will focus on the second wave of feminism and further explain Friedan's book.

2.2.The Female Literary Tradition: The Female Writer and 'The Angel in the House'

Feminism was a counterculture in the rigid and traditional 1960s American society, giving birth to a distinct female literary tradition. Women writers were in need of a tradition of their own that distinguish them apart from men's writing and established the woman writer's identity (Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* 8). Their subjugation made them comply with using male language that hindered their literary expression. As the second wave of feminism took hold, a robust female literary tradition developed, led by prominent philosophers and writers with different theories and a handful of books that are staples of the feminist movement. Among the notable American feminist figures are Betty Friedan, Mary Elman, Kate Millett, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter to mention a few.

In a speech that later became a paper published posthumously entitled "Professions for Women", Virginia Woolf, a modernist English writer, addressed "the angel in the house" as a ghost that hindered her writing. "The Angel in the House" (1854) is the title of a famous Victorian poem by Coventry Patmore. The poem is narrative, and it describes the definition of an ideal woman. She is "an angel in the house" because she belongs to that space and no other. It is her calling in life to be devoted and submissive to her husband and all his needs as it is described in the poem. This is the conformist ideology pushed around in that time's culture, and a woman diverging from that ideal image is no longer what they define as feminine. The angel is a ghost that represents these ideals that oblige Woolf to write about innocent, pure, and

angelic things for the sole reason of being a woman. Patmore conceded that "there certainly have been cases of women possessed of the properly masculine power of writing books, but these cases are all so truly and obviously exceptional, and must and ought always to remain so, that we may overlook them without the least prejudice to the soundness of our doctrine." Women are not only confined to their homes and burdened with housework but they are also denied the opportunity to develop and pursue their writing skills.

Woolf recounts her struggles with society's standards and expectations as a female writer. She explains that society's ideals obstruct women's writing. Since women are human too, they are not perfect nor angel-like. In reality, women think and feel differently, they do encounter taboo topics in their lives, and they would like to express that in their writings (Showalter, "Killing the Angel in the House" 342). Woolf refrained from writing about sexuality in her novels because it has been often assigned as a masculine property. Woolf explains:

> You cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must-to put it bluntly-tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard ("Professions for Women" 156).

The angel in the house obstructs the writer from writing about life as it is experienced. She wants to abolish the pampered writing style and the false representations of women in literature. "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer." ("Professions for Women" 156). Woolf wanted to write freely about certain topics; however, she abstained due to the expected society's reactions. This is why many women publish their works under a pseudonym instead of their real names, Sylvia Plath when publishing *The Bell*

Jar is an example. Woolf explains: “men sensibly allow themselves great freedom in these respects, I doubt that they realize or can control the extreme severity with which they condemn such freedom in women.” (“Professions for Women” 158). Woolf’s quote explains that men had more freedom to express themselves in literature without any backlash, but if a woman expressed herself the same way a man did, she would be judged for it. She argues that killing the angel in the house is part of the female writer’s job (“Professions for Women 158). What she meant is that for a female writer to write freely, she has to overcome the stifling effect of fitting in the ideal feminine, and write authentically without constraints.

However, as Woolf noted, killing the angel was only the first step; the female writer then is faced with a journey of self-discovery. Now that society’s constraining picture of a woman is moved out of the way, the writer needs to rediscover herself and what she can do away from those social standards. Woolf admits that she does not know what is a woman, and what is her full potential until she tries all arts and professions available to humankind. Enabling women the freedom to try different skills and talents will make them discover their potential (“Professions for Women” 157), which is how one discovers who they are as a person away from social influences. For Woolf, she admits that she successfully killed the Angel in the House, but she is still struggling to express her experiences freely, and she doubts any woman has ever accomplished that yet. The reason she feels that way is because she overcame society’s pressure to be and live a certain way; however, she does not express her raw ideas, and creativity into her writing. (“Professions for Women” 158). This is why Woolf’s writings are void of any taboo topics.

In a paper entitled “Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy and Women Writers” (1977), Elaine Showalter, a feminist and an American literary critic, discussed the woman writer struggles. Female writers avoid writing about some aspects of the female experience due to the presence of the Angel in the House. Woolf undeniably avoided taboo topics which shows

a level of ambivalence. A lot of women writers are ambivalent; they express themselves and their experiences as women, and at the same time they search for covert ways to present their topics (Showalter 342). They would present taboo topics implicitly in a way that would not cause any controversies in their writing.

The feminist literary criticism questioned the 'logocentrism' of male literature. In her book *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millett, an American radical feminist writer, studied sexism and phallogocentrism in history, psychoanalysis, sociology, and other areas. She came to the understanding that the relationship between men and women is embedded in politics and that women are falsely represented. Millett was a radical feminist who believed that all forms of women's oppression were rooted in the political issue of one sex dominating the other (Millett 24). The relationship between the sexes is built on a dominant and a dominated. In her book, she reviews some of the well-known male authors' works and argues that these authors create a sexist cultural discourse. Her book served to give a feminist perspective on different literary texts. Furthermore, the phallogocentric is a term that is part of Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction. The term refers to the privileging of the masculine in literature in the construction of meaning over the feminine. There are a great number of female writers but there is no sense of an ongoing tradition. Feminist literary criticism sought to revolt against phallogocentricism and fought to create literature that belonged to women writers, a literary tradition that they could call their own.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar introduced the madwoman thesis. The title is an allusion to Jane Eyre's Bertha who was a madwoman in an attic. The madwoman thesis explains that women writers' creativity is oppressed; therefore, they channel their creativity to being subversive, devious, and psychologically self-destructive. A great example would be Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" where the

protagonist is a woman narrating her experience going through postpartum depression and being perceived as a madwoman. Gilbert and Gubar have noticed the same pattern of protagonists portrayed as madwomen in the works of Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Mary Shelley, and Emily Dickinson. They often opt for monstrous or destructive characters or angelic ones because of the strong influence of the patriarchal literary tradition that portrayed women as either angelic housewives or madwomen seeking other things in life (Gilbert & Gubar 68).

Feminists often fixate on how male writers portray female characters when in fact the problem also relied on the oppressed creativity of female writers and their representation of female characters. When the patriarchal literary tradition is the dominant literature and the female literary tradition lack a sense of consistency and continuity, female writers cannot help but use a male language. The latter is the most prominent and conventional with society's standards, and in using it, they have a higher chance of recognition. "The continual use of male models inevitably involves the female artist in a dangerous form of psychological self-denial that goes far beyond the metaphysical self-Iessness" (Gilbert & Gubar 69). Therefore, they deprive themselves of their creativity in writing about the female experience to use male language and seem more eloquent.

In "American Gynocriticism", an article that analyzes the situation of the American female writer, Showalter has developed the concept of gynocriticism. The term refers to the study of female writers and their significance in literary history, and it studies the representation of female characters by both male and female writers.

> American gynocriticism has moved away from the romantic feminism that calls for the coming of Melville's sister to a more complex engagement with the symbolic, linguistic, and professional aspects of American women's literature. Writers from Fuller to Alice Walker and Ursula K. Le Guin have envisaged the American Eve, torn between the

> Edenic mother's garden, the sanctuary of women's culture, and the authoritarian father's library, the sanctuary of patriarchal learning and art (Showoalter, “American Gynocriticism” 115)

Showalter observes that American gynocriticism has moved beyond the initial phase of "romantic feminism," which simply called for female equivalents of great male writers (like "Melville's sister"). Instead, it now engages with more complex aspects of women's literature, including symbolic, linguistic, and professional elements. She then presents a metaphor used by many women writers, from Margaret Fuller to Alice Walker and Ursula K. Le Guin. This metaphor depicts the American female writer (the "American Eve") as torn between two symbolic spaces: The "mother's garden", representing women's culture, a nurturing and safe space. And the other space is the "father's library", symbolizing patriarchal learning and art, associated with authority and tradition. Showalter extends:

> As Le Guin suggests in her parable of Adam and Eve, "She Unnames Them," women's writing should be rule breaking, playful, sensuous, anarchic; women should remake language and write in the Mother Tongue. Yet if women choose a literary career, they cannot afford to renounce tradition, the formal resources of language, the rules of the marketplace, the test of aesthetic standards. The metaphors of the matriarchal tra- dition, which were necessary to inspire scholars and critics working against the critical tide, can now be (Showalter, “American Gynocriticism” 115).

Showalter references Le Guin's parable "She Unnames Them," which suggests that women's writing should be rebellious, playful, and free from patriarchal constraints. This idea aligns with the concept of writing in the "Mother Tongue," implying a distinctly feminine form of expression. However, Showalter points out a tension: while there's a call for women's writing to be revolutionary and reject patriarchal norms, women who choose literary careers can't entirely abandon tradition, formal language, market considerations, or aesthetic standards. This highlights the complex negotiation female writers must navigate between innovation and tradition. The tension between revolution and tradition mirrors broader feminist debates about

engagement with patriarchal systems. Should women work entirely outside these systems or attempt to change them from within? In the literary world, this translates to whether women should create entirely new forms of expression or work to expand and redefine existing ones. Showalter acknowledged that writers do not develop in a vacuum but within a complex web of cultural, economic, and artistic factors.

More importantly, in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), she reviewed and gave recognition to many female writers, and she has revived a female literary tradition by studying and reinterpreting some female literary works. While studying female literary works, Showalter has explored three phases of women's writing. The first one she called the 'Feminine' phase in which women adhered to men's style of writing. Women's themes did not carry topics about women's rights, and they did not voice out feminist writings. They did not resist their subjugation; instead, they would publish their works under pseudonyms. Afterward came the 'feminist' phase; women started to revolt against sexist social norms and speak up about their oppression and the struggles of female writers. Moreover, in the 'female' phase, which is the last one, women writers have out passed the need to prove their legitimacy as writers. Instead, they were focused on writing and expressing themselves. The phases are not rigid categories but overlap in time (13). From publishing works with safe topics and under male pseudonyms to expressing themselves freely, the female writer indeed traveled a journey to discover her identity as a writer separate from male subjugation.

In the same book, Showalter responded to John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Women" and more specifically to this quote, she cited: "If women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would have had a literature of their own. As it is, they have not created one, because they found a highly advanced literature already created." (Qtd. in Showalter 3). He is implying that female writers are imitators of male writings. Women have written a canon of literary texts, and they have established an important

place in literary history like Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, and Sylvia Plath to mention a few. Showalter studied the development of the works of British women novelists from the 1800s onward to show the literary tradition that women have already accomplished, and she confirms that the 19th century is the century of female novelists (Showalter 3). Indeed, they lacked a sense of an ongoing female literary tradition, as opposed to male literature. However, to say female literature is an imitation is farfetched since their writings express female experiences and topics from the perspective of a female writer. The inconsistency of a female literary tradition comes from the constraints women writers face when they want to pursue writing as a profession.

As opposed to men who were lavished with encouragement, recognition, and opportunities when it came to writing, women faced many struggles as writers. In her essay "A Room of One's Own" (1929), Woolf argues that there are not a lot of female writers recognized, and the female tradition in literature is lacking because many women writers are constrained away from writing. Women's education and the pursuit of a career as a writer are not encouraged (4). Any other career is not encouraged because that would divert her from the traditional stay-at-home mother role. Her argument was that women writers can be as talented as men are, but they are constrained from reaching their full potential.

She supported her argument by imagining a fictional sister to Shakespeare named 'Judith'. In a conformist and traditional society similar to the 16th century, Shakespeare would be encouraged to study and write; on the other hand, his sister, Judith, is prohibited from her basic right to have an education. Judith is as talented as Shakespeare or even better than her brother, but because she never has been encouraged to study, she will think that her thoughts are not worthy of any documentation. She will not write, instead, she will submerge herself in the standards of society ("A Room of One's Own) 39). Woolf's analogy aims to show why there are not a lot of women writers; it is because women are faced with many obstacles that prohibit them from the ambition of thinking about writing. Women are not given any

opportunities not even to entertain the idea of writing; instead, they are faced with a lot of criticism and judgments. According to Woolf, Women's emancipation and her career as a writer depends on her financial freedom ("A Room of One's Own" 41).

Financial freedom is a crucial step towards emancipation and building a career as a writer. Woolf writes, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." ("A Room of One's own" 4). Woolf explains that women's autonomy depends on their financial freedom. Women are made to believe that marriage is the only savior and destiny in their lives and that is how they will make a living. Through different generations and centuries, it has been the tradition for men to be the providers, and women have been taught that they cannot work like men and provide for themselves, and that is what kept them captive, controllable, and constrained.

Women writers face a lot of obstacles. They are either uneducated, so they never know their potential and talent in writing, or they are educated and write well but face a lot of restrictions in society and refrain from publishing their work, so they live in isolation. Furthermore, the women who publish their work publish it under a male pseudonym to hide their identity. They hide behind a male pseudonym to get recognition and not be dismissed because they are female writers. As a result, not many female writers are known, and the female literary tradition lacks a sense of an ongoing tradition.

The challenges faced by women writers throughout history, from lack of education to societal restrictions and the need to hide behind male pseudonyms, contributed to a fragmented and often hidden female literary tradition. This suppression of women's voices and creative expression was symptomatic of broader societal constraints on women's roles and identities. As we move into the mid-20th century, we see how these long-standing limitations on women's autonomy and self-expression culminated in a period of intense gender role rigidity, particularly

in the 1950s. This era, while outwardly portraying an image of domestic bliss, was in fact laying the groundwork for a powerful feminist response. The disconnect between women's lived experiences and societal expectations became increasingly apparent, setting the stage for influential feminist thinkers like Betty Friedan to articulate and challenge the pervasive "feminine mystique."

2.3.The Myth of "The Feminine Mystique" and the Existential Crisis of Women

At the heart of Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism was a profound conflict between the rigid gender roles and societal expectations imposed on women, and the fundamental human need for self-determination and authenticity. This tension is encapsulated in the phenomenon Beauvoir's contemporary Betty Friedan termed the "feminine mystique" the cultural myth of the perfect, happy homemaker that trapped women in predefined domestic identities.

In her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan describes women's dissatisfaction with their lives that have been defined by society's images of the perfect woman. Society has depicted the feminine as what aspires to be a diligent wife who takes care of her husband and children's needs; her cares of the day revolve around housekeeping and childcare. She described "the feminine mystique" as the woman whose fulfillment in life depends on being a wife and a mother taking care of others. She explained that a lot of women like that are actually dissatisfied with their lives and feel a huge emptiness. Moreover, they would feel ashamed to express their dissatisfaction because it means that there is something wrong with them since all women are happy with their mundane lives. For a long time, it has been a problem with no name for women (Friedan 14). The feminine mystique, by prescribing predetermined roles and limiting the scope of women's possibilities, stands in direct opposition to the existentialist principles of self-creation and the rejection of fixed essences. Just as existentialist philosophers argued that

individuals must forge their own meaning in life, women too must wrestle with questions of identity and purpose beyond the confines of societal expectations. Understanding the meaning of one's existence is not a question exclusive to men; existential angst is a universal human experience.

Many feminists argue that society often traps women in the domestic sphere by constructing their identity and limiting them to the roles of a wife and mother. While there is nothing inherently wrong with these roles, the problem arises when women cannot imagine themselves outside the home. They become stuck in predefined identities because they were brought up learning that only these roles define femininity, and any manifestation of their identity outside these particular roles is deemed unwomanly. For generations, women were taught to act a certain way and live a certain lifestyle, leaving no room for them to act and live according to their own desires. Housewives were always portrayed as happy homemakers, so if a woman felt dissatisfied or unfulfilled, she would only think that there was something wrong with her, not her situation

Friedan called this situation ‘The problem that has no name’. She argues that the concept of the feminine mystique allows, and even promotes, women to disregard the question of their own identity. It suggests that women can define themselves solely through their relationships with others, answering the question "Who am I?" with responses like "Tom's wife" or "Mary's mother. (Friedan 64). Women grew up needing a new image to understand their identity. However, the problem is they often do not know what they want to become. All they know is they do not want to become like their mothers because they see the dissatisfaction and unhappiness their mothers have lived. Even though they do not want to grow up to be like their unhappy mothers, they persist in going the same route in life because that is all they know (Friedan 12).

Women's primary project is often seen as motherhood; however, when that role ends as children become independent, women face another life crisis. Therefore, many women find themselves dissatisfied with their lives, especially when their children are all adults and no longer need them. Moreover, society has always taught women to fear growing old because their self-worth supposedly diminishes as soon as they hit their thirties. Their goals and dreams in life are so centered on devoting themselves to other people that they forget to self-identify and cannot imagine themselves outside of the mundane life society has drawn for them

Moreover, the historical marginalization of women's voices within philosophical discourse has profoundly shaped their engagement with these existential questions. Raised on a steady diet of Disney princess narratives and Barbie dolls that valorize youth, beauty, and feminine passivity, generations of girls have been indoctrinated with the notion that their primary purpose is to find a husband and become a devoted wife and mother. Little girls always face many influences shaping their vision of their future as young adults; however, these visions rarely show what life is like as mature women of forty years and older. Growing up, young girls have always imagined themselves as young adults getting married and having children. The stage where their children are all grown up and no longer need their parents is always a blur for women. The woman has always imagined herself as taking care of someone and never seen herself with her own identity detached from any other person. The "happily ever after" ending of these stories leaves no room for the messy, complex realities of adult womanhood, where the role of caretaker no longer neatly defines one's identity.

Disney stories and movies designated for little girls are proof of feeding women the image of submissiveness from a young age. The princesses of all Disney stories are submissive, helpless, and always waiting for a prince charming to save them, and they are all young adults if not teenagers. Whether they are trapped in a huge tower, or they are in a long sleep or mistreated by their stepmother or an evil witch, the protagonists are happy, relieved, and all

their problems solved with the coming of a strong and charming man. This shows the binary of men and women where the man is strong and courageous, and he is a necessity for the happiness of the woman. On the other hand, what makes the woman feminine is her weakness and desperation for a man to save her because her happiness depends on him. The happily ever ending is always marriage and children. What happens after the wedding scene is never an interesting part to be included in a story.

Such stories never show women in their forties accomplishing other dreams. The happily ever after ends when the woman is young so the image that remains with the child is the youthfulness of the protagonist as if she would never get older. Women are encouraged to look pretty and doll-like to satisfy a man and be good enough to get married. The princess with her prince charming get married and have many children and that is how they live happily ever after. We never see her pursuing something else other than marriage, like her education or a job. The princess always takes on the role of a young beautiful innocent lady and we never see her getting older. An elderly woman is always portrayed as an evil character whether a stepmother or a witch.

However, it is important to note that these narratives have evolved over time, reflecting changing societal attitudes. Early princesses like Snow White (1937) and Cinderella (1950) were indeed passive and awaiting rescue (Reilly 53). However, later princesses show more agency. Ariel in 'The Little Mermaid' (1989) actively pursues her dreams, though still ultimately for love. Belle in 'Beauty and the Beast' (1991) is bookish and independent. More recent princesses like Mulan (1998) save others rather than being saved, while Merida in 'Brave' (2012) actively rejects marriage altogether. Moana (2016) has no love interest at all, focusing instead on her role as a leader (Reilly 53). This evolution reflects changing societal expectations, though the emphasis on youth and beauty largely remains.

Women are often brainwashed by society's standards at a young age and trying to live up to those standards diverts them from self-identification. Their persistence in being pretty and young makes them neglect the pursuit to understand themselves, their identities, and their essence. It diminishes their confidence because their self-worth depends on whether she is doing a good job satisfying a man or not. If she gets older, she becomes worthless. These are the subliminal messages Disney movies, Barbie dolls, and any other products directed to children teach young girls. Media outlets sell us the myth of the feminine mystique.

While aspects of the feminine mystique persist in contemporary society, there have been significant changes. Women today have more career opportunities and societal support for pursuing goals outside of marriage and motherhood. However, women still face pressure to 'have it all' - balancing successful careers with perfect home lives. Social media has added new dimensions to the mystique, with social media influencers often presenting idealized versions of motherhood and domesticity. The 'Instagram mom' phenomenon, for instance, creates new pressures for women to maintain picture-perfect homes and families, while also pursuing personal fulfillment. Thus, while the specific manifestations have evolved, the underlying tensions Friedan identified between societal expectations and personal fulfillment remain relevant.

The feminine mystique, by prescribing predetermined roles and identities for women, fundamentally conflicts with existentialist principles of self-definition and authenticity. Just as existentialist philosophers argue that individuals must create their own meaning in life, women too must grapple with questions of identity and purpose beyond societal expectations. Understanding the meaning of life is not a question exclusive to men; existential questions are not gender-specific. As much as men sometimes feel lost in understanding their true essence, women equally face existential questions. However, the historical exclusion of women from philosophical discourse has impacted their engagement with these existential questions. By

recognizing and challenging the feminine mystique, women can begin to engage more fully with the existential task of self-definition, free from predetermined societal roles.

2.4. Existential Feminism: Bridging Existentialism with Feminism

The term existential feminism came to prominence with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949. Beauvoir is a French philosopher who was heavily influenced by her life partner's philosophy Jean-Paul Sartre, known as Sartrean existentialism. Her book is based on existential-phenomenological analysis that studies the issues that subordinate women to men and designate them as the Other. Beauvoir presents the different levels women have been regarded as the Other throughout history. She studies biological, psychoanalysis, and historical perspectives and women's 'lived experiences' that can hold the reasons behind the inferiority of women.

Beauvoir studies biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism to understand the source of the subordination of women. Indeed, women and men are different in these three disciplines; however, being different does not justify inferiority. Looking at history, she traces unjustifiable subordination supported by myths incarnated as facts and passed down through different generations. The main myth that should be debunked is what Beauvoir calls the "eternal feminine" (De Beauvoir 13). Women do not come in an immutable mold where all women are the same, and they all bear an eternal feminine essence. It is but a myth created by men to satisfy men. Just like men, women are human and it is in their nature to express, experience, feel, and live differently because each woman holds a unique essence.

At the core of Sartre's existentialism was the idea that "existence precedes essence" - the notion that human beings have no pre-determined nature or "essence", but rather create their own meaning and identity through the choices and actions they take. Beauvoir fully embraced this view, rejecting the idea of a fixed "feminine nature" that consigned women to subordinate

roles. Beauvoir saw the "myth of the eternal feminine" - the pervasive cultural narrative that women have an immutable, passive essence as a primary means of women's oppression. Drawing on Sartre's concept of "bad faith," she argued that women were socialized to internalize this myth and deny their own capacity for freedom and self-creation.

In Sartrean terms, "bad faith" refers to the human tendency to evade responsibility for our choices by convincing ourselves that we have no control over our circumstances. Beauvoir contended that women were encouraged to adopt a stance of "bad faith" by embracing the passive, immanent role assigned to them by patriarchal society. Beauvoir's solution, inspired by Sartre, was for women to resist this "immanence" and instead assert their capacity for "transcendence", the ability to freely shape their own lives and projects (De Beauvoir 725).

Just as Sartre saw authentic human existence as a constant striving towards self-actualization, Beauvoir believed that women's liberation required them to reject the limitations imposed by the "eternal feminine" and embrace their existential freedom. This Sartrean emphasis on radical freedom and self-creation was central to Beauvoir's feminist analysis. She urged women to take responsibility for their own lives, to refuse to be defined by their biology or social conditioning, and to participate fully in the world as autonomous, transcendent subjects.

While Beauvoir's approach was firmly rooted in Sartrean existentialism, she did not ignore the material, historical, and economic factors that shaped women's oppression. Unlike some other existentialist thinkers, Beauvoir recognized the need to integrate an understanding of objective, structural forces with her focus on subjective, experiential dimensions of gender inequality. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir expresses several times the word “woman” as a term that has been socially constructed. According to her, the term in the eyes of society is a weak and a secondary creature. De Beauvoir explains, “One is not born, but rather becomes,

woman." (Simone 283). A woman is not born weak nor inferior; she becomes that because of her upbringing. The influence one gets from seeing their mother, sisters, and other women in their environment seeking and living the same lives teaches them to seek the same things and live the same way. Society constructed the myth of the eternal feminine and ascribed it to be the essence of women to justify their inferiority. "No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine." (De Beauvoir, 283). She refers to femininity as the construction of society. This is because women are brainwashed from a young age to become that 'woman'. Young girls and women, in general, are faced with a lot of influence from a phallocentric and conformist culture. Women have been predefined by society with stereotypes before they had the chance to define themselves. The phrase "like a girl" used as an insult to describe someone's action as weak is a great example of stereotypes. To say to someone they run, play, or hit a ball like a girl reinforces the idea that girls are not athletic nor strong enough for any physical activities. From a young age, women have been taught that doing anything like a girl is weak.

Beauvoir argues, "She [the woman] is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other." (23). The concept of Other is often seen in (post)colonialism where there are historical dates of the start of the oppressed and oppressor relation. Women's oppression, on the other hand, does not have a specific period in time that marks its start. They have always been cast and defined as the Other, the subordinate, and the inessential. The male has always defined himself as the essential; he held the power of representation; therefore, women have internalized the concept of being the second because it was men who did the defining.

Beauvoir elaborates on the advantages that enabled the man to dominate the woman with two points. The first one is that women are generally physically weaker than men. The physical differences are not a definitive obstacle that makes them inferior. Women are the bearers of children, so they are cast as the weaker link in society. For Beauvoir, the woman's body is but a situation "a given which takes on meaning only in relation to an individual and social context". (McCall 211). Society and traditions bound women as inferior, and constrain their identity due to their maternal functions. In other words, society depicts being a woman as having the inevitable destiny of being inferior due to biological factors, when in fact being a woman is just a situation that can take on any meaning the woman wants to make of herself. Beauvoir's standpoint holds the same principle as Sartrean existentialism. There is no already made meaning, it is our actions that shape the meanings of everything; hence, existence precedes essence. They are not born inferior and submissive, but they become that because of the standards that society imposes on women. Having children is in no way an obstacle or a weakness.

Beauvoir contends that: "No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (De Beauvoir 283). This quote by Beauvoir is in parallel to Sartre's philosophy. The premise of his philosophy, as we have explained in the first chapter, is that the human race is born first, and then takes on meaning during his lifetime. Civilization and culture as a whole shape our understandings and impose ideologies, concepts, and ways of life that a person acknowledges and accepts without thinking about it. As a human race, we grow up with certain standards and understandings of life, and we hardly question any of them. If all they know is to be oppressed and inferior, women will understand that that is normal. Beauvoir elaborated that women

collaborate with men to make themselves inferior. Women offer themselves as objects and in doing that they are exercising free will.

The constant blind pursuit to be an ideal woman and disregarding their desires to experience, discover, and understand what they want is what we call in existentialist terms bad faith or mauvaise foi in French. Women suffer from bad faith because the concept of the ideal woman, or what Friedan calls the feminine mystique or what De Beauvoir calls eternal feminine or Woolf's the angel in the house has been carved into women's brains and carried throughout generations. Many women live in dissatisfaction with their lives, but they still live up to being the ideal by their own free will. Women are often pressured by society's expectations of marrying, having children at a certain age, and carrying the role of a perfect, selfless woman who looks after her family. Because women are pressured, they view these life events as achievements. Not attaining one of these achievements can take away from her womanhood, or the essence of being a woman. These ideas are carved into women's brains from a young age, as a result, they live a bad faith because they are so distracted to know they have other options in life, and their worth does not rely on society's standards.

Great existentialist philosophers have analyzed and discussed the human condition from the perspective of men only, when in fact women share that human condition and they should be part of their discussions with peculiarities specific to the women's experience. Beauvoir's second major work is *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) in which she discusses ethics from the perspective of existentialist philosophy. Ethical systems are grounded on abstract principles of morality which dictate what is right and good, and what is not. From an existentialists' perspective, principles are something acquired through the course of one's life. De Beauvoir argued that abstract ethical principles should not govern people's choices and lives; instead, she stressed that human freedom should be the basis of all morality. People are free to decide and make choices on their moral decisions.

Beauvoir's existential feminism shared some common ground with other feminist approaches. Like Marxist and liberal feminists, she was committed to expanding women's political, economic, and social rights. And her emphasis on individual authenticity and self-actualization complemented the liberal feminist focus on individual autonomy.

Beauvoir's existential feminism differed from Marxist feminism in its emphasis on the individual's subjective experience and "lived reality" rather than class-based oppression. Marxist feminists saw gender inequality as rooted in capitalist economic structures, while Beauvoir focused more on the psychological and cultural forces that shaped women's consciousness and self-perception. Beauvoir argued that women's oppression was not solely economic, but also stemmed from society's perpetuation of the myth of the "eternal feminine" the idea that women have a fixed, essential nature. She saw this as a form of "immanence" that denied women's capacity for transcendence and freedom. In contrast, Marxist feminists tended to view women's liberation through the lens of class struggle and revolutionary politics.

Her existential approach also diverged from liberal feminism, which tended to focus more on achieving legal and political equality for women within existing social and economic structures. Liberal feminists emphasized individual rights, equal opportunity, and integration into male-dominated institutions. Beauvoir, on the other hand, was more concerned with dismantling the deeper cultural and psychological barriers that prevented women from experiencing authentic freedom and self-determination. She saw women's oppression as fundamentally a crisis of subjectivity, rooted in the way women were socialized to view themselves as "the Other" in relation to men. Her vision of women's liberation required a radical transformation of consciousness and the overturning of patriarchal norms and values.

She recognized the importance of both subjective and material factors in women's oppression. Her analysis integrated an understanding of the economic, political, and cultural

forces that shaped women's lived experiences. In this sense, her existential feminism could be seen as a bridge between different feminist schools of thought.

To conclude, Beauvoir's claims can be summarized into two main arguments. Firstly, she claims that women have long lived in patriarchal societies, so they were always defined as man's secondary and Other. A woman is inessential to the essential, passive, submissive. The binaries that define men and women resulted in patriarchal mystifications of the essence of womanhood or as she called it the "eternal feminine", when in fact there is no such thing. Every individual has their own essence and is self-defined. There is no common essence or an eternal feminine that defines her identity. The mystifications that constrain women by assigning them specific roles discourage them from pursuing their own essence.

Secondly, women are not born but become "women". They have been formed and shaped by society to act and be a certain way. They are constrained to specific roles, and then they justify their oppression on the nature of women or the essence which de Beauvoir calls 'eternal feminine'. Women are not born with an "eternal feminine" that makes them who they are. Instead, women go through lived experiences that shape their identity into a submissive Other.

Conclusion

The journey of feminism and women's struggle for equality has been long and multifaceted. From the early advocates for women's education to the waves of feminist movements, women have continuously fought against societal constraints and for their rights. Women's identity and potential have been limited by societal expectations, gender roles, and media portrayals. Beauvoir's existential feminism represented an attempt to synthesize Sartre's philosophical insights with a more holistic, interdisciplinary analysis of women's condition. Her

work stands as a powerful example of how existentialist ideas could be creatively applied to the project of women's liberation.

Feminist thinkers and writers like Virginia Woolf, Betty Friedan, Elaine Showalter, and Simone de Beauvoir have played crucial roles in identifying and articulating the challenges women face. They've exposed the constraints on women's writing, the dissatisfaction stemming from limited societal roles, and the philosophical underpinnings of women's perceived inferiority. Importantly, women's subordinate position is not a result of inherent inferiority, but rather a product of societal constructs and conditioning. As de Beauvoir famously argued, one is not born a woman, but becomes one through societal shaping.

By recognizing and challenging the feminine mystique, women can begin to engage more fully with the existential task of self-creation. This is not to disparage the important roles of wife and mother, but to ensure that women have the freedom to choose these paths, rather than have them thrust upon them as the sole definition of feminine identity. An existential feminism, grounded in Beauvoir's insights, offers the possibility for women to break free from the restrictive gender norms that have long shaped - and limited - their lived experiences.

The ongoing struggle for women's equality underscores the need for continued efforts to challenge societal norms, redefine women's roles, and create spaces for women to express themselves freely and fully. It is through understanding and addressing these deep-rooted issues that true equality can be achieved, allowing women to define their own identities and destinies beyond the constraints of societal expectations.

Chapter Three: Echoes of Silence: Postwar American Culture and Mental Health in 1950s Literature

Introduction

Existentialism gained prominence in America during a time when tradition held paramount importance. The 1950s, often referred to as the "Eisenhower Era," was characterized by a strong emphasis on conformity and social cohesion. In this context, conformism was not viewed negatively; rather, adhering to society's ideals was considered the norm. Blending in with the crowd was seen as a means to secure normalcy and stability in a world still recovering from the upheavals of World War II and grappling with the tensions of the Cold War.

This pervasive desire for conformity extended to discussions of mental health, rendering the representation of mental illness in 1950s American literature a taboo subject. Authors who dared to explore themes of psychological distress often did so through veiled metaphors or by setting their stories in unconventional contexts, as direct portrayals of mental illness were seen as a challenge to the era's facade of social harmony and personal well-being.

Interestingly, this period also saw the nascent stirrings of postmodernism in art, which would gain full force in the following decades. Postmodernism, with its rejection of grand narratives and embrace of fragmentation, ambiguity, and skepticism towards established structures, stood in stark contrast to the conformist ideals of the 1950s. In literature and visual arts, postmodern techniques such as non-linear narratives, unreliable narrators, and the blurring of boundaries between high and low culture began to emerge. These artistic innovations reflected a growing undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the rigid social norms of the time and foreshadowed the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. The tension between the conformist surface of 1950s society and the subversive undercurrents of existentialism and early postmodernism created a rich, complex cultural landscape that would profoundly influence American art and literature for decades to come.

This chapter discusses the social and cultural context and the representation of mental health of the mid-20th century American novel. It examines how the post-war era's emphasis on conformity and the American Dream influenced literary depictions of psychological struggles, and how the postmodern era changed the American literary style. The chapter also explores how authors of this period navigated the taboo surrounding mental illness, often using subtle narrative techniques to address these sensitive themes while avoiding direct societal confrontation.

3.1.Angst in The Postwar American Society

The 20th century was marked by a pervasive sense of despair among Western people, stemming from a complex interplay of historical events, scientific advancements, psychological discoveries, and philosophical shifts. This existential angst was fueled by devastating world wars, the looming threat of nuclear annihilation, and the erosion of traditional social structures and belief systems. The rise of existentialist philosophy, coupled with Freudian psychoanalysis and the growing awareness of humanity's cosmic insignificance, further contributed to a widespread feeling of alienation and meaninglessness in modern society.

Historical events played a crucial role in fostering this despair. The 20th century witnessed a series of cataclysmic occurrences that shook the foundations of Western society. World War I, often called the "war to end all wars," devastated Europe and shattered the illusion of progress. This was followed by the Great Depression, which brought economic hardship and uncertainty to millions. Ideological conflicts, the decline of Western influence in Asia, and the Spanish Civil War further eroded confidence in established systems. World War II, with its unprecedented scale of destruction and human suffering, dealt another severe blow to Western optimism. The unstable peace that followed, marked by the Cold War and nuclear tensions, only prolonged the sense of insecurity and dread.

Paradoxically, scientific discoveries, while expanding human knowledge and capabilities, also contributed to this despair. As our understanding of the universe grew, so did our awareness of its vastness and our own insignificance within it. The development of powerful technologies, particularly weapons of mass destruction, burdened humanity with an enormous responsibility and the potential for self-annihilation. This juxtaposition of expanded knowledge and increased existential risk created a profound sense of unease (Hardré, 535). Advances in psychology further complicated the Western psyche. These discoveries challenged conventional notions of normalcy and abnormality, delving into the depths of human consciousness and subconsciousness. By revealing the complexities and potential pathologies of the human mind, these insights weaken man's faith in himself and his rational capabilities. While illuminating, the exploration of the human psyche also exposed vulnerabilities and uncertainties that were previously unacknowledged (Hardré 535).

Philosophically, this era focused on the individual and the lived experience. Phenomenology, a key movement during this time, studied consciousness and direct experience. Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger were influential figures in this field. Existentialism, another prominent philosophy, further emphasized individual existence, freedom, and choice. Additionally, Feminist Philosophy emerged to examine gender's role in philosophical discourse and society. It can be viewed through the lens of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century French philosopher and a pioneer existentialist philosopher, who says: “all our pleasures are but vanity, our evils infinite, and lastly that death, which threatens us every moment, must infallibly and within a few years place us in the dread alternative of being forever either annihilated or wretched” (Pascal, 13). According to the quote, worldly pleasures are vain and not important because we as humans are met with death. He extends: “All things arise from nothing, and tend towards the infinite. Who can follow their marvelous course? The author of these wonders can understand them, and none but he.” (Pascal, 21) Pascal wrote to encourage

readers to follow Christianity by showing how vain and pessimistic the world is first and then explaining how following God is meaningful since people are guided by values and principles.

Moreover, modern discoveries amplified the sense of human insignificance and internal conflict beyond what Pascal could have imagined. Unlike in Pascal's time, when a relatively stable set of values provided a framework for understanding the world, the 20th century saw these traditional values questioned, challenged, and often ridiculed. This erosion of established belief systems left many feeling adrift in a world without clear moral anchors (Hardré 535). Furthermore, modern thought tended to reduce human motivation to mere instincts, stripping away notions of higher purpose or transcendent meaning. This reductionist view of human nature contributed to a sense of existential emptiness, as people struggled to find significance in a world that seemed increasingly mechanistic and devoid of inherent purpose (Hardré 535).

Existentialism's prominence in America during the mid-20th century reflected a broader cultural transformation. As traditional values were questioned, particularly by the younger generation, existentialist thought offered a means to explore individualism and personal freedom. This philosophical movement not only resonated with the counterculture of the time but also laid the groundwork for ongoing discussions about identity and societal norms in contemporary America. The mid-20th century marked the emergence of a counterculture that challenged mainstream values. Young people and committed writers began to advocate for freedom, change, and self-expression, often in opposition to the conformist ideals of their parents' generation. This counterculture was characterized by a rejection of societal pressures to conform, leading to a greater emphasis on personal identity and authenticity. Existentialism provided a philosophical framework for this shift, encouraging individuals to confront the absurdity of existence and to forge their own paths

Existentialism, primarily associated with European philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, found a unique resonance in the American context. In *Existential America*, George Cotkin, a Professor in U.S. history, argues that existentialist themes have deep roots in American thought, tracing their influence from early American literature to the postwar era when existentialism gained popularity among intellectuals and the youth (Cotkin, 2). The existentialist focus on individual agency and the search for meaning became particularly appealing during a time when many felt disillusioned by traditional authority and societal norms. Existentialism's impact on American literature during the mid-20th century can be seen in the way writers addressed profound questions about existence, identity, and societal norms. Coming-of-age novels gained popularity due to the rise of counterculture and individualism.

The aftermath of World War II brought widespread disillusionment with traditional values and institutions. The existential crisis is vividly portrayed in works like J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* where the protagonists embody feelings of alienation and disillusionment with societal norms, reflecting a broader generational angst and a rejection of conformity

> Whether he knew it or not, all this stuff going on behind the scenes in America, a lot of misinformation the public was not made aware of. Just as the book was published you're moving straight into the McCarthy era and Cold War paranoia. Now it's international terrorism and new imperialism. There's something in the novel that chimes with these times again. Which is where the connection with Eminem probably comes in too. Because *The Catcher in the Rye* has this language of protest that is not being heard (Peter Kuch Qtd in. Eik)

Classic American novels of the 1950s are not typically categorized as existentialist literature, but they express themes of alienation, individualism, and rejection of conformity which align well with existentialist concepts of absurdity, authenticity, and freedom. Ralph The Beat Generation writers are prime examples of anti-conformism. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*,

for instance, showcases the American quest for freedom and self-discovery. Ellison's *Invisible Man* follows the journey of an African American protagonist who experiences existential invisibility due to the era's racist segregation laws. While not explicitly labeled as existentialist, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* also carry existentialist themes, with protagonists struggling with existential crises, quests for freedom, and self-discovery. Among the literature more directly categorized as existentialist are Franz Kafka's works, like *The Metamorphosis,* and the French author Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* (translated to English as *The Stranger*), and Jean Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*. These works collectively demonstrate the pervasive influence of existentialist thought on mid-20th century literature, both in America and abroad. They reflect a cultural moment marked by profound questioning of individual identity, societal norms, and the human condition in the aftermath of World War II and the dawn of the Cold War era.

3.2.The Literary Transition Between Modernism and Postmodernism

Postmodern fiction is viewed as a response to the historical changes of its time. Literary innovations often reflect the reality of the sociocultural context in which they emerge. For the postmodern artist, the focus was to challenge traditional art forms and present a sincere and genuine expression of creativity that reveals individual perspectives. This challenge to tradition manifested in various ways, including the fragmentation of narrative, the blurring of boundaries between high and low culture, and the incorporation of multiple, often contradictory, viewpoints within a single work (Hoffman 14). It embraces a widespread sense of doubt and skepticism towards established truths and grand narratives. Postmodernism emphasizes the subjective nature of knowledge and experience, often rejecting the idea of absolute or universal truths in favor of relative or context-dependent understandings.

Postmodern fiction represents the latest stage in the narrative tradition that began with modernism (or romanticism). When considering art cycles, we can view postmodern aesthetics in three ways: as the start of a new cycle after modernism's end, as the final exhaustion of modernism, or as a new beginning within the modern tradition that combines both exhaustion and renewal. Interestingly, all three perspectives can be valid, depending on the specific text and viewpoint – a characteristic example of postmodern multiple perspectives (Hoffman 59). Postmodern writers, while rebelling against modern artistic ideas, are still influenced by them. They often emphasize form, like their modernist predecessors, but add elements of chaos to structure. The unique ways in which writers combine these elements distinguish them from one another. This blending of modern and postmodern features results in a "double-coding" of texts, creating transitions and overlaps between modernism and postmodernism.

The classification of writers within these movements is complex. Each writer has different ideas about their place in literary history and values their uniqueness. Some writers, like John Barth, even describe their work using both modernist and postmodernist terms. This complexity extends to how we read postmodern texts, as some can be interpreted through both modern and postmodern lenses (Hoffman 59). A prime example of this dual nature is Thomas Pynchon's "Gravity's Rainbow," a cornerstone of literary postmodernism. A "modern" reading of the novel might focus on themes of alienation, the search for identity, and attempts at formal design. In contrast, a "postmodern" interpretation might emphasize the eclectic mix of themes, the dissolution of character, playful approaches to form and composition, and the use of radical irony and comedy. This duality demonstrates how postmodern works often seamlessly blend elements from both modernism and postmodernism, reflecting the complex transition between these literary movements (Hoffman 59)

This philosophical approach views reason and rationality with suspicion, challenging the Enlightenment-era belief in the power of human reason to discern objective truth.

Furthermore, postmodernism is acutely aware of how ideologies function in society, particularly in terms of how they are used to establish and perpetuate structures of political and economic dominance. Postmodernist thinkers argue that knowledge and truth are inherently subjective, shaped by cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. They emphasize the role of power dynamics in shaping what is considered "truth" in any given society. This perspective often leads to a deconstruction of grand narratives and metanarratives that have traditionally been used to explain the world and human experience. As a result, postmodernism tends to embrace pluralism, ambiguity, and the coexistence of multiple, sometimes contradictory, interpretations of reality. The first postmodern novels and rebellious statements emerged in the 1950s, marking the beginning of a new literary and cultural era.

While America stood at the center of these cultural and artistic movements, the theories of deconstruction that accompanied postmodernism's advance were primarily of European origin. This transatlantic exchange of ideas contributed to the rich tapestry of postmodern thought and expression (Hoffman 14). The theories of deconstruction were started by Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher. Deconstruction is a critical approach in philosophy and literary studies that challenges the foundational binary oppositions and hierarchies embedded in Western thought. This method involves a meticulous examination of philosophical and literary texts, scrutinizing their language, structure, and underlying logic to reveal hidden assumptions, contradictions, and instabilities. By doing so, deconstruction aims to expose the limitations of traditional conceptual frameworks and open up new possibilities for interpretation and understanding (“Deconstruction” Britannica).

Postmodern literature also frequently employed metafictional techniques, drawing attention to its own artifice and questioning the relationship between fiction and reality. Moreover, postmodern writers often engaged with and critiqued grand narratives and established power structures, reflecting the growing skepticism towards authority and universal

truths in the post-war era. By doing so, postmodern fiction not only mirrored the complexities and uncertainties of its time but also actively participated in shaping cultural discourse and understanding.

> Postmodernism is not only a national phenomenon. Since it is not just a fashionable cult but a far-reaching reordering and revaluation not only of art, music and literature, but of the very notions of what culture and civilization are, should be and can be, it spreads across the western civilizations, though of course in different ways and degrees (Hoffman 14).

Postmodern art emerges from and reflects the new postmodern mindset, but it also has its own artistic logic. It rebels against modernism's strict artistic rules, creating new experiences, awareness, and intellectual approaches. Most importantly, it opens up playful creative possibilities free from the constraints of existential alienation and the overly serious focus on consciousness that limited innovation after modernism peaked. At the same time, postmodern art's radical experiments continue modernism's emphasis on form, even when challenging it through anti-form experiments. This shows both continuity and change between the two movements (Hoffman 14). Art is influenced by both general cultural trends and its own artistic traditions. This puts artistic concepts and practices in a middle ground between these two influences. As a result, postmodern fiction, while emerging from the spirit of the 1960s, isn't just a reflection of that decade's specific characteristics or postmodernist beliefs. While it does reflect its time, it also criticizes and challenges it, fulfilling art's long-standing role of highlighting a society's shortcomings (Hoffman14).

Postmodern fiction highlights the complexity and instability of fictional worlds and narrative functions. To understand this, we must examine what makes postmodern fiction unique. Metafiction is the most distinctive formal practice in postmodern writing (Nicole 31). As Patricia Waugh demonstrates in her *book Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) in which she defines metafiction as: « fictional writing which self-

consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2). This self-reflexive quality of metafiction serves to disrupt the traditional suspension of disbelief, forcing readers to confront the constructed nature of the narrative and, by extension, their own perceptions of reality. By doing so, postmodern fiction challenges conventional notions of authorship, narrative authority, and the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, inviting readers to become active participants in the creation of meaning.

Two influential attempts to establish a 'poetics of postmodernism' in fiction come from Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale. A poetics involves breaking down related texts to identify essential features of a particular group of texts. While postmodern fiction is too diverse to be a genre, it shares certain key features (Waugh 2). Hutcheon's and McHale's approaches are valuable because they highlight distinctive elements of post-war fiction without claiming these elements are unique to this period. What sets postmodern fiction apart is the degree to which these elements are present, rather than their mere existence. Postmodernism doesn't introduce new fictional techniques; instead, it obsessively focuses on certain elements already present in fiction (Waugh 2). Hutcheon's approach emphasizes the concept of "historiographic metafiction," which combines historical events with fictional narratives, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. McHale, on the other hand, focuses on the ontological dominant in postmodern fiction, exploring how these texts question the nature of reality and existence. Both theorists highlight the self-reflexive nature of postmodern fiction, where texts often draw attention to their own fictional status. This self-awareness extends to a broader critique of representation itself, challenging the ability of language and narrative to accurately depict reality. Additionally, postmodern fiction frequently incorporates intertextuality, pastiche, and parody, creating a complex web of references that further complicates the relationship between text, author, and reader.

Initiation stories, like *The Catcher in the Rye* and The Bell Jar, are sandwiched between the two movements. elements of both modern and postmodern approaches to initiation stories coexist, with authors drawing freely from various traditions to create complex, nuanced narratives of growth and transformation.

Initiation stories, which depict a character's transition from one state of being to another (typically bildungsromans), have been a staple of literature throughout history. However, their treatment and significance have evolved significantly with the advent of modernism and postmodernism in literature. While modern and postmodern approaches to initiation stories differ significantly, they also share some common ground. Both movements use initiation stories as vehicles for social critique, though their methods may differ (castle 17) They acknowledge the complexity of human experience, moving away from simplistic narratives of growth. Additionally, both modern and postmodern writers experiment with form and style in their treatment of initiation stories, pushing the boundaries of traditional narrative structures (Castle 25).

This evolution from modern to postmodern treatment of initiation stories reflects broader shifts in philosophy, society, and literature. As writers continued to explore the theme of initiation, they adapted their approaches to reflect changing understandings of identity, reality, and the human experience, creating a rich and diverse body of literature that continues to resonate with readers today.

3.3.Representation of Mental Health and the American Postmodern Novel

In postmodern literature, the representation of mental health often reflects the philosophical tenets of the movement. The fragmented narratives and unreliable narrators common in postmodern works frequently mirror the disjointed experiences of those grappling with mental illness. Additionally, the postmodern skepticism towards grand narratives and objective truth aligns with the subjective nature of mental health experiences, challenging traditional medical and societal views on mental illness.

Writing is often viewed as a therapeutic expression for writers with mental disorders. Autobiographical accounts of depression often describe the experience as "unspeakable," leading to feelings of isolation and intensified suffering and often leading them to publish works using pseudonyms. Those experiencing depression struggle to make sense of their condition, attempting to think their way out of a situation that impairs their ability to think clearly. Once diagnosed, however, the individual's unique experience often becomes overshadowed by medical and cultural discourses, reducing their narrative to a series of symptoms, treatments, and therapies. This medicalization can lead to an internalized identity as a "depressed self," with all aspects of life viewed through the lens of depression (Clark 83).

In response to this grand medical narrative, sufferers may use figurative language and metaphors to reclaim the individuality of their experience. Novels of this genre frequently portray mental illness not as a clear-cut medical condition, but as a complex interplay of personal experience, societal expectations, and power structures (Clark 84). Postmodern authors tend to challenge traditional narratives of mental health, often presenting fragmented or unreliable narrators whose experiences blur the lines between sanity and madness. These works may critique the medical establishment's authority over mental health diagnoses and treatments, instead exploring how perceptions of mental illness are shaped by cultural, social, and political factors. By doing so, postmodern novels offer a nuanced and often ambiguous representation

of mental health, one that resists simple categorization and invites readers to question their own assumptions about normalcy and psychological well-being. Interestingly, profound existential questions often arise in the context of everyday activities and objects, creating an intersection of the poetic and prosaic in depression narratives. This intersection offers an alternative interpretive frame that could inform new approaches in theory and therapeutic practice (Clark 84).

The authors of this text aim to explore these narratives of depression, focusing on aspects often overlooked by current theories and practices. Their approach draws from postmodern thinking on narratives and pathologies of the self, emphasizing subjectivity and meaning-making within the context of cultural archetypes and meta-narratives. By examining figurative language and details of everyday life, they seek to create a space for the voice of the "other" in depression narratives. The authors employ interpretive methods from literary, psychoanalytic, and feminist traditions, each focusing on a different female author's work. Their choice to study women authors stems from personal resonance, an interest in the "ordinary" aspects of illness narratives often played out in domestic spaces, and curiosity about how these authors connect their experiences as women to their depression (Clark 84). In her book *An Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*, Marguerite Sechehaye expressed her situation using figurative language by writing:

> For me, madness was definitely not a condition of illness; I did not believe that I was ill. It was rather a country, opposed to Reality, where reigned an implacable light, blinding, leaving no place for shadow; an immense space without boundary, limitless, flat; a mineral, lunar country, cold as the wastes of the North Pole. In this stretching emptiness, all is unchangeable, immobile, congealed, crystallized. Objects are stage trappings, placed here and there, geometric cubes without meaning. People turn weirdly about, they make gestures, movements without sense; they are phantoms whirling on an infinite plain, crushed by the pitiless electric light. And I - I am lost in it, isolated, cold, stripped purposeless under the light (Qtd in Sass 63).

This vivid picture paints madness not as a medical condition but as an alien reality. The author uses striking imagery of a barren, lunar terrain to evoke the sense of isolation, disorientation, and detachment from reality that characterizes their mental state. The portrayal of people as meaningless phantoms and objects as mere props emphasizes the profound disconnection from normal human experience. The final sentence poignantly captures the author's sense of being lost and purposeless in this harsh, incomprehensible realm.

In feminist literary criticism, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has significantly influenced studies on the representation of women labeled as "mad" in literature. The novel inspired Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. This work argues that women writers subverted the Madonna/whore stereotype by using characters with double identities or alter egos to explore different paths for female characters.

Mental illness has been a recurring theme in literature, offering readers insight into the complex experiences of those living with various psychological conditions. In the realm of memoirs, Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) stands out as a powerful account of the author's time in a psychiatric hospital during the 1960s. Diagnosed with borderline personality disorder at 18, Kaysen spent 18 months at McLean Hospital. Her memoir provides a candid and often darkly humorous look at the mental health treatment of that era, exploring themes of identity, sanity, and societal expectations for young women.

While not primarily focused on mental illness, Stephen Chbosky's coming-of-age novel "The Perks of Being a Wallflower" (1999) touches on several mental health issues. The protagonist, Charlie, grapples with depression and PTSD stemming from childhood trauma. The book also addresses topics like anxiety and substance abuse, painting a nuanced picture of adolescent struggles with mental health. Other notable works have made significant contributions to the portrayal of mental illness in literature. Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" (1962) offers a critique of institutional processes and the concept of "madness"

in society, set against the backdrop of a psychiatric hospital. Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel "The Bell Jar" (1963) provides a raw and honest portrayal of a young woman's descent into depression in 1950s America. Joanne Greenberg's "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden" (1964), written under the pseudonym Hannah Green, details a young woman's three-year battle with schizophrenia based on the author's own experiences.

In more recent years, works like Kay Redfield Jamison's memoir "An Unquiet Mind" (1995) have offered unique perspectives on mental illness. Jamison, a clinical psychologist, describes her personal and professional experiences with bipolar disorder, providing insights from both a patient's and a doctor's viewpoint. Mark Haddon's "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" (2003) presents a distinctive narrative voice, offering readers a glimpse into the mind of a young man thought to be on the autism spectrum. John Green's young adult novel "Turtles All the Way Down" (2017) focuses on a teenage girl living with obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety, providing an intimate look at the thought processes associated with these conditions. These works, among others, have contributed significantly to the broader conversation about mental health in literature. They help to destigmatize mental illness by providing diverse representations of people living with various conditions. By challenging societal norms and medical practices, these narratives give voice to experiences that have historically been marginalized or misunderstood, fostering greater empathy and understanding among readers.

These works present mental illness through varied perspectives, ranging from deeply personal accounts to fictional narratives that provide insights into characters' inner worlds. They often depict the daily struggles, thought patterns, and coping mechanisms of individuals living with mental health conditions, highlighting both the challenges and the humanity of those affected. Many of these texts critique societal norms and medical practices, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about mental illness. They frequently explore themes of

identity, stigma, and the search for understanding and acceptance. By offering nuanced portrayals of mental health experiences, these works contribute to destigmatizing mental illness and fostering empathy among readers

3.4.Literature in Philosophy

Literature has been part of philosophical discussions since the inception of Western philosophy, with works like Plato's dialogues contemplating art or more specifically Socrates' theory of Aesthetics. In ancient Rome, poetry was considered the highest art form. In Plato's dialogues in "The Republic", Socrates argues that an ideal city would not include poets because they do not contribute positively to society (The Republic by Plato 42). To understand the reasoning behind this statement, we need to examine a couple of his theories.

First, the theory of Forms, as mentioned previously, suggests that the world we perceive is but an imitation of the Forms or Eidos. Moreover, reality, according to this theory, consists of three levels: the Forms, physical objects (which are imitations of Forms), and art. The latter is an imitation of physical objects, which are themselves imitations of the Forms; therefore, art does not imitate reality directly but imitates an imitation of reality. Socrates concludes that art is twice removed from the truth because it is an imitation of appearance rather than an imitation of reality itself (The Republic by Plato 114). He states that “we have three arts: one of use, another of invention, a third of imitation; and the user furnishes the rule to the two others.” Each single thing involves three particular acts: to use the thing, to make the thing, and to imitate the thing. The artist only needs to imitate the thing; they do not need to have experienced or lived what they write, compose, or draw. Consequently, they do not possess true knowledge or correct opinions about what they imitate (The Republic by Plato 114).

Second, Socrates' explanation of why art negatively affects people lies in understanding his view on the soul. For Socrates, the soul has three parts: rational, spirited, and appetitive.

The latter two are represented as two horses guided by the chariot rider of reason, or the rational part that should be in control of the other two because it is the superior part. Art, according to Socrates, plays on our emotions and our appetites, strengthening them while weakening reason. By strengthening these inferior parts, art ultimately ruins reason (Ferrari 46).

Sartre contends that “existentialism is humanism”. Humanism believes that there is a core human nature that does not change over time or across cultures and literature is proof of that. The fact that modern readers can relate to characters in ancient stories (like those by Homer or Plutarch) is seen as evidence of this shared human nature. When we compare ancient and modern history, we're not just looking at similar situations because man’s situation is always changing, but at similar human reactions, dreams, and feelings. Because humanists believe in this universal nature, they're not shocked by the darker or more complex aspects of human behavior that might be revealed by naturalists or existentialists (Hardré 536)

The philosophical debate on literature's role and value did not end with Socrates. Throughout history, thinkers continued to grapple with these questions. Aristotle, for instance, challenged Plato's views, arguing for the cathartic and educational value of poetry. However, Plato, like other authors of the time, was indeed attempting to reach and influence a wide readership through his chosen literary approach. The authors of this period developed unique literary techniques and styles to engage readers and convey their ideas effectively. Unlike later concepts of "art for art's sake" or established genres, this literature was primarily aimed at persuasion or instruction. The form and style of each work were tailored to the author's specific purpose. This new literary movement marked a significant shift in how written works were crafted and presented to appeal to a broader audience while serving didactic or persuasive aims (Ferrari 13). As philosophy entered the modern era, the questions surrounding literature took on new dimensions. The rise of existentialism in the 20th century brought fresh perspectives to

the age-old debate about literature's purpose and value. Sartre offered a distinctive view of literature that built upon and challenged earlier perspectives.

In his seminal work *What Is Literature?,* Sartre addresses fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of writing. The philosopher explores the essence of writing, its motivations, and its intended audience, offering a nuanced examination of literary creation and consumption. Central to Sartre's argument is the distinction he draws between prose and poetry, positing that prose serves a utilitarian function and inherently reflects the author's perspective. Sartre argues: “The writer is a speaker; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates. If he does so without effect, he is talking and saying nothing.” (*What Is Literature* 34). In this view, prose becomes a medium through which the author compels readers to perceive reality through their lens.

Conversely, Sartre contends that poetry operates on a different plane, likening it to visual art. He argues that poetry invites individual interpretation, much like a viewer's personal engagement with a painting. This dichotomy leads Sartre to conclude that prose possesses greater revolutionary potential. However, this assertion has been challenged by subsequent literary movements, particularly the Beats and the New York School, which emerged shortly after the publication of Sartre's essay in 1948. Despite potential limitations in his prose-poetry dichotomy, Sartre's work offers valuable insights into the nature of writing. His critique of 'poetic prose', which he sees as obfuscating meaning through excessive ornamentation, echoes similar sentiments expressed by George Orwell in "Politics and the English Language". The essay's concluding remark, characteristic of Sartre's philosophical outlook, provocatively suggests that while the world might survive without literature, it would fare even better without humanity.

While "What Is Literature?" may not be considered Sartre's most essential work, it provides a thought-provoking exploration of literary theory and practice. The essay exemplifies

Sartre's ability to stimulate intellectual discourse, even if some of his assertions invite debate or disagreement. As with much of Sartre's oeuvre, this work offers valuable philosophical insights, though it may be prudent to approach his ideas with a measure of critical distance.

Conclusion

The evolution of literature in the 20th century, particularly in its portrayal of mental illness and individual struggles, reflects the profound societal and philosophical changes of the era. From the existential crises depicted in works like *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar* to the complex narratives of postmodern fiction, literature has served as a mirror to the collective psyche of Western society.

The shift from modernism to postmodernism brought about a radical change in how stories were told and how reality was perceived. Postmodern literature, with its emphasis on fragmentation, multiple perspectives, and the questioning of grand narratives, became a powerful tool for exploring the complexities of mental health and individual experience. This approach allowed for a more nuanced and empathetic portrayal of mental illness, moving away from simplistic medical narratives to explore the intricate interplay between personal experience, societal expectations, and power structures.

The representation of mental health in literature, particularly in autobiographical works and feminist criticism, has played a crucial role in destigmatizing mental illness and giving voice to marginalized experiences. By using metaphor and figurative language, authors have found ways to express the often "unspeakable" nature of mental health struggles, creating a bridge of understanding between the sufferer and the reader. As we reflect on the literary landscape of the 20th century and its treatment of mental health, we see a gradual but significant shift towards more compassionate, complex, and authentic portrayals of psychological

experiences. This evolution in literature not only mirrors societal changes but has also contributed to shaping public perception and discourse around mental health.

The literary exploration of mental illness, from modernist alienation to postmodern complexity, has been instrumental in fostering empathy, challenging stereotypes, and promoting a more nuanced understanding of the human psyche. As literature continues to evolve, it remains a powerful medium for illuminating the diverse spectrum of mental health experiences, encouraging dialogue, and ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and understanding society.The exploration of literature's role in society and its relationship with philosophy has deep historical roots, stretching back to the foundations of Western thought. Literature has been part of philosophical discussions since the inception of Western philosophy, with works like Plato's dialogues contemplating art or more specifically Socrates' theory of Aesthetics. In ancient Rome, poetry was considered the highest art form. In Plato's dialogues in "The Republic", Socrates argues that an ideal city would not include poets because they do not contribute positively to society. To understand the reasoning behind this statement, we need to examine a couple of his theories.

This ancient philosophical backdrop provides an interesting contrast to the evolution of literature in the 20th century, particularly in its portrayal of mental illness and individual struggles. The shift from classical ideals to modern and postmodern perspectives reflects the profound societal and philosophical changes over time.

Chapter Four: Existential Angst in *The Catcher in the Rye*

Introduction

J.D. Salinger is an American author who mostly wrote short stories, but the work that made his name is his only novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Considered an American classic, *The Catcher in the Rye* follows the protagonist and narrator, Holden Caulfield, over about three days after he learns he's being expelled from his third boarding school, Pencey Prep in Pennsylvania. Instead of going home, he leaves school early and spends time in New York City. He stays in a hotel the first night and briefly with his former English teacher, Mr. Antolini, on the second. Throughout these days, Holden interacts with various people, constantly seeking connection and understanding as he grapples with questions about life and his place in the world.

Holden is a seventeen-year-old narrating the events that happened a year ago in a retrospective view. The sixteen-year-old Holden expresses teenage angst, the fear of growing up, and his discontent with the conformist society he is in that he views as a bunch of phonies, except a few people. The following chapter discusses an existentialist perspective and a feminist criticism of the novel. The first section is dedicated to examining Holden's existential angst and analyzing existentialist themes in the novel. Since "existentialism is a humanism", we will not disregard the female characters. The second section discusses *The Catcher in the Rye* through the lens of feminist criticism.

4.1.Teenage Existential Angst and the Fear of Growing up

The Catcher in the Rye is a novel that presents existential angst through the perspective of a teenager, and it portrays his fear of growing up. Within the main theme of existential angst unfolds several themes. During the two days that Holden narrates, the reader is exposed to Holden's tangled thought process that is filled with questions about the human condition of growing up, his discontent with the phony adults, and the desperate need for someone to listen to him and his existential questions. Holden is an opinionated young boy who often sees the world of adults as absurd and phony.

Growing up is part of the human condition. It is a human and natural process to grow old as time passes. Holden laments this process for several reasons. The first reason is social. He sees flaws and phoniness in the adults that surround him, and he is afraid of becoming a phony adult as well. Furthermore, his second reason is existential. His revulsion and strong criticism of the adults is not the only thing that constitutes his fear. The second reason is existential. He fears change. Growing old brings change to everything; and as humans, we fear the unknown because we do not know what kind of change is awaiting us. Holden is an adolescent going through teenage existential angst. Moreover, he is the protagonist and the narrator sharing his journey through the first-person narration technique. He is a troubled youth trying to speak out his inner pains and puzzlements, as well as his thoughts on life and society.

The following section will focus on analyzing the novel through an existentialist lens by discussing the protagonist's reoccurring existential questions and his existential angst with the transition to adulthood. Main existential themes and symbolism will be discussed in an attempt to analyze Holden's existential angst.

4.1.1. "I'd Just Be the Catcher in the Rye and All" : Preservation of Innocence and Rebellion against Social Conformity

Holden's life experiences pushed him to grow up fast and stripped him of his innocence. He experienced the death of his younger brother at a young age, left three schools, and witnessed a suicide incident. He does not want to grow up because he despises social conformity and phoniness. These traumatic events have stripped Holden of his innocence, fueling his desire to protect others from a similar fate. As a sixteen-year-old, his role is to focus on his studies and build a future for himself; however, he keeps quitting different schools, running away, and reminiscing. Holden is an observative person who would like everything to go his way; he is a perfectionist. He does not want to conform to society; instead, he complains about everyone's behavior and calls most people phony. He does not see the point in growing up if it entails becoming part of the adult world that he considers phony.

Holden does not seem to get along with people his age or older. The only person who listens to him and understands him is his ten-year-old sister, Phoebe. He relates to her more because she reminds him of his younger brother Allie, and of childhood innocence. Holden seems to appreciate and praise his younger siblings; however, he refers to his older brother, D.B., as "a prostitute" for being in Hollywood after succeeding in his career as a writer. In an age dominated by motion pictures and the hunger for fame, Holden hates Hollywood and the movies. "If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me." Holden seems to be more attached to sincerity, humbleness, and innocence.

Phoebe reminds him of his younger self because she went to the same primary school, the same museum, and the same places where he used to play as a kid. She is a representation of Holden's lost innocence, and he wants to protect her at all costs and to protect her innocence. He admired her for being young, smart, and a good listener. When he went to her primary school

and saw profanity written on the wall, he tried his best to erase it because he wanted to shield his younger sister from the vulgarity of the adult world; however, he struggled to do so as he found another profanity on the wall. No matter how much one tries to protect an innocent child, the world finds its way to mature everyone.

Holden's iconic dream of being "the catcher in the rye" serves as a central metaphor for his desire to protect childhood innocence. He rebels from school three times and refuses to conform to society and adhere to the adults' world. The only thing that he could think of doing was being a catcher in the rye. Holden's noble cause is to preserve innocence. The loss of Allie troubled him and motivated him to protect Phoebe. When Phoebe asks him what he plans to pursue as a job in the future, he does not have a clear idea other than being a protector of innocence.

> I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around--nobody big, I mean--except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff--I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy." (Ch. 22).

He does not have a dream job; instead, he wants to be a catcher in the rye. His dream is a metaphor that represents Holden's desire to protect children from the fall into adulthood (Bloom 97). He idealizes childhood, he fears adulthood, and he self-appoints himself as a protector of innocence.

The title of the novel is a reference to a poem written by Robert Burns in 1782 entitled "Comin thro' the Rye" (Salinger Ch 22), which is full of sexual connotations. The metaphor adds layers of meaning, with Salinger's alteration from "meet" to "catch" emphasizing

Holden’s protective instincts over potential sexual connotations. Phoebe is aware of the mix up of words and brings it to Holden’s attention (Salinger Ch22). Salinger changed the words of the poem from “if a body meet a body” to “if a body catch a body” to reverse the meaning. The word ‘meet’ has a sexual connotation; meanwhile, the word ‘catch’ implicates saving and protecting a body. Holden imagines himself in a rye full of children, and he is the only adult around. He imagines a cliff nearby, and his job is to save children from falling off it. The cliff is a representation of the adult world, and he wants to shield children from falling into the adult world quickly. The imagery Holden creates represents his willingness to protect innocence and shield children from growing up as fast as he did.

Holden’s confusion between these two words “catch” and “meet” illustrates Holden’s struggle with misunderstandings and misinterpretations of human interactions (Trowbridge 687). "Catching" implies a one-sided, protective action where Holden sees himself as a savior, preventing others from falling into the perceived evils of adulthood. In contrast, "meeting" suggests a mutual, reciprocal interaction between equals. Holden's preference for "catching" reveals his desire to remain in a state of arrested development, clinging to childhood innocence rather than engaging with the complexities of adult relationships. This misunderstanding ultimately highlights Holden's fear of genuine connection and his reluctance to participate fully in the give-and-take of mature human interactions.

His view of the “catcher” is an unrealistically ideal plan. The impossibility of being a catcher is his excuse for being nihilistic (Trowbridge 687). This impossible ideal reflects Holden's inability to come to terms with the inevitability of growth and change. By fixating on this unattainable role, Holden creates a convenient excuse to avoid engaging with the real world. Therefore, Holden's belief in the impossibility of his ideal leads him to view all alternatives as meaningless or "haas." This perspective reinforces his nihilistic worldview. By setting an unachievable goal, he pre-emptively excuses himself from trying and potentially failing at more

realistic endeavors. Holden's ideal provides him with a rationale for his inaction and disconnection from society. It becomes a shield against the responsibility of personal growth and engagement with the adult world.

Holden’s primary dream is to preserve innocence, which is a naïve and unrealistic dream. Having that said, it is noble and pure. He wants to protect all children, including his little sister. The death of his younger brother, Allie, was perceived as a personal failure in protecting him, as he did not pass the age of eleven. Phoebe is just a year younger than when Allie died; therefore, it seems to be a motive for Holden’s extra care and protection. He keeps reminiscing about Allie throughout his journey. His devotion to protecting innocence is his way of coping with the guilt and regret that he did not save Allie, even though his brother died of a natural cause that Holden would not have been able to do anything. Holden's ideal of being "the catcher in the rye" is ultimately unrealistic, serving as a shield against engaging with the complexities of adulthood, an excuse for his nihilistic worldview, and a manifestation of his guilt over failing to "save" his brother Allie.

Holden's conversations with adult figures, such as Mr. Spencer and Mr. Antolini, highlight his struggle with conformity. The first adult Holden talks to in the novel is Mr. Spencer, a history teacher at Pencey Prep School, who wanted to talk to Holden before he went home after he was expelled to counsel him on life. "Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules." (Ch. 02). Holden kept his true thoughts to himself and only agreed to what his teacher said. Moreover, Holden internally rebels: Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right--I'll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game (Ch. 02). This internal monologue reveals Holden's awareness of and frustration with social disparities and his rejection of a system he sees as unfair and biased towards the privileged. He considers society as phony because they would side with the “hot-shots”. He

does not have a sense of belongingness and has the urge to run away and blames society for being unfair and biased toward the wealthy and powerful.

Moreover, the unfairness of society is apparent when Holden describes Mr. Haas, a headmaster in Elkton School, a previous school he was expelled from. According to Holden, “Old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents.”(Ch. 02). Mr. Haas would have lengthy conversations with parents. However, when it comes to parents who do not fit the social standards, he brushes them off with a phony smile “Old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe a half an hour, with somebody else's parents.” (Ch. 02). Holden sees hypocrisy and fake emotions as being phony, and he despises such behaviors. Not everyone has equal chances and opportunities in life. People who fit social standards are privileged; therefore, life is an unfair game based on conformity and social standards (Ohman 28).

Another teacher Holden speaks to is Mr. Antolini. He is Holden’s ex-English teacher at Elkton Hills School, and he provided him with a lot of advice. Antolini's protection of James Castle's body aligns him with Holden's idealized "catcher" figure. He is the only adult who could see through the troubled mind of the protagonist and he felt the need to counsel him.

> You’ll find that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. You're by no means alone on that score, you'll be excited and stimulated to know. Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them--if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry (Ch. 24).

Holden is troubled morally by human behavior and the adult world. Life is full of confusion, enlightenment, and difficulties; and one has to move forward and go through it despite it all. Although Holden feels estranged and isolated in his troubles, in reality, he is not. All his emotions are human emotions that many people go through. Additionally, Mr. Antolini encourages him to pursue his education because no matter what is Holden's dream or his opinion of the people there, he will only make a change in the world when he completes his education. Antolini essentially tells Holden that his current depression is a natural response to recognizing the world's imperfections. He encourages Holden to persist in his pursuit of truth, assuring him that he'll find a way to channel his idealism into constructive action (Trowbridge 688).

Pencey Prep School is a fictional school in a fictional location, Agerstown, Pennsylvania. Agerstown is not a real place; furthermore, the name can be an indication Salinger chose to make to refer to the school as an institution that molds people into conforming to phoniness. Ager is "someone that ages as a person" (Merriam-Webster) and his school is agers' town, where all the adult phonies reside. The schools might be full of hypocrites and phonies, as Holden describes, but that does not defeat the fact that a school is a great place to learn. Pencey Prep School's slogan is "Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men." (Salinger 1). Nevertheless, Holden mocks that slogan since he does not see the boys in school as "clear thinking boys". His rebellion against social conformity is evident in his critique of institutions and adult behavior. His disdain for Pencey Prep School, with its slogan, reflects his broader rejection of societal expectations, and his skepticism towards institutional claims. A school is an institution where one finds the moral support to pursue knowledge and the encouragement to keep searching and questioning. It is not the school, but society as a whole that molds people into a conformed shape of human behavior that Holden despises.

Holden trusted Mr. Antolini because he was his favorite teacher. He is the only person Holden thought of for shelter when he did not know where to spend a night after secretly visiting his sister back home and sneaking out. He is one of the only persons whom he did not think of as phony and had a lot of respect for; however, his perspective of him soon changed in their last encounter. As he was sleeping on the sofa, he suddenly woke up with Mr. Antolini patting his hair. An act that may seem innocent but is perceived as a perverted act by Holden. Conflicted by doubts about his interpretation of Antolini's perceived homosexuality and guilt over rejecting Antolini's kindness, Holden is left in a state of emotional turmoil (Trowbridge 689). He had a creepy feeling and quickly excused himself and left his house immediately. Whether the ex-teacher had perverted motives or not, Holden did not think innocently of him and was disappointed in the adult he respected the most. This is an example of Holden's misunderstanding and misinterpretation of human interactions, and his fear of genuine human connection.

Holden keeps running away when he is faced with an unpleasant situation. He was supposed to go home on a Wednesday but he left his dormitory prior and ran to New York City to run away from his roommate who is dating his crush. He ran away from home and Mr. Antolini's house because he assumed his teacher had bad intentions. Additionally, he wants to run away and live in the woods with Sally. She is a beautiful girl he takes on occasional dates. He asks her to marry him and run away with him; although, he does not seem to be interested in her. She advises him that running away is not a good idea since he does not have a job and that he needs to finish college. Sally is saying finishing college will take him to marvelous places. Nonetheless, he sees no point in going to college because he cannot see marvelous places for his future. Holden would be completely different after college. He would wear suits work in an office and be forced to mingle with other people he considers as phonies. He imagines a completely different lifestyle centered on superficialities and materialistic things, and it does

not interest him. Holden does not want to be restricted by society's formalities and conformities; instead, he wants to run away from city life and society as a whole.

Preservation of innocence is Holden's main virtue, and he does not want to be part of the adult world because he views it as a phony, cruel, and unfair world. He wants to protect all children, including his little sister, because he believes life is an unfair game biased toward the conformists, phonies, and the wealthy. Holden gradually changes his perspective by the end of the novel. When he took Phoebe to play on a carousel, she thought she was old for it. He buys her a ticket and convinces her that she is still young to ride the carousel.

> All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them (Ch 25).

On the ride, there was a golden ring that all the children tried to reach, and they looked like they were about to fall. Holden is obsessed with protecting his sister, but he comes to the realization that kids need their space to learn and grow, and he cannot be a catcher in the rye all the time to catch falling kids. Another part of his rebellion is his angst towards change and the absurdity of existence.

The novel's conclusion hints at Holden's developing maturity. His decision to let Phoebe ride the carousel and "grab for the gold ring" shows a growing understanding that children need freedom to experience life, even with its risks. This realization marks a shift in Holden's perspective, suggesting the beginning of his acceptance of the inevitable process of growing up. Holden Caulfield's journey in *The Catcher in the Rye* is a poignant exploration of the struggle between preserving innocence and facing the realities of adulthood. His desire to be "the catcher in the rye" serves as a powerful metaphor for his internal conflict, while his

rebellion against social conformity reflects his disillusionment with adult society. Ultimately, Holden's gradual acceptance of the inevitability of growth and change suggests a path towards reconciliation with the complexities of the adult world, even as he maintains his critical perspective on societal phoniness and injustice.

4.1.2. "Certain Things They Should Stay the Way They Are": Attachment to the Past and the Absurdity of Existence

Adolescence is a phase of life where the person feels pressured to understand his essence and to find his sense of direction moving forward in one's life. Existential angst is part of existence and is not limited to teenagers; however, angst and questions about existence are more frequent among teenagers. Holden's struggle represents a universal aspect of the adolescent experience. Adolescence is a transitional phase to adulthood, and Holden despises it because he is still reminiscing. He is in a state of rebellion, and he does not want to grow and figure things out like adults. He wants to stay the way he is. Holden often thinks that everything should stay the same. Other than being afraid of becoming a phony adult, he genuinely fears growing old. Since he was a kid, he had the right side of his head full of gray hair, and in one year, he grew six and a half inches.

Holden's physical attributes serve as powerful metaphors for his inner turmoil and alienation from his peers. His prematurely graying hair stands as a striking symbol of his emotional state, suggesting a young man burdened by experiences beyond his years. This physical anomaly mirrors Holden's mental state, marking him as someone who feels fundamentally out of step with the carefree nature of adolescence. Simultaneously, Holden's rapid growth spurt acts as a physical manifestation of the tumultuous nature of adolescence. This sudden change in his body represents the unsettling and often disorienting experience of

maturation, both physical and emotional. The abruptness of this growth parallels Holden's struggle to adapt to the swift changes occurring in his life and psyche.

These physical characteristics, the gray hair and the growth spurt, function as tangible reminders of time's relentless march and the looming specter of adulthood that Holden so fervently resists. They serve as constant, visible markers of his transition from childhood to adulthood, a journey that Holden finds deeply troubling.Moreover, these physical traits embody Holden's existential anxiety. His gray hair, typically associated with wisdom and age, contrasts sharply with his youthful face, creating a visual representation of his internal conflict between innocence and experience. Similarly, his growth spurt symbolizes the inevitable and often uncomfortable process of change that Holden grapples with throughout the novel.

Holden is not excited about the future; instead, he reminisces about the past. He finds absurdity in the human condition, so he questions the absurdity of having gray hair, growing up, and losing innocence. He says: “Certain things they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone. I know that's impossible, but it's too bad anyway. Anyway, I kept thinking about all that while I walked.” (Ch. 16). All the changes that happen to his body, growing taller and having gray hair, are his reality check that change is inevitable, and he cannot possibly stay the same. Holden's fixation on his past, particularly the time before his brother Allie's death, represents what Freud termed "melancholia" – an inability to move past loss (Leader 8). This is exemplified by Holden's admission: "I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen" (Salinger, 1951, Ch. 02), suggesting he is emotionally stuck at the age he was when Allie died. Time stopped for Holden the second he lost his brother, and he is afraid to face a world without him. His childhood reminds him of good times when he used to play with all his siblings. Now, his older brother is in Hollywood, and his younger sister is a preteen who will soon face the world that

he despises so much. Moreover, Holden does not want to grow old because he does not want to face the human condition of growing old and weak.

Mr. Spencer is Holden's history teacher at Pencey Prep School. He is someone he respects, and he happens to be housebound elderly. He paid him a visit when he left the School. Holden portrayed Spencer as an old and weak man in a depressing state. Holden was on the verge of disgust seeing an old man with "pills and medicine all over the place, and everything smelled like Vicks Nose Drops." (Ch. 02) Holden contemplated the reasons behind the contentment and enjoyment of a frail man living in an old age. "I used to think about old Spencer quite a lot, and if you thought about him too much, you wondered what the heck he was still living for. I mean he was all stooped over, and he had very terrible posture" (Ch. 02). He contemplated what would be the meaning and enjoyment of living a long life until becoming frail. "But if you thought about him just enough and not too much, you could figure it out that he wasn't doing too bad for himself." (Ch. 02). Spencer created meaning and enjoyment for himself despite his old age and fragile body. He would invite his students over for a cup of hot chocolate and show them an "old beat-up Navajo blanket" (Ch. 02) that he enjoyed very much. The sincerity in finding joy in simple things like a blanket is what Holden admired. This is in parallel with Sartre's philosophy of creating meaning of life within oneself. Nonetheless, Holden is afraid of old age because it entails finding meaning and purpose in life, which he cannot fathom. Instead, he wants to hold on to his youth and run away.

Nothing about the current world seems to satisfy Holden's ideals as a perfectionist. He wants to preserve innocence and hold time; however, existence constitutes inevitable change, growth, and death. The museum that Phoebe goes to, and he used to go to as a kid represents Holden's ideal world.

> The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times, […] Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you. Not that you'd be so much older or anything. It wouldn't be that, exactly. You'd just be different, that's all. You'd have an overcoat on this time. Or the kid that was your partner in line the last time had got scarlet fever and you'd have a new partner. […] I mean you'd be different in some way--I can't explain what I mean. And even if I could, I'm not sure I'd feel like it. (Ch. 16)

Holden's ideal world is a world where time stops. He tries his best to ignore the human condition of growing old and denies it by trying to explain how a person would not change much over the course of going to a museum a hundred thousand times, which is impossible. It takes many years to go that many times to a museum, and with time passing, it is inevitable to grow old. Holden fears time passing and wants everything to be stable. He fears change and wants to stop time because he is attached to the past. Moreover, when Holden went to the museum looking for his sister to talk to her, he did not go in. The museum is a place where he only went in when he was a kid. He does not want his favorite place's memory to be tarnished by the reality of the present.

The museum is his favorite place because it is not disturbed with time; and going in after years, he fears to see change in the only place that is constantly stable. Another probability for the reason why he did not go in is that he does not want to see everything frozen in time in the museum; meanwhile, he is no longer the same kid that used to go there. Either way, time did not stop and everything is constantly moving and changing and that is inevitable. The museum preserves its exhibits by preventing physical contact. This is exemplified by the guard's warning to children not to touch anything (Salinger Ch16). The abundance of glass cases in the museum serves the same purpose, creating a barrier between the viewer and the object, ensuring that everything remains unchanged. Holden's perspective aligns with this idea of preservation through isolation. He believes that certain aspects of life should remain constant, likening this

desired stasis to objects encased in glass, untouched and unaltered (Takeuchi 165). the untouched museum exhibits symbolize a state of preserved innocence. On the opposite end of the stable imagery of the museum, Holden is worried about the unstable state of the ducks in the novel.

Holden sees absurdity in existence because no satisfying answer would quench his existential angst. He is worried about the ducks in the lagoon that he sees all year round but would disappear in the wintertime. Holden asks multiple cab drivers, that he took when he was roaming around New York, about the ducks in the lagoon and where they would go when the lagoon froze in the wintertime, when he actually knows the answer. In an attempt to describe the museum, he explains to the readers that there is a section for birds. They portray "birds flying south for the winter. […] they all looked like they were really flying south, and if you bent your head down and sort of looked at them upside down, they looked in an even bigger hurry to fly south." (Ch. 16) His constant inquiry about where ducks go in the winter when he explains later that all birds go south indicates his constant denial of change. Some of the ducks grow old and die, and others travel for better weather; the world is not a museum, and it is inevitably changing. He is very much aware of where ducks go, but he is in denial because he wants to freeze time.

His denial stems from his questioning of the absurdity of life and death. He finds life and death absurd because he does not find meaning in changing and dying. Holden gets emotional when talking about the present because he wants everything to stay the same. His constant inquiry about the ducks can be rhetorical to enquire about how ducks would overcome winter and come back to the same place. And just like the ducks, he wants to overcome the wintertime and the difficult phase he is facing and come back to the good old times. However, the reality of existence only moves forward in time.

At the end of the novel, when his older brother asks him about what he narrated, he says he does not know. “If you want to know the truth, I don't know what I think about it. I'm sorry I told so many people about it. About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about.” (Ch. 26). Holden is just an adolescent that wanted to rant about his angst and confusions. This final admission reveals the depth of Holden's uncertainty and emotional vulnerability. His expression of missing the people he talked about hints at a longing for connection, even as he struggles to understand his own feelings and experiences.

4.1.3. “Who Wants Flowers When You're Dead?”: Holden and the Concepts of Death and Suicide

Death is a concept that Holden had to know at a young age with the death of his little brother. As a thirteen-year-old, Holden lost his eleven-year-old brother. His physical age was sixteen during the story, but he was mentally stuck at thirteen, the year that his brother died. “I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen.” (Ch. 02). Holden is a seventeen-year-old when he is narrating the events of his expulsion a year ago during Christmas. He would reminisce about Allie throughout his narration and would share a lot of information about him. “He's dead now. He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946. You'd have liked him. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent.” (Ch. 05). He remembers the exact date because that date represents the separation between the good old days, and the reality of his present and his hardships as a young boy going through a transitional phase to adulthood. Before that date, Holden was worry-free, innocent, and happy. After that date, he became a troubled person because he was shocked with reality, the reality of the inevitability of death.

Holden laments over existential matters like death. He cannot stand the idea that his little brother’s body is lying among the dead in a cemetery. He did not attend his funeral because

he had broken his hand smashing all the windows of his parents' garage when he heard the bad news about his brother. He had to lie in the hospital for several days. After being discharged from the hospital, he went with his parents to visit the grave a couple of times, and then he stopped because he could not stand seeing his brother's grave, especially when it rained.

> It was awful. It rained on his lousy tombstone, and it rained on the grass on his stomach. It rained all over the place. All the visitors that were visiting the cemetery started running like hell over to their cars. That's what nearly drove me crazy. All the visitors could get in their cars and turn on their radios and all and then go someplace nice for dinner--everybody except Allie. I couldn't stand it. I know it's only his body and all that's in the cemetery, and his soul's in Heaven and all that crap, but I couldn't stand it anyway. I just wish he wasn't there. You didn't know him. If you'd known him, you'd know what I mean. It's not too bad when the sun's out, but the sun only comes out when it feels like coming out. (Ch. 20).

Holden grapples with the jarring contrast between the finality of death and the seeming indifference of the living world. When everyone returns to their normal lives and their daily routines, the dead do not stop being dead. Holden is mad because everyone gets to move on except his brother. This highlights the existential absurdity that life continues unabated while individuals cease to exist. Holden's anger stems from his inability to reconcile these two realities.

He does not see the point of visiting a grave and putting flowers when the dead do not need flowers. What they need is compassion, prayers, and sincere thoughts. He finds absurdity in human behavior because everything people do is ceremonial and for show. Holden's disdain for putting flowers on graves reflects a deeper criticism of what he perceives as hollow social conventions. He sees these rituals as performative rather than genuinely meaningful, which aligns with his broader rejection of societal "phoniness." He hated the whole ceremony because it seemed insincere and phony. Everyone will go home and enjoy their lives as if that dead

person never existed. Holden distinguishes between sincere mourning and the superficial displays of grief he observes in others. The only one, besides himself, who seems not to get over his brother's death is his mother and she is someone whom he praises and cares for. This reflects his quest for authenticity in human emotions and interactions, a core theme of existentialism. Holden's observation of people quickly returning to their normal lives after a funeral highlights what existentialist philosophers would call the absurdity of the human condition, our tendency to create meaning and carry on despite the ultimate meaninglessness of existence.

Additionally, the concept of oblivion is thought-provoking. This concept terrifies him, as it suggests that existence itself is ultimately meaningless if it can be so easily forgotten. Death and oblivion reveal Holden's deep-seated existential anxieties and his struggle to find meaning in a world that seems all too ready to forget. It underscores the novel's engagement with themes of mortality, authenticity, and the human search for significance in the face of an indifferent universe

Death is a concept that intrigues Holden. He wants to stop time because he fears death. He is not afraid of dying, but he is scared for his loved ones to die; he cares so much about the reaction of the people surrounding him if he dies. When he was roaming in New York City, he got drenched in the rain and did not find a place to hide. He imagined himself dying of pneumonia, and he imagined the most depressing ceremony because of the phony people that would come to his funeral, the same phony people that came to his brother's funeral. He did not care much about his death not as much as he cared how his mother and Phoebe would take in the news.

> I hope to hell when I do die somebody has sense enough to just dump me in the river or something. Anything except sticking me in a goddam cemetery. People coming and

> putting a bunch of flowers on your stomach on Sunday, and all that crap. Who wants flowers when you're dead? Nobody. (Ch. 20).

Scared for his mother and sister to be tormented by his death, he does not want to be buried. Holden finds absurdity in death because he sees the absurdity of the living. He sees meaninglessness in schools, finding a job, and money. Holden sees a world devoid of meaning, so he contemplates suicide.

Holden contemplated the idea of jumping out of the hotel window and committing suicide. “What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window. I probably would've done it, too, if I'd been sure somebody'd cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn't want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory.” (Ch. 14). He again thinks of all the phony people that would gather just to watch and not help cover him and carry him like what happened with the suicide he witnessed in Elkton Hills School, which is a school he quit voluntarily. James Castle is a boy from this school who was bullied and had a hard time in the school. Everyone circled around James’s body and watched without giving a hand until Mr. Antolini came and helped. In fact, Holden did not know James and did not talk to him before except the one time he asked to borrow a sweater. James died in Holden’s sweater.

The suicide he witnessed at Elkton Hills School was probably one of the reasons why he left the school. “One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That's all.” (Ch. 02). James was bullied for calling one of the students there, Phil Stabile, a conceited boy. Stabile gathered his friends and ganged up on him in his room. They “tried to make him take back what he said, but he wouldn't do it. So they started in on him. I won't even tell you what they did to him--it's too repulsive--but he still wouldn't take it back, old James Castle.” (Ch. 22). Instead of giving up to his bullies, he committed suicide.

Suicide was one of Holden's thoughts, and no one of his entourage suspected that he had suicidal thoughts except one person, his teacher Mr. Antolini. He was worried about where Holden was headed in life. He tells Holden: "I have a feeling that you're riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall." (Ch. 24). Mr. Antolini warns Holden from heading to a fall. The imagery of falling is depicted with children falling off a cliff, James committing suicide by jumping off a window, and finally Holden's suicidal thoughts of jumping off the hotel window. Mr. Antolini also witnessed James' suicide, and he was the one who picked his inanimate body from the ground to take to the infirmary. He might have sensed that Holden is as troubled as James was, and he is afraid that he would have the same end. In a way, Mr. Antolini is trying to save Holden from "a terrible fall". Mr. Antolini advises Holden to overcome his angst and inner troubles and to learn from them.

James seems to be similar to Holden. He could not fake it and please Stabile and he could not take back what he said. Holden is similarly outspoken that way. He is very descriptive of people and very opinionated of them. Conceited is the word James uses to describe what Holden sees as phony. They do not conceal their opinions, they are rather outspoken by defying society's conformity. James prefers to die rather than conform, and Holden quits school to get away from conformity. And that is the noble cause Mr. Antolini warned Holden from sacrificing himself.

Worried about Holden, Mr. Antolini wrote him a note by a psychoanalyst named Wilhelm Stekel: "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one". Mr. Antolini does not want Holden to sacrifice himself for a cause, as James did, and act irrationally heroic about it. James's suicide was an act to revolt against his bullies and not to submit to them. Nonetheless, the act was irrational, and it did not solve any problem. The act stems from his immaturity. Holden holds respect for James for not submitting to his bullies; however, suicide is not an act to be

glorified or admired. Dying for a cause is an immature act because it does not solve the problem. Suicide is never a solution; instead, it aggravates the problem even more.

Some events mentioned cannot be confirmed nor denied because the readers have to depend on Holden's words only; therefore, Holden is an unreliable narrator. Readers cannot be completely sure about the facticity of events. We cannot judge whether James' suicide is real or not; however, we can draw a similarity between James and Holden. Given the fact that James was wearing Holden's sweater when he committed suicide, he can be a fictional person the narrator created to narrate what happened to him in Elkton Hill School. Holden was not expelled from the school, he voluntarily quit without mentioning the reason behind his departure. He could have been bullied like James. Holden confessed that bad and pervert things happened to him when he was younger. Similarly, James's bullies did repulsive acts upon him. Holden imagines what could have happened if he jumped out of a window when he went to that school. Mr. Antolini is the only adult who can sense that he is struggling with inner pains. So, he imagines Mr. Antolini covering his body and picking him up to an infirmary away from the stares of people because he is the only one in the know of Holden's angst.

4.2. A Feminist Criticism of The Catcher in the Rye

Most of *The Catcher in the Rye*'s reviews and analyses focused on the psychoanalysis of the main character, Holden Caulfield. Very few texts were dedicated to a feminist reading of the novel. The theme of teenage angst and Holden's difficulty in transitioning to adulthood was only analyzed through the perspective of a male. Although it is a relatable novel for all young adults, it does not speak of specific female issues, and it lacks relatable female characters. This section is dedicated to analyzing the female characters, Holden's relationships with them, and his probable stance on feminist issues.

4.2.1. Female Representations in *The Catcher in the Rye*

The Catcher in the Rye notably features fewer female characters compared to male characters, and those present often play less pivotal roles in driving the narrative. This imbalance reflects both the novel's focus on Holden's personal journey and the societal norms of the 1950s. Female characters were frequently depicted as wives, mothers, or love interests, with their identities and aspirations largely defined by their relationships with male characters and typically lacking depth and agency, serving primarily to support or complicate the male protagonist's journey. However, the female characters that do appear offer crucial insights into Holden's psyche and the broader themes of the novel.

Holden tends to categorize women into two extreme groups: pure, innocent, or corrupt and sexual which is a clear manifestation of what psychoanalysts term the "Madonna-Whore complex." This dichotomous view reveals Holden's immature and problematic understanding of women and sexuality, his deep-seated desire to preserve innocence. He contends that "Sex is something I just don't understand". This dichotomy reflects his own conflicted feelings about sexuality and his idealization of childhood innocence.

The only female character that had a noticeable impact on Holden’s journey is his sister. She represents the epitome of childhood innocence to Holden. He sees her as pure and untainted by the adult world. Although Holden is the protagonist of the story, Phoebe is the one who saves the day. He only feels comfortable and at ease with his little sister. The narrator only shares his angst and problems without trying to find a solution other than running away. Despite her young age, Phoebe is portrayed as smart and pretty, and the one person he talks to and fully understands him. She did not want him to run away from home and changed his mind to return home. Phoebe was present when Holden needed a person the most, and she can be considered as the real protagonist of the story given the impact she has on Holden’s decisions. She is the

one who convinced him to cancel his impulsive plans to run away and return home, and with her help, he realizes there is more to life than being a catcher in the rye.

Other than his sister Phoebe, Jane Gallagher is another character that Holden appreciates and respects. She is Holden's friend whom he got close to in the course of a summer two years ago, and a potential love interest although he never actually declares that. She is the only character who does not appear; instead, Holden only talks about her, and he presents an idealized version of her. Jane is the representation of innocence even at her age when everyone "horse around" as Holden describes it. All they do is hold hands, spend a lot of time with each other, and play checkers. The fact that Jane is presented to the readers only through Holden's depictions strikes the probability that she might be totally in his imagination, and he wants to depict his ideal woman. She is a platonic love, innocent, and pure.

Jane is a character that he held dearly and highly thought of her. For Holden, "Jane was different". Although, Holden "wouldn't exactly describe her as strictly beautiful"; he is interested in her because she read interesting books, she liked poetry, and she was the only one that he showed Allie's baseball mitt with his poems on it. He talked to her about Allie and she listened. Holden is interested in the people who listen to him. It took Holden by surprise to know that Jane had a date with Stradlater, his roommate whom he considers a phony. Holden suspects that he did "give her the time" (Ch. 06), which is slang for sexual interactions. Stradlater would not share what they did on the date; thereupon Holden decides to strike him with a fist, but he misses. They fight, and that is when Holden decides to leave the dormitory and roam in New York City. His reluctance to contact Jane throughout the novel suggests a fear of confronting a reality that might shatter his idealized image of her.

One day, her stepfather interrupted Jane and Holden's checkers game to ask if there were any cigarettes, and she broke down crying. The breakdown insinuates a hidden secret or

incident that may have happened between her and her stepfather. Although Holden knew her in the course of only one summer two years ago, and his depiction of her is limited to only good things, he declares, that he knows her “like a book” (Ch. 11). By claiming to know her completely, Holden resists the idea that Jane might have changed or grown since their last meeting. His perception of Jane may be more about projecting his own desires and fears than understanding her as a complex individual. Jane is a character that he would like to protect from adulthood’s adultery considering he thought she is still innocent and not tainted with the adults’ world. His memory of this event is tinged with helplessness and a desire to protect Jane, foreshadowing his later wish to be the "catcher in the rye." The stepfather's intrusion can be seen as a metaphor for the adult world encroaching on childhood innocence, and Jane's tears might represent her own struggle with the loss of childhood innocence. While never explicitly stated, the text hints at the possibility of sexual or emotional abuse.

While Holden sees Jane in simplistic terms, the novel hints at her complexity. The incident with her stepfather suggests that Jane has experiences and emotions that Holden doesn't fully understand or acknowledge. Additionally, the possibility that Jane has changed since Holden last saw her highlights the theme of inevitable maturation and change.Holden saw a new side of Jane in two instances. Firstly, the unpleasant interaction with her stepfather ended with her crying. Secondly, when he hears about her date with Stradlater he decides to pick a fight with him. Jane is a human and like any other human, she cannot be perfect. Holden is a perfectionist and very opinionated towards people he knows; however, he only sees the good side of his crush.

The disconnect between Holden's idealized view of Jane and the hints of her complex reality underscores a major theme of the novel, the gap between perception and truth. For Holden, Jane is the epitome of a young woman, and the reason why she makes no appearances in the book is that the perfect Jane that Holden knows does not exist, and Holden’s epitome of

a young woman does not exist. The perfect image that he had of her is shattered and the person he used to know two years ago does not exist. This explains Holden's constant hesitation to call her and never committing to call. He hesitates throughout the novel to give her a call because he is afraid that he will be faced with a reality different from his imagination. After all, they did not meet for two years, and in the course of time, she most definitely changed. The fact that Jane never physically appears in the novel only heightens her symbolic importance, allowing her to serve as a blank canvas for Holden's projections and fears. Ultimately, Jane's character and Holden's perception of her provide a powerful lens through which to examine the novel's exploration of innocence, maturity, and the often painful transition between childhood and adulthood.

Sally Hayes is another love interest that he went on dates with. She is the opposite of Jane. Holden initially idealizes Sally, describing her as beautiful and intelligent. However, when she rejects his fantasy of running away together, he quickly shifts to demonizing her, calling her "a pain in the ass." Sally is a beautiful girl; however, Holden does not enjoy her company because he thinks she is superficial, phony, and not much of a conversationalist. "I wasn't too crazy about her, but I'd known her for years. I used to think she was quite intelligent, in my stupidity." (Ch. 15). He thinks that she is "the queen of phonies" (Ch. 16). However, he is sexually attracted to her, which he does not do to Jane. As Freud wrote: "Where they love they cannot desire; where they desire, they cannot love". (cited in Abdusattar Abdulatif 170). He does not have the respect for her as he has for Jane. He lies to her and tells her he loves her "I told her I loved her and all. It was a lie, of course, but the thing is, I meant it when I said it." Then he asks her to run away with him and marry him. He is with her strictly, because she is pretty. He does not love her, but he tries to justify his lie to the readers by explaining that he meant it when he said it. He is using her to fulfill his sexual desires and a companion to run away with, and not as a person he is romantically interested in.

In contrast, Holden views Sunny as corrupted and pitiful. Despite hiring her services, he can't bring himself to accept the services, instead trying to engage her in conversation. His pity for Sunny the prostitute may reflect his own feelings of vulnerability and exploitation.

4.2.2. "Real Ugly Girls Have It Tough": Sexism and Generalizations

The Catcher in the Rye is often considered a sexist novel due to the sexist comments the narrator makes. He often had sexist comments and generalizations about women (Modlitbová 12). "Real ugly girls have it tough. I feel so sorry for them sometimes. Sometimes I can't even look at them" (Ch. 12). He casts their value depending on their appearance. He would categorize girls depending on their looks.

> Girls with their legs crossed, girls with their legs not crossed, girls with terrific legs, girls with lousy legs, girls that looked like swell girls, girls that looked like they'd be bitches if you knew them. It was really nice sightseeing, if you know what I mean. In a way, it was sort of depressing, too, because you kept wondering what the hell would happen to all of them. When they got out of school and college, I mean. You figured most of them would probably marry dopey guys (Ch 17).

Holden categorizes girls depending on what they look like and it is very sexist to judge them based on their appearance; however, in the same train of thought, he judges the kind of boys those girls would marry. He says:

> Guys that always talk about how many miles they get to a gallon in their goddam cars. Guys that get sore and childish as hell if you beat them at golf, or even just some stupid game like ping-pong. Guys that are very mean. Guys that never read books. Guys that are very boring--But I have to be careful about that (Ch 17).

Holden is a product of his time and the comments he says are typical views of a sixteen-year-old boy. Holden attended a boys-only school, and he had little exposure to the opposite sex; therefore, his knowledge of women is very limited. The representation of women in the

novel is a reflection of how women are perceived in his sociocultural context which promote emotional detachment and the objectification of women. (Jeranko 8). Holden had sexist and degrading comments towards women; however, he equally bashed male characters. Moreover, thinking of women too provocatively is an inappropriate characteristic of Holden; however, there are female characters who are presented in an appropriate way.

Reviewers often criticized the novel as sexist; however, Holden had some decent moments. He once defended the honor of a girl who dated an ex-colleague of his. Luce is a student in Whooton, which is the first school Holden was expelled from. Holden regards him as an intellectual probably because he gives sex talks late at night with boys gathered in his room. When he was in Whooton, Luce used to date a girl, and Holden asked him if he was still with her. Luce gave a strong negative response and called her a "whore" because she dated him. Holden extends, "That isn't nice. If she was decent enough to let you get sexy with her all the time, you at least shouldn't talk about her that way." (Ch. 19). One cannot deny that Holden often gave comments that objectified women; nevertheless, he had feminist views.

In a society where being a sexually active male is praised and glorified, but a sexually active female is shamed and degraded; Holden did not shame the girl. Women are degraded to objects with which males fulfill their sexual desires, and when they are fulfilled, they cast shame on their female partners. A sexual act is a two-party act that should be either socially shamed or praised, and it should not be a double standard perspective to judge the act depending on the sex of the person. Luce is not any better than the girl he dated since they had a consensual relationship; therefore, his sexist comment about his ex reflects the double standards of the era, and Holden's defense shows a feminist instance. With that said, Holden can never be classified as a feminist because of the sexist instances he had. According to Holden, he comes close to losing his virginity with various girls, but when it comes to it, the girl always tells him to stop.

Holden says that he regrets stopping and not getting through with it. Holden expresses his regret for not raping girls which further indicates he is sexist.

Holden is unreliable as he narrates and portrays females in a good light then negates himself with another statement that makes the reader question his stance toward feminism. One can only judge the instances as they are because Holden is in a transitional phase into adulthood and is still developing his identity and opinions. However, the sexist comments are so vulgar and repulsive that readers unconsciously overlook his few actions that entailed feminist ideas. One cannot categorize Holden as a feminist person because of the few feminist instances he had and the overarching, vulgar comments he makes.

Conclusion

Growing up, change, and death are part of the human condition. Existential angst and worrying about the inevitability of change and death are also part of the human condition. Despite feeling like an outcast, Holden is not alone in having those existential confusions and contemplations. He is supposed to advance in life and move from one phase to another; however, he is mentally and emotionally stuck in the past. He is obsessing over his childhood and the memory of his dead brother which is part of the existential angst.

Salinger uses Holden’s physical attributes as external manifestations of Holden's internal struggles, providing readers with visceral, tangible symbols of the protagonist's complex psychological state. These physical metaphors give us deeper insight into Holden's fear of adulthood, his sense of alienation, and his profound existential anxiety.

The Catcher in the Rye comforts teenagers in their transitional phase to adulthood by offering a relatable character. However, while Holden's struggles resonate with many young readers, his actions also reveal the extent of his immaturity. This is particularly evident in

Holden's idealistic chase after his dream and his extreme contemplation of suicide as a solution to his problems. The protagonist narrates his story through writing in a mental institution. The novel teaches readers the importance of education and the importance of writing as a therapeutic means. By the novel's end, the narrator does not hold the same views. As he writes his last chapter, he admits that he does not know what to think of the story he wrote because he is no longer the same person, and that he misses everyone including the people he criticized and called phony.

Furthermore, Holden's interactions with female characters in *The Catcher in the Rye* reveal a deeply conflicted young man struggling to transition from childhood to adulthood. His Madonna-whore complex, tendency to idealize or demonize women, and inability to form meaningful connections all stem from his fear of the adult world, his desire to preserve innocence, and his own emotional immaturity. These attitudes toward women serve as a microcosm of Holden's larger struggles with identity, belonging, and growing up in a world he perceives as corrupt and insincere. The novel is often regarded as sexist, and it is apparent in Holden’s treatment of his love interests, and how he describes women in general. Sally and Jane are two opposite characters despite both being Holden’s love interests. However, I argue that the novel is not sexist. It portrays the reality of society, and Holden’s hypocrisy in dealing with his love interests.

Chapter Five: Existential Angst in *The Bell Jar*

Introduction

The Bell Jar is Sylvia Plath's only novel, published only a month before she died in 1963. The book is semi-autobiographical because she disguises her story by changing the names of the characters and fictionalizing events. The story is told from the first-person point of view, through the main character, Esther Greenwood, through which the reader comprehends events and gets to know her feelings and thoughts throughout the story. This chapter examines *The Bell Jar* through the perspective of feminism and existentialism for the sole purpose of understanding the existential angst that the main character goes through.

Set in the 1950s American conformist and traditional society, *The Bell Jar* presents a bildungsroman of a young woman trying to figure out life. This chapter contains two sections. The first one focuses on the feminist thoughts presented in the novel. We will explore Esher's hard time dealing with the mainstream ideas of that time, discovering gender roles and the images women are supposed to fulfill, and where she stands among these expectations. The second section will further examine Esther's troubles in understanding life and finding herself. We will study Esther's maturation and self-discovery journey through the perspective of existentialism. The character poses questions and discusses themes that are correlated to both existentialism and feminism. Both perspectives study the individual's pursuit of self-fulfillment, understanding oneself, battling angst that comes with maturation, and being free. Therefore, both sections serve to understand the character and analyze her ideas on women's issues, and understanding life choices.

5.1. A Feminist Perspective of *The Bell Jar* in the 1950s Context

The Bell Jar is a novel that narrates Sylvia Plath's lived experiences through the fictional character of Esther, a woman in the conformist American society of the 1950s. Plath published her only novel under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas" for several reasons: to distinguish herself from her poet husband, Ted Hughes, and avoid being identified merely as "Mrs. Hughes"; to protect the identities of the people she portrayed in the book; and because the themes and messages she conveyed were very personal and quite revolutionary for the 1960s.

The Bell Jar was published in 1963, the same year as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Before these publications and the third wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s, women had not experienced such a revelation about their societal situation. Neva Nelson, Plath's colleague at Mademoiselle magazine during the summer that inspired *The Bell Jar*, describes their college-aged cohort: "We were all immature adolescents —products of the middle 1950s, pre-Pill, pre-Feminine Mystique— expected to do something extraordinary, but left with the ambiguity of the female role, with its stress on home and family" (qtd. in Brain and Harding 180). Women of this era lived under superficial standards that oppressed their freedom to explore their true essence. Throughout the story, Esther portrays the unfair treatment women faced, such as double standards, discrimination, and restrictive gender roles. The novel thus serves as a powerful critique of the societal expectations and limitations placed on women in mid-20th century America

The protagonist carries out the pressures of being a woman in 1950s American society. Esther narrates her month-long summer internship as a guest editor of *Ladies' Day* magazine in New York; she also narrates her deteriorating mental health, her suicidal thoughts, and her journey recovering in asylums. Winning a month-long summer internship is a lifetime opportunity that should make her thrilled; however, her inner thoughts about people and their

intuition or the lack of it, social standards, and conventions hindered her enjoyment of her new experience. Esther had a lot of angst about her future, especially as a woman. The ideas of virginity, marriage, and having children were both something to look forward to and something she was afraid of having.

5.1.1. "In Defence of Chastity": Virginity and Double Standards

"In Defence of Chastity" is an article Esther's mom sent to her daughter to read. This article encapsulates all the double standards that Esther stands against. The main perspective of the article is that men and women hold different emotions, and different worlds, and only marriage can merge the two into one. The problem is not with the standards of staying a virgin until marriage that society holds for individuals; the problem is that those standards only apply to women. The article insinuates that adultery is justified for men and forbidden for women. Moreover, Buddy Willard is Esther's first encounter with these double standards that made her change her perspective on men and marriage.

Buddy Willard, a potential future husband, is the source of a great deal of her problems. He is considered a full package since he is a handsome medical student who obeys his mother, and he is a 'devoted' Christian. "All I'd heard about, really was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for." (ch. 06) Esther admired him from a distance for quite some time, but once they started dating, she got closer and saw his true self, and she realized his flaws and hypocrisy. The blame for her reluctant feelings toward the idea of marriage falls on Buddy's hypocrisy.

Buddy represents the unfair double standards of the 1950s American society. Esther grew to loathe him every time she spent time with him. Whenever they talked about relationships, he made her feel more experienced with men; however, the reality is he is the one who is much more experienced. When they had their first kiss, his first reaction was to comment that she must go out with many men, when in fact he experienced sexual intercourse multiple

times with a random girl. The innocent image that she had of him shattered along with her desire to stay a virgin. Even her college seniors whom she asked about the matter told her "Most boys were like that and you couldn't honestly accuse them of anything until you were at least pinned or engaged to be married." (ch. O6). Society does not hold men accountable for having a sex life outside of wedlock; they are not accused of cheating, even while dating. It seemed that pureness was only associated with women.

What upsets Esther is the fact that she is a virgin, who feels not so pure because of Buddy's comments, how he pretends to be pure when he is not, and how he expects the woman he would marry to be a virgin when he is not. His persistence in acting innocent and pure, and referring to Esther as not so pure is an act of putting himself on a pedestal. He is showing superiority as a man. Whatever he did, his reputation as a good Christian handsome man is untouchable simply because he is a man. Meanwhile, Esther's purity is shattered, and her reputation is questioned, not because of her actions because she is still a virgin, but for the simple fact that she is a woman. For women, their chastity is something that they have to prove constantly.

Discovering her boyfriend's true character and misconduct, she realized most men think the same. Her perspective on men was further confirmed when she met a man called Eric. He presented the same ideas about sex. He expressed his disgust when he saw college girls kissing in plain view, and in the same conversation, he proceeded to talk about how he had slept with his first woman. "By the time you graduated it was an unwritten rule that you had to had known a woman. Known in the Biblical sense, Eric said." (Ch. 10) However, men with such a mentality tarnish so many women's reputations without having the idea of marrying them in mind. The college girls, who disgust Eric so much, are kissing men, they are not doing bad deeds on their own, and he is one of them. He further explained that: "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." (ch.10). If that is how all men think, Esther finds it hard to accept the idea of marriage because she would probably have to marry someone not pure. Chastity is a pursuit limited to women. The 1950s American society was hypocritical for normalizing double standards and judging individuals based on their gender. The society of that time strongly supported traditions, yet they covertly supported a more open-minded lifestyle, but only for men.

As a way to avenge her boyfriend's cheating and the double standards of her time, she felt the need to get rid of her virginity. "Ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck." (Ch. 07) She was determined to go against the values held for women. "When I was nineteen pureness was a great issue […] I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another." (Ch. 07)

Irwin is a mathematics professor Esther meets at Harvard's Widener Library, and she chooses to lose her virginity to him. "I [Esther] thought a spectacular change would come over me [her] the day I [she] crossed the line" (Ch. 07); however, all she experienced was pain and a hemorrhage. She was waiting for a transformation. Bleeding can be seen as a sacrifice Esther had to endure to dismantle and free herself from society's double standards; additionally, it represents a rebirth of a new woman.

5.1.2. The Feminine Angst: Marriage and the Woman Writer

Esther is a diligent student and an over-achiever who has the dream of becoming a writer. In her maturation journey, she grows to understand that many women have to choose between having a family of their own or having a career. She understood that her long years of straight A's would go to waste the minute she gets married and gets occupied with having

children. Nonetheless, she entertains both thoughts. The thought of never getting married and the thought of settling down and having lots of children like Dodo Conway.

Dodo is a Catholic woman and Esther's neighbor. She admired her for being unconventional for having six children and a seventh on the way. Esther sees herself as "unmaternal and apart" (Ch. 18), and she cannot "dream of devoting myself [herself] to baby after fat puling baby like Dodo Conway" (Ch. 18). In traveling this path, Esther risks losing her dream of becoming a writer or doing anything exciting in her life. When Esther revealed to a famous woman poet she met that "I [She] might well get married and have a pack of children some day, she stared at me [her] in horror. 'But what about your career?' she had cried." (Ch. 18).

The concept of marriage is such a delicate subject for Esther. She did not like the idea of marriage because she was afraid of losing herself. "I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So, I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brain washed" (Ch. 07). The conventional homemaker role takes a toll on women's identity because a great part of their lives is dedicated to the home, and a great part of the person they were before marriage perishes.

Mrs. Willard, Buddy's mother, is another character that portrays the female conventional homemaker role, and she represents the conformity of the 1950s. Readers never get to know her name; instead, she is referred to by the last name of her husband, Mrs. Willard, or is known as Buddy's mother. In a way, her husband and her son, the men in her life, proclaim her identity. Esther proclaims that "cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself." (Ch. 07). In the 1950s, even with the achievements a woman can reach in her life, she is bound to sacrifice everything to stay at home and take care of a

husband and children. Esther's concept of marriage is the total change in the woman's life. Her life would be turned upside down because she would be tied with basic chores like cleaning, washing, cooking, and caregiving, and her lifelong straight-A's achievements would go to waste. In response to many of Mrs. Willard's conformist maxims, Esther expresses that:

> That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket. (Ch. 07).

Constantin is the only character that Esther shows genuine interest in in the novel; however, she is reluctant to know him better, scared of discovering his flaws like what happened to her with Buddy. He is a UN simultaneous interpreter, who happens to be a very handsome and thoughtful young man. She praises Constantine by saying: "He had what no American man I've ever met has had, and that's intuition." (Ch. 07). He took Esther on a date and she imagined the possibility of falling in love and marrying Constantin, and all she can see for her future is chores all day long, while he goes out to spend a 'fascinating day' at work (Ch. 07).

> All I knew was that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat. (Ch. 07)

The idea of bearing children and marriage grew more and more grotesque in Esther's perspective when she went with Buddy to witness a woman giving birth. All she could think of is why would they numb the woman to forget she experienced any pain, while she had been "making this unhuman whoosing noise" out of extreme pain (Ch. 06). When the delivery is over, the new mother is not even responsive because of the pills, and she did not even get to enjoy holding her baby for the first time. For Esther, the pills were something a man would invent. The woman giving birth would feel everything; the pills would only make her forget

about the pain afterward so that the woman keeps giving birth to more babies. This experience is considered both eye-opening and disappointing for Esther. The miracle of giving birth should be emotional and joyful after the painful delivery; what Esther saw is a mother in extreme pain, and then she enters a total haze because of the pills. Esther expressed that she did imagine herself giving birth to a baby; however, what she witnessed traumatized her and made her ambivalent about the idea of having kids.

Each character in the novel had some impact on Esther, whether it was negative or positive. Jay Cee, who is the boss and editor of *Ladies' Day magazine*, is the closest representation of an ambitious and independent woman whom Esther looks up to. She was often described as old and ugly, but for Esther, "she has brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter." (ch.01)

The feminine angst consists of the fear of missing out and regretting a decision made. Choosing one thing meant losing another choice. Esther thrives to be an author, but society expects her to fund a family. The choice of marriage does not guarantee happiness because men in the 1950s expect women to do everything in the home and do not offer help, which can be a burden for a working mother. Marriage was detrimental to Esther's well-being because she was afraid of losing herself. Women's lives completely change the minute they get married. They had to sacrifice a lot by not only devoting their bodies to childbearing but also caregiving for the rest of their lives to their children and husbands. After all, that is what constitutes a good woman in the 1950s. While the women made sacrifices to live up to the social standards, men are not expected to take part in chores related to the house, or taking care of their children. Social standards diminished women's existence and worth to the constitution of marriage. By social conventions, what a good woman looks forward to in her future is marriage and sacrificing the remaining years of her life for childbearing and caregiving. For the man, even

after marriage, nothing much changes in their life except the paycheck they need to bring in to support the family.

The idea of marrying and having kids was Esther's life plan before discovering society's views and double standards. Her developed reluctant feelings towards the idea of having a traditional nuclear family changed because she no longer sees herself as happy. She discovered that the lifestyle that society sees for women is but a myth. She does not see purpose nor enjoyment in following the feminine mystique myth.

The narrator of *The Bell Jar* is telling her story in retrospect, and she does not let the reader know of her current situation except for one hint she throws in chapter one. While talking about the free things she got from her scholarship in New York, she mentions the presence of a baby. The following passage from chapter one is Esther's way of telling the reader that in the present she is writing she has a baby and she became well.

> For a long time afterwards I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sun-glasses for the baby to play with. (Ch. 01).

She mentions the baby only once. The narrator never mentions the baby again and does not present any follow-ups by the end of the novel as to what Esther's life went. Esther enters a room full of doctors to be examined and given a last verdict on whether she can be released or not, and the novel abruptly ends. Other than having a baby, the reader is left to interpret what could have happened to Esther. She is well and alive since she is telling us, as a first-person narrator, her story; however, no further hints are distinguished in the novel.

5.1.3. The Divided Self and Ambivalence between Rebellion and Purity

Esther has different conflicting sides and they can be compared to R.D. Laing's divided theory about the self. Laing is a British psychiatrist known for his studies on schizophrenia and madness. He argued in his book *The Divided Self: An Existential Study on Sanity and Madness* (1965) that each individual has an image and expectations for everyone else. I.e., Each individual is defined by another and everyone carries a model of everyone else in their minds. In a way, each individual tries to comply with these models and to exist to fulfill people's expectations of them. The pressure of trying to live up to other people's expectations creates ontological insecurity; as a result, the self is divided into two main selves: a false self, also known as the public self; and the true self, which is the genuine and private one. According to Laing, these are considered the psychotic symptoms of schizophrenia, a mental illness that Plath has been diagnosed with. Since *The Bell Jar* is semi-autobiographical, it is safe to assume that Esther can be schizophrenic as well. Esther has multiple selves. Public ones, which are fake, that she puts on to comply with society's standards and to fit in and conform, which is similar to the character of Betsy. In addition, another self that she keeps hidden from judgment, like the character of Doreen. Therefore, Doreen and Betsy represent two different manifestations of Esther's identity.

Laing's theory of the divided self provides a compelling framework for understanding Esther's internal struggles. The concept of ontological insecurity is particularly relevant to Esther's experiences. Throughout the novel, we see Esther grappling with her sense of self, often feeling disconnected from her own identity and struggling to reconcile her inner desires with societal expectations.

Esther spent her whole life abiding by rules. She is a diligent student, a winner of a scholarship, and a med school student who is about to propose to her for marriage. In a way, everything in her life is already set up. Another part of herself longs to rebel and break rules.

She wants to see life from a perspective that is not already planned out. When she is with Doreen, she sees herself as the least attractive and the least exciting, yet she picks up the courage to be rebellious. When she is with Betsy, her energy matches with hers and she can relate to her. Doreen represents her rebellious self and her authentic self, and Betsy is someone to whom she can relate. She abides by rules, and she has a conventional life ahead of her. Betsy is considered the public self that Esther shows to comply with society's standards.

Betsy and Doreen are two polar opposite characters. The first represented conformity and purity, and the latter represented rebellion. Betsy is the character Esther felt she resembled the most, yet as the story progressed, Esther drifted away from the innocent diligent student image she thought of herself, and she admired Doreen more. "I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart." (Ch. 02). Betsy's plans for her future are to get married to a farmer, settle down, and raise kids. Betsy resembles Esther because she is the type to follow rules and be diligent with everything she does. However, in chapter three, Esther reveals, "I never intended to get married." (Ch. 03). This shows that despite Esther thinking that she relates to Betsy she is far from resembling her.

On a night out with Doreen, who is the rebel of the novel, she gets to experience going into a bar, ordering a drink, and being approached by men. She felt good that she stepped out of her comfort zone; however, she was not comfortable enough to share her real name. Scared of being recognized in a bar by people she knew, she faked her name to Elly Higginbottom. The creation of the fake name is a significant moment that reveals Esther's discomfort with her true self in certain situations. This alter ego allows her to explore a different side of herself while maintaining a safe distance from potential consequences.

Esther ignored the man who approached her but still followed Doreen and her date, Lenny Shepherd, to his house. As the couple felt more comfortable, Esther felt lonelier and out of place. She decided to leave them and walked off the night's worries back to her hotel alone. She was a third wheel, who did not do any bad deeds, yet she felt dirty, which shows the internalized moral standards of 1950s society and how they affect Esther's self-perception.

At this point, the Esther of that night felt reluctant to rebel. The courage to go out to a bar was all Elly, the identity she made up. She is ambivalent between enjoying the night and feeling like she did something wrong. Her ambivalence is an internal conflict between different selves. Esther's ambivalence about the night's events. reflects broader themes in the novel, such as the conflict between societal expectations and personal desires, or the tension between innocence and experience. She is jealous of Doreen and her new date because she feels lonely, yet watching them feels wrong and the only thing that calmed her down is the walk home and the hot bath she took before her sleep.

Furthermore, Esther desperately wants to feel pure again. She feels "about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water" (ch.2). She wanted to feel freshly baptized or to feel like a clean slate as a newborn. This symbolism ties into themes of purification, rebirth, and the desire for innocence that run throughout the novel. She created the character of Elly from Chicago to distance herself completely from that night, and she seems to return to herself and forget about Elly when she is back in her hotel room and has taken a hot bath to purify her.

Esther portrayed her friend Doreen as someone who she wished to be as free-spirited as her, yet she still wanted to hang on to her purity. The start of the night was great. Going out with Doreen, "made me [her] forget my [her] worries. I [She] felt wise and cynical as hell" (Ch. 01). As the night progressed, she felt "powerful and god-like" (Ch. 01) because she ordered a Vodka, and drinking it felt like it 'cleansed' her, which is another word that refers to being pure.

However, seeing how animalistic Doreen and Lenny can be, she expressed that “There is something demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other, especially when you are the only extra person in the room.” (Ch.2). She likes the idea of being free-spirited; however, she is reluctant to be as free-spirited as Doreen is. She used the word ‘demoralizing’ when describing the scene of the couple having intercourse, yet she followed that comment by saying that it felt lonely.

> It's like watching Paris from an express caboose heading in the opposite direction—every second the city gets smaller and smaller, only you feel it's really you getting smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier, rushing away from all those lights and that excitement at about a million miles an hour. (Ch. 02).

Esther's feeling lonely in the events reflect her broader struggles to fit in society and find her place. When being pure is encourage, the going out and drinking is encouraged too as long as you do not get caught. Her loneliness is not just about physical isolation, but also about feeling emotionally and intellectually disconnected from those around her.

Watching Paris from a moving train symbolizes Esther’s sense of alienation and her feeling of being left behind by society’s expectations and experiences. The image of the city getting smaller could represent Esther’s diminishing sense of self or her perceived distance from social norms.

She compared having someone and getting intimate to watching Paris City, which is a symbol of romance. Esther romanticizes sexual intercourse after she finds out about the hypocrisy of Buddy and the hypocrisy of all society when it comes to being pure. The novel is narrated in retrospect. With the knowledge she accumulated from her experiences, Esther narrates how her past self was fooled by society’s double standards, and how the more she figures things out, the more she feels like an outcast who has been fooled and wants to rebel. Esther's romanticization of sexual intercourse, followed by her disillusionment, mirrors her broader experiences with societal expectations. This cycle of idealization and disappointment

could be traced through other aspects of her life, such as her career ambitions or her views on marriage She often plans something with enthusiasm, only to be overcome by a sense of angst and uncertainty as reality sets in. This pattern is particularly evident in her approach to her future career, where her initial excitement about working in publishing is gradually eroded by the realities of the industry and her own self-doubt. Similarly, her changing perspective on marriage evolves from an accepted inevitability to a source of anxiety and resistance, reflecting her growing awareness of the limitations it might impose on her personal freedom and ambitions.

While society valued purity as the standard for being good, Esther prized intuition. She greatly admired Doreen for possessing this quality. To Esther, having intuition meant being insightful, understanding, and, most importantly, genuine. This admiration suggests that Doreen, and possibly Constantine, represented aspects of Esther's authentic self. Esther's glowing description of Doreen and her intuition stands in stark contrast to her portrayal of Buddy as a hypocrite. Being with Doreen allows Esther to express her true self - the genuine image she doesn't share with the world. In contrast, characters like Buddy, Betsy, and other conformists represent the false self that Esther presents to society. This dichotomy between her authentic and false selves underscores Esther's internal struggle and her difficulty in reconciling societal expectations with her own desires and values.

Although writing and poetry are Esther's fields of expertise, Buddy asks her if she knows what a poem is. He comments dismissively, "A poem is a piece of dust" (Ch. 05). While Esther disagrees with his statement, she doesn't express her disagreement openly. Instead, she overthinks the scenario, imagining various responses in her mind. Buddy's presence overwhelms her, causing her to suppress her true thoughts in the moment to maintain composure. Esther only realizes later that she habitually agrees with everything Buddy says, often regretting her responses afterwards. She acknowledges Buddy's influence over her,

admitting, "My trouble was I took everything Buddy Willard told me as the honest-to-God truth" (Ch. 05). This behavior exemplifies how Esther succumbs to the pressure of meeting others' expectations as a means of seeking validation. Her interaction with Buddy, characterized by total acknowledgment and acceptance even when she disagrees with him, is a clear manifestation of her false self. This pattern reveals Esther's struggle to assert her true identity and opinions in the face of societal and interpersonal pressures.

5.2. An Existentialist Perspective of *The Bell Jar*: The Human Condition and Choices

Esther's thoughts reflect a profound existential angst. She's grappling with the fundamental question that has troubled philosophers for centuries: What's the point of life if we all die in the end? She finds it hard to understand the human condition because whatever a person accomplishes or how long they live, everyone eventually dies. “Why I couldn't sleep and why I couldn't read and why I couldn't eat and why everything people did seemed so silly, because they only died in the end.” (Ch. 11). This realization leads her to a state of nihilism, where she sees all human endeavors as ultimately meaningless. Her inability to find meaning in existence translates into a loss of basic drives and motivations, symptomatic of depression. Esther's view that "everything people did seemed so silly" because of the inevitability of death aligns with the philosophical concept of absurdism. This idea, explored by philosophers like Albert Camus, posits that the human tendency to seek inherent meaning in life is futile because the universe is chaotic and meaningless. Esther's fixation on death shows a skewed temporal perspective. She's so focused on the end that she's unable to find value in the journey of life itself.

Esther questions the human condition because no matter how hard one works, or how many things one achieves, it is meaningless when the person is met with death and oblivion. The human condition is inevitable. Coming of age is such a distressing phase, and it is

understandable for a teenager to think that way and question the utility of everything. Esther is anxious and afraid of growing old and facing the world ahead.

Implicitly, Esther's thoughts challenge societal norms that place value on achievement and longevity. Her perspective questions whether these commonly held values are truly meaningful in the face of inevitable death. Coming back home from her New York trip and finding out that she failed to be accepted in a writing class, the narrator sees no point in what she is doing and finds herself in a loop of sleepless nights and not bathing for several weeks.

Although Esther's thoughts are deemed philosophical questions, they also indicate symptoms of clinical depression. The previous passions that she used to do easily felt like chores for Esther now. She could not write, sleep, eat, get dressed, or bathe. Her inability to find joy or purpose in daily activities is a classic sign of clinical depression. Her mental health took a toll on her daily life and left her with a paralyzing feeling of anxiety.

From an existentialist perspective, anxiety is part of the human condition because all humans are faced with unlimited choices in life, and with freedom comes the responsibility of choosing, and the choice made is what creates meaning in life. Esther suffers from existential angst because humans are condemned to be free, and she is pressured into creating meaning for her life. Throughout the novel, Esther expresses her struggles with mental health issues and her constant indecisiveness in choosing what is best for her future.

5.2.1. The Fig Tree: Esther Greenwood’s Existential Angst

Existential angst represents the ambiguity of life and the loss of one’s sense of direction in choosing their future steps. The fig tree is a symbol of the various unlimited choices a person will encounter in his life, and it also represents Esther’s disabling indecisiveness when she is faced with her choices. It is in her indecisiveness that her existential angst resides. She compared her life to a big green fig tree, and the ripe figs on each branch represented her choices in life. She imagined herself standing under that tree of life, and wondering what fig to choose

> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor … another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers… and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. (CH. 07)

The fig tree serves as a rich, multi-layered symbol in the novel. The quote rightly identifies existential angst as stemming from the ambiguity of life and the difficulty in choosing one's path. This aligns with existentialist philosophy, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "existence precedes essence," where humans are "condemned to be free" and must create their own meaning through choices.

Adolescence is a transitioning phase to adulthood and a decision-making phase that will determine and shape one's future. The choices in life seemed limitless for Esther, and she could not imagine herself choosing one because in choosing one, she is losing all other possibilities (Séllei 128). Moreover, every fig seemed intriguing and tempting, and because she could not stand the thought of losing other options, she starved herself into choosing none.

> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving myself to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the fig I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing the rest, and as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (Ch. 07)

The image of ripe figs implies that opportunities are time-sensitive, adding pressure to decision-making. Esther's indecisiveness in the face of these choices is the core of her existential angst. This paralysis reflects a common modern dilemma: the anxiety that comes with freedom of choice, especially when societal expectations are high.

Furthermore, the metaphor implies that by not choosing, Esther risks losing all possibilities. This reflects the existentialist idea that not making a choice is itself a choice with

consequences. Esther's inability to choose might stem from a fear of making the wrong choice or a desire to live all possible lives perfectly, which is impossible. This passage encapsulates the feeling of existential angst; the figs wrinkling and going black is her reality check and reminder of the human condition.

Esther's anxiety about choosing one path over another reflects a profound fear of missing out on something special. This fear is not just about missing experiences, but about missing potential versions of herself. If she chooses to marry Buddy, or anyone else for that matter, she will be constantly thinking of other paths she could have traveled like being a poet and a university professor. If she puts her career first and never gets married, she would think of all the kids she could have had and does not have. Her contemplations show the incompatibility between different life choices, particularly career and family. This reflects societal expectations, especially for women in the 1950s, where choosing a career often meant sacrificing family life and vice versa.

Additionally, Esther's tendency to imagine the alternatives to any choice she might make shows a pattern of rumination and self-doubt. She had a list of things to prove her incompetence, and her not getting accepted into the summer class she applied to was a further confirmation of her incompetence as a writer. It's not just a professional setback but a blow to Esther's entire self-concept and future vision. This highlights the fragility of her self-esteem and the extent to which she's invested her identity in external validation.

Every choice was bitter-sweet because she felt immense pressure. The bitter-sweet nature of every choice points to the immense pressure Esther feels. This pressure likely comes from both external expectations and her own perfectionism. Not being accepted into a summer school course came as a shock to her. She has imagined being accepted in this small class of a famous writer and being acknowledged by him. She went on to imagine being acknowledged by the Fiction Editor, and Jay Cee would agree with his opinion of publishing Esther’s works.

Esther's vivid imagination of success scenarios serves as both a coping mechanism and a source of further distress when reality fails to match these fantasies.

Esther's focus on being acknowledged by others (the famous writer, the Fiction Editor, Jay Cee) suggests that she's trying to form her identity through the eyes of others, rather than through self-acceptance. Esther was looking for validation, but she had the total opposite when she received a rejection letter for that course. Esther looked for validation all her life. As a woman writer, she felt compelled to write stories anonymously, and only when the Fiction Editor acknowledged her, did she consider surprising Jay Cee that the anonymous writer is she.

Esther's list of perceived incompetencies reveals a deep-seated insecurity. This negative self-perception acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy, coloring her interpretation of events and reinforcing her sense of inadequacy, she may be unconsciously sabotaging her own success or decision-making abilities. When Jay Cee asked her about her plans for the future, she thought of getting a big scholarship or studying abroad and graduating, being a writer, and getting a job as a professor. However, what her mouth could spell out is “I don’t really know,” (Ch. 03) This gap between her aspirations and her ability to articulate them points to a deeper uncertainty and lack of confidence. The "promising future ahead of her" actually becomes a source of anxiety rather than comfort. The potential for success creates pressure, and the fear of not living up to this potential contributes to her existential crisis. Esther's history as a high achiever suggests a tendency towards perfectionism. The prospect of choosing a path and potentially failing may be contributing to her inability to commit to a direction.

She did not expect herself to say such a response, but hearing it out loud she came to the realization of her own thoughts. “It sounded true, and I recognized it, the way you recognize some nondescript person that’s been hanging around your door for ages and then suddenly comes up and introduces himself as your real father” (Ch. 03). Esther's surprise at her own response suggests that her uncertainty was present at a subconscious level before she

consciously acknowledged it. The act of speaking it aloud brings this hidden truth to the surface, forcing her to confront it. Despite the promising future ahead of her, Esther does not know what to pursue in life, and she loses all sense of contentment. Her maturation changed her from a straight A's student to a person with existential angst, not aware of what to do with her life, desperate and full of angst. The abrupt change illustrates how quickly existential crises can develop, especially in transitional periods of life. Esther's transition from a high-achieving student to someone unsure of her future indicates a loss of identity. Her academic success had likely been a core part of her self-concept, and without it, she struggles to define herself.

In chapter nine, the twelve interns had to have their picture taken by the magazine's photographer as a last activity before they returned home, and the theme was to pose with something that suggests their plans for the future. The photo shoot serves as a metaphor for the pressure to define one's future. The requirement to pose with something that suggests future plans highlights the societal expectation for young people to have a clear direction in life.

Esther did not want to take her picture because she felt an immense urge to cry, and she did not know why. Her urge to cry without understanding why indicates a deep-seated emotional distress that she hasn't fully processed or acknowledged. This was her cry for help. Her inability to articulate her distress verbally manifests in this physical and emotional response. Her inner self was creeping out and crying her existential angst to be heard, asking to be noticed. "I didn't know why I was going to cry, but I knew that if anybody spoke to me or looked at me too closely the tears would fly out of my eyes and the sobs would fly out of my throat and I'd cry for a week" (Ch. 09). As the other interns held objects related to the future they planned, Esther did not know what to tell the photographer, but she settled with a poet. Esther's choice to pose as a poet is significant. It suggests that despite her uncertainty, she still clings to this aspiration. However, her inability to fully commit to this identity (struggling to smile and crying) shows her ambivalence and insecurity about this choice.

The photoshoot itself represents the performative nature of identity in society. Esther's breakdown during this performance highlights her struggle to maintain this expected performance. She could not smile when the photographer told her to, and when he asked her why she looked like she was about to cry, she burst into tears. She felt an immense relief to show her misery, and to finally have her inner self shown; however, when she lifted her head to see her surroundings, everyone had already vanished. “I felt limp and betrayed, like the skin shed by a terrible animal. It was a relief to be free of the animal, but it seemed to have taken my spirit with it, and everything else it could lay its paws on” (Ch. 09). The disappearance of everyone else after her emotional outburst is a powerful image of isolation. It reflects Esther's feeling of abandonment and lack of support in her moment of crisis. No one was around her to comfort her when she cried; she felt unrecognizable to the people who should be showing support. Jay Cee is the woman Esther aspires to be like, and she is not acknowledged by her; instead, Esther feels “limp and betrayed” (Ch. 09). The animal represents her false self that she manifests to put on a smile. The comparison of her false self to a "terrible animal" is particularly striking. It suggests that maintaining her public persona has been a violent, consuming process. The relief of shedding this skin is mixed with a sense of loss, as if her authentic self has been damaged or diminished by the effort of pretending. The feeling that her spirit has been taken along with the "animal" indicates a profound sense of emptiness and loss of identity. It suggests that Esther has become so accustomed to her false self that she's unsure what remains when it's stripped away. This scene marks a transitional moment for Esther, moving from maintaining a facade to a more authentic (if painful) expression of self. It represents a liminal space between her past identity and an uncertain future.

The mirror scene is a powerful literary device often used to represent self-reflection and identity. In this case, it serves to highlight the disconnect between Esther's internal state and her external appearance. In an attempt to fix her makeup and return to her old self, Esther did not

recognize herself in the mirror. “The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell after a prolonged beating. It looked bruised and puffy and all the wrong colours. It was a face that needed soap and water and Christian tolerance.” (Ch. 09). The description of her face suggests that her emotional turmoil has manifested physically. This blurring of emotional and physical states is a common theme in depictions of mental health struggles. That face that peered from a prison cell is a representation of her suppressed inner self. The smile that she tried to force out was her false self putting on a show to suppress and protect her inner self. While this false self is a form of self-protection, it's also a source of distress and alienation.

She could not stand society’s views on gender roles; nonetheless, she did want to form a happy family. Nevertheless, the thought of doing that meant accepting society’s unfair double standards and settling for a mundane life she did not want for herself. The struggle to choose a fig represents the broader struggle of identity formation. Each fig represents not just a career or life path, but a potential version of herself. This passage shows us the unlimited possibilities in life and the freedom of an individual to choose who he wants to be. The different choices are also overwhelming. With the unlimited choices life offers, Esther is entrapped in the stage of decision-making.

Esther suffers from existential angst because she is indecisive. When Buddy proposes to her for marriage, she confesses to him that she has no desire to get married. Buddy reminded her of a conversation they had about choosing to live in the city or the countryside, and her response was both. He is insinuating that she will change her mind about marriage. Buddy had told her that her response matched with a true neurotic and that that question was from a questionnaire he had in a psychology class. “If neurotic is wanting two mutual exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days.” (Ch. 08)

We as humans always seek validation, and we often seek it from our surroundings. People often seek validation and acknowledgment from others when in fact that only leads to constant self-doubt, disillusionment, and a constant fear of not living up to those standards. Esther Greenwood sought that validation by being the best at everything she does. She has been feeding off that feeling of achievement. However, now that she feels depressed and estranged from society's standards, she knows she can no longer get the dose of validation she had lived with up until the point she no longer believed in those standards. Her journey of maturation is a journey to discover that personalities, reputations, and standards are just an image on display. Buddy's innocence and the perfect image were just a show to accommodate society's standards, and once she discovered that, she had to re-evaluate herself. She started counting the things that she could not do because she believed that she was incompetent in many ways. And for the incompetent person she thinks she is, nothing was worth choosing.

5.2.2. Under "The Bell Jar": Mental Illness and Suicide

The Bell Jar was banned in the United States in the 1970s for containing daring themes that go against society's conservative views and was deemed unsuitable to be taught in schools. The banning reflects the novel's power to challenge societal norms. It overly scrutinized society's conformism, and it spoke of mental illness and suicide in a raw and direct manner.

The novel's opening lines foreshadow the forthcoming events and set an anxious tone. The novel is in retrospect, and the narrator is speaking from a place where she already lived all the events. "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York" (Ch. 01). She offset implies to the reader that she is confused and lost. The story about the Rosenbergs and their electrocution foreshadows her electrocution later in the novel.

Esther went through electrotherapy after she was hospitalized for her mental issues. The Rosenbergs are criminals getting executed for a crime they did; meanwhile, she is electrocuted

for being sick. She mentions them to mirror their electrocution with hers, and to create an image for the readers that she is getting punished for being the way she is. The parallel implicitly criticizes society's treatment of mental illness, suggesting that it's viewed and treated almost as a crime. The comparison between Esther's electrotherapy and the Rosenbergs' execution highlights the sense of punishment for being different and for her inability to conform to societal expectations. It ties into existentialist ideas about authenticity and the societal pressure to conform. The electroshock therapy becomes a metaphor for society's attempts to 'correct' those who don't fit the norm.

Her first electrotherapy felt like torture which explains her sympathy toward the Rosenbergs. Doctor Gordon, the doctor responsible for her first electrotherapy whom she described as young, good-looking, and arrogant, had a family picture on his desk half facing him and half facing Esther. The doctor and the family in his picture portray the family Esther feels unable to recreate because of her negative experience with Budd. Doctor Gordon represents the conventional happy nuclear family of the 1950s and it also means the lifestyle Esther is repulsing. Her unsuccessful electroshock seems to be a punishment because she rejects conformity.

Esther's mental state and her struggle with suicidal thoughts prevail as the novel progresses. As she was rejected in the summer creative writing class, she makes multiple plans to be productive in her summer, and then she comes into self-destructive thoughts, she shares:

> Then plan after plan started leaping through my head, like a family of scatty rabbits.
>
> I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three ... nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth.

This multiplicity of plans reflects the existentialist notion of radical freedom, and that we always have choices, even in extreme circumstances. The image of telephone poles representing years of life is a powerful visual metaphor for Esther's perception of her future. The poles represented the years she lived. The wires dangling into space after the 19th pole symbolize her inability to envision a future beyond her current age. Her inability to see beyond the 19th pole represents a crisis of meaning and purpose, central to existentialist thought.

Esther has imagined and thought of up to nine ways to kill herself. She locked herself in a bathroom and thought of abusing her wrists, but she backed down at the last minute. “It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at.” (Ch. 12). Her description suggests that her thoughts are tormenting her, and she wants to destroy something deeper that is making her sick.

It is inhuman for someone to contemplate suicide because as humans we are not wired to kill ourselves. To contemplate the idea of suicide is a call for help. Esther did not want to harm herself; instead, she wanted to relieve herself from feeling hopeless. Esther is battling the conflict between our instinct for self-preservation and the capacity to choose self-destruction. Esther's struggle with suicide can be seen as a response to what existentialists call the 'absurd' - the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent meaning in life and the human inability to find any. She is full of ideas to do, and dreams to accomplish, yet the sense of absurdity of it all creeps to find herself aimless. In another attempt, she tried to hang herself but found nowhere to attach the robe. Although she is determined to commit suicide, she is scared. The first and unsuccessful attempt that hospitalized her is hiding in the house’s cellar and swallowing pills.

Esther chose to metaphorically compare the space she feels entrapped in when her mental health is at its lowest to a “bell jar”. She expressed,

> A ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street cafe in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. (Ch. 15)

The “bell jar” represents Esther’s entrapment in her own destructive thoughts and self-doubt. Wherever she physically is, she is mentally entrapped because of her deteriorating mental health. The transparency of the glass emphasizes how Esther can see the world around her but feels separated from it, mirroring the existential idea of being 'in-the-world' but not fully part of it. Moreover, each individual is fundamentally alone in their experience of the world. The symbol speaks of the isolation of everyone’s inner world and the uniqueness of our experiences. In existentialist terms, the bell jar represents a paradox of freedom and confinement. While Esther is free to travel the world, she feels confined by her mental state, mirroring the existentialist tension between absolute freedom and the constraints of our facticity.

Additionally, jars also represent death in the novel because Esther got to see dead babies preserved in jars. Furthermore, bells represent the church bells that represent marriage and death ceremonies. Bells and jars being connected to death suggests that Esther's mental state is not just stagnant, but potentially deadly.

The raw description of her suicidal thoughts count up to nine ways to kill oneself and her actual attempt intrigued readers to deem this novel inappropriate. With that said, the novel shares the mentally ill’s inner struggles and their perspective of the world. By providing a first-person account of mental illness, Plath offers readers insight into the lived experience of depression and suicidal ideation. It shed light on the topic of suicide which was deemed taboo because society often makes suicidal persons culpable, when in fact they are victims of a disease. The novel's impact in shedding light on mental illness highlights the existentialist view

of art and literature as means of exploring and communicating profound truths about the human condition.

5.2.3. Esther Greenwood's Identity Crisis

Growing up and going from a teenager to a young adult is a self-discovery journey and a crucial phase for identity formation. Esther is a 19-year-old trying to understand life, as well as herself. In existentialist thought, identity is not something we are born with, but something we create in the course of our lives; however, many external things can influence the way we see ourselves. Therefore, a huge part of an identity and how one carries themselves is how one sees themselves in a social context. An ontologically secure person would be a person sure and confident in his identity, and comfortable in his own skin. Ontological security, coined by R.D. Laing, is the "security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice" (Qtd. In, Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 03). Laing's argument is predicated on the existence of a sensation known as embodiment. According to his concept of the divided self, "the individual thus has as his starting-point an experience of his body as a base from which he can be a person with other human beings" (qtd in 129). This perspective stands in contrast to the perception of the body "felt more as an object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual's being," which is characterized as "the core of the false self" (qtd in Nóra 129). In Laing's view, the embodied self is experienced as the fundamental essence of one's existence, facilitating "creative relationships" as opposed to "sterile relationships" (qtd in 129). Consequently, Laing regards the feelings of embodiment as essential in both diagnostic and therapeutic processes. While not explicitly stated, it is implied that the body becomes the authentic locus where the core of a healthy, "embodied" psyche should be sought.

Esther is unmotivated, indecisive in all her choices, and cannot see a future for herself, which is what constitutes her identity crisis(Nóra 128). Throughout the novel, ontologically

insecure about herself, Esther creates different identities at different times depending on the situation and the people with her.

Elly Higginbottom is an identity Esther creates to distance herself from her true self. She is the total contrast to Esther. Through Elly, Esther forgets her worries and existential angst; instead, she pretends to be much more mature; she acts like a person well- aware of her essence, certain, and a wholesome person. She used the character when she was out in a bar with Doreen to confidently meet men and have drinks. She did that to protect her true identity because she did not want to be seen by people from her town, and to feel more confident. She used this identity again when she met a sailor, who she thinks of as a potential love interest. Afraid of any judgments, Esther thinks, "In Chicago, people would take me for what I was" (Ch. 11). She created a whole other person that she would like to be.

> I would be simple Elly Higginbottom, the orphan. People would love me for my sweet, quiet nature. They wouldn't be after me to read books and write long papers on the twins in James Joyce. And one day I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway. If I happened to feel like it. (Ch. 11).

Esther did not want to be seen through her incompetence, or judged for being the girl who has "thrown up a scholarship" (Ch. 11) and "mucked up a month in New York" (Ch. 11), and "refused a perfectly solid medical student for a husband" (Ch. 11). She did not want to be associated with her mother, or the grief of the loss of her father. She wanted people to see and love her for who she truly is; however, inventing an identity is not the way to live manifesting your true self; instead, she is further repressing her true self deep down by creating other false selves, and it shows her insecurity.

Another identity Esther creates goes by the name Elaine who is the protagonist of the novel she is writing. She wanted to write a novel with the protagonist being herself. "My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. Elaine. I counted the letters on my fingers. There were six letters in Esther, too. It seemed a lucky thing." (Ch. 10). After

writing two lines, Esther does not know what to write for her heroine because she does not foresee what she herself will do, and feels that she has no experiences she can write about. The past does not look interesting to her, and the future seems blank. While she feels lost in her life, creating an alternative through writing can be Esther's way of refiguring herself and her future; however, her heroine is in the same paralyzing situation as her. "I sat like that for about an hour, trying to think what would come next, and in my mind, the barefoot doll in her mother's old yellow nightgown sat and stared into space as well." (Ch. 10). Esther metaphorically compares Elaine to a doll. A doll is an object that people play with, and instead of fulfilling its essence of being a toy, the doll is doing nothing and staring into space. This metaphor represents Esther's situation. Additionally, to being an object toyed with and controlled by others, she feels drained, stagnated, and lost. The protagonist of the novel she is writing represents herself and mirrors her identity crisis by being stagnated and unable to identify her next move and cannot see a future for herself.

Another key character in the novel is Joan Gilling. Esther only introduces her at the start of the novel, and the reader only gets to know this character's depth and representation by the end of the novel. In the beginning, Joan was someone that makes Esther "feel squirmy" (Ch. 05). Esther is envious of her for being athletic and admired by Buddy. Joan shares common characteristics with Esther. They are both overachievers and diligent students from Boston, they go to the same church, and they are both Buddy's exes. By the end of the novel, Esther is surprised to see Joan in an Asylum with her because she too tried to take her life. "For the first time it occurred to me Joan and I might have something in common." (Ch. 16). The person that she knew from afar and disliked so much was a spitting image of herself. They both won awards and succeeded in their fields of study, dated and dumped the same man, and faced mental health issues.

> In spite of my old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me. It was like observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own.[…] I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose. (Ch. 18)

Joan is Esther's psychological double. "Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me." (Ch. 17). She was awarded privileges in the asylum faster than Esther for her continuous improving recovery. Joan seemed to be an identical self that reminds Esther of her own self. She goes through everything that she does; however, by the end of the novel, Joan disappears and then is found hanged in the woods. She successfully committed suicide, unlike Esther.

At some point in their stay in a mental Asylum, Joan confesses to Esther that she likes her better than she likes Buddy. By considering Esther romantically, she is expressing her homosexuality which Esther disgusts. Her reply, "'That's tough, Joan,' I said, picking up my book. 'Because I don't like you. You make me puke, if you want to know.'" (Ch. 18), was upfront and direct. Her disgust towards her double shows her abundance of her old self because Joan reminded her of that. And Joan's death is a further confirmation of Esther's detachment from her old self.

Moreover, a nurse calls Esther by the name Jane, which she finds weird considering it is not her name. "I found it strange that the nurse should call me Lady Jane when she knew what my name was perfectly well." (ch. 17). This is a reference to a famous feminist novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), by the English author Charlotte Brontë. Jane is the main character, and she is a madwoman trapped by her husband in an attic. Jane mirrors Esther's character because they both suffer from mental health issues; they both live in a conformist society, and they are both locked away from society.

From Elly, Elaine, and Joan, to Jane, Esther manifests different identities due to her identity crisis and shows different flaws in her characters through them. She feels indecisive and lacks bravery so she created Elly, a fake identity that she meets new people with. She wanted to write about herself in a sense to gain some control over herself, so she created Joan. However, she found nothing to write about since she had no experience, and she does not see a clear vision for her future. Furthermore, Joan is the character that resembled Esther the most. Even though Joan resembled her, Esther envied and hated her because she reminded her of her old best self. Joan's suicide represents the death of Esther's old best self and the beginning of a new chapter in her life.

Conclusion

The Bell Jar is a feminist novel that also shows Esher's perspective on the absurdity of the world. The transitional phase to adulthood is what paralyzes Esther into asking millions of questions and what constitutes her existential angst. She contemplates on double standards, her ambivalence between purity and rebellion as she prefigures her perspectives, the banality of gender roles that only constrain women, and her fear of the concept of marriage.

Buddy's untouchable reputation and Esther's under-question reputation show how men and women lived in the 1950s. The woman is always questioned, and she needs to be always on her case to show her innocence. Meanwhile, men are superior in that matter. They had to prove nothing. The constant pursuit of purity regardless of one's actions is one of many things that contribute to what Plath imagines as a bell jar that entraps women. The double standards of the 1950s held women accountable for everything they did or did not do. On the other hand, men were not judged. Chastity was a pursuit limited to women which is why Esther views Buddy and society as hypocritical, which made her consider giving up on the idea of marriage.

Marriage is a delicate subject for Esther because she sees the difficulties mothers and wives face in a conformist society. In the novel, marriage is often portrayed as a dead-end road

for Esther and a danger to her career life. Being a mother is a noble role that should be chosen with conviction rather than cast upon all women as a life-end goal. Moreover, Esther fears change and fears sacrificing her career and self to being a mother and a wife. At the same time, Esther entertains the idea of having a large family. She does not like to choose because she likes to do and experience everything. Moreover, despite her negative comments on the idea of having children, she refers to her baby in the first chapter. The reference is only made once, and it indicates that she eventually had at least one baby. The novel is in retrospect, and she might have changed her perspective on the matter after the events of the novel have ended. Esther finds absurdity in human life because no matter what a person accomplishes, it does not change the inevitability of death. Afraid of living a wasted life, she contemplates her choices and she is overwhelmed by the freedom and unlimited choices she is faced with. According to Sartre, humans are condemned to be free. Esther is paralyzed when faced with her freedom.

The fig tree is a prominent symbol in the novel that expresses the core of Esther's inner pains and angst. It represents the unlimited choices humans face. She imagines herself starving herself to death as she watches the figs rotting and dying, which is a symbol of Esther's incapability of choosing. She is tormented by her indecisiveness because she wants to experience and do everything, but it is humanly impossible to do and be everything.

The Bell Jar not only provides a groundbreaking portrayal of mental illness but also engages with fundamental existential themes. By presenting Esther's struggles in such raw detail, Plath challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about mental illness, societal expectations, and the nature of existence itself. The novel serves as a powerful tool for promoting understanding and empathy, while also raising complex philosophical questions about freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in a world that often seems indifferent to human suffering.

Chapter Six: Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood: A Comparison of Adolescent Angst

Introduction

Salinger and Plath's novels are often compared for having similar protagonists who struggle with the anxiety of growing up and finding their place in the world of adults (Séllei 127). Additionally, the two novels have a lot in common since they have a confessional style, are both set in the 1950s, and criticize the time-exclusive standards, both were banned and both characters struggle with mental illnesses. Since the two protagonists are opposite in gender, the same message and the same struggles are perceived differently. The situation is the same; however, the protagonists have different and unique experiences

6.1.Confessionalism: The Author and its Creation

Confessionalism is a style of writing that emerged in the late 1950s America and was first popularized by Robert Lowell in his popular poetry book *Life Studies* (1959). The writing style was a breakthrough in poetry because Lowell disclosed his upbringing and personal family life in his book. Writers were influenced to not adhere to traditional meter and form of poetry and to disclose personal life experiences and feelings.

> I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo . . . These peculiar, private and taboo subjects, I feel, have been explored in recent American poetry. (Plath qtd in. Gill p20)

The two novels discussed and shared many similarities with their authors. Inspired by Lowell's writing style, Sylvia Plath was also a confessional writer who disclosed personal events and experiences; however, for the novel, she used a pseudonym and fake names for the characters to hide her identity and the identity of people in the book. *The Bell Jar* is without

argument a confessional piece; however, due to Salinger's private nature, *The Catcher in the Rye* has not been discussed much in terms of a confessional novel. Despite the lack of biographical information about Salinger, there are recognizable similarities between him and his protagonist.

6.1.1. Confessionalism in *The Catcher in the Rye*

While *The Bell Jar* is a semi-autobiographical novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* is not quite defined as one. J. D. Salinger was quite a private man and hated anything that would bring him attention. He refused to sell the copyright to any of his literature to permit any movie adaptations. This is emphasized in his novel. Holden says: "If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me." (Ch. 1). Salinger also tried to sue Ian Hamilton, a Canadian writer who tried to publish a biography about him entitled *In Search of J. D. Salinger* in 1986, only to be published two years later in 1988. (*J. D. Salinger Sues to Bar a Biography*)

Salinger's relatives and acquaintances refused to do any interviews and kept silent to respect his decision to stay private. Only after he died in 2010, Salinger's former lover, Jean Miller, was interviewed for the first time. She said, "He once said to me, 'If you ever lose track of me just read my stories.'" ("Lifting the veil of mystery from J.D. Salinger"). Therefore, it is a declaration that he made to his girlfriend at the time that his writings come from his own experiences and his troubles, or at least inspired by them. Additionally, he dated her at the same time he was writing his novel; Jean could be the inspiration for the character Jane Gallagher who can be his platonic love.

According to Miller, Salinger was attracted to her innocence and guilelessness. She was only 14 when she met the 30-year-old Salinger. Other than the resemblance in the first name between Jean and Jane, they also had a platonic love. He was writing *The Catcher in the Rye* while dating Miller and taking her on long walks on the beach. Considering that he joined the military during the Second World War and checked himself into a mental hospital afterward

and was treated for “combat fatigue” which was post-traumatic stress syndrome, it is very understandable for an individual to crave innocence, calmness, and peace. This is relevant in his writings because he never writes about war; instead, he obsesses about innocence. “It's fascinating because World War II made him as an artist, and broke him as a man."

In an unprecedented interview in 2019, almost ten years after J.D. Salinger’s death and in celebration of the 100th anniversary of his birth, his son Matt Salinger disclosed a lot of new information. He said the following about why *The Catcher in the Rye* was so relatable and engaging:

> Everybody feels lost, everybody loses their way in life whether you are sixteen or you are seventy-six, we question our choices we question how we are living, who we are living with, what we are doing, and that was Holden, that was my father. He thought there was a better way, a kinder way (Wagner, “Celebrating JD Salinger”).

The novel is enduring a sustained popularity due to the relatability of the themes. This explanation, proposed more than two decades after the novel's initial publication, comes from journalist Stefan Kanfer, who imagines a middle-aged Holden Caulfield reflecting on the book's appeal. Kanfer suggests that the novel's new audience shares many similarities with its original readers. They may not be familiar with the exact vocabulary, but they can relate to the underlying sense of discontent. The imagined older Holden believes that his distress resonates with new readers, who also yearn for the role of a savior figure and are acutely aware of life's impermanence (Whitfield 586).

The way the author saw life and the world is projected into how the character Holden expressed himself. The novel might be fictional; however, it has the author’s unfiltered thoughts toward society and his feelings of estrangement and the sense of not belonging. Just like the way Holden expressed his desire to flee and live in the woods far from everyone and expressed his absolute hatred for fame, Salinger isolated himself from the public eye and did not want to

be treated as a famous person. Just after realizing the fame that the novel brought him, he decided to move from New York City to Cornish, New Hampshire, the small town where he lived until he died in 2010.

The Catcher in the Rye is an open book to Salinger's inner thoughts and feelings. He wanted to stay away from the eyes of the public, so he stopped publishing and favored a more reserved and private life. The public assumed that he stopped writing; however, his son declared in the interview that his father spent 6 to 8 hours a day writing for over fifty years because writing was his passion, and he did it for himself. The happy news is that his son will soon publish his father's works sometime in the current decade (Wagner, "Celebrating JD Salinger").

Similar to Holden who fails out of different schools, Salinger fails out of McBurney School, and his parents decide to send him to Valley Forge Military Academy. The latter is an academy in Pennsylvania and served as an inspiration to the school Holden fails out of Pencey Prep school in Pennsylvania. Due to Salinger's private nature and the lack of personal information, we cannot compare more details about his life with Holden's. Furthermore, even the end of the novel has mysteriousness. Although the protagonist does not specify the location he is currently in, all we know is Holden is undergoing treatment for his mental state in a mental institution.

Although Salinger's life does not resemble his main character's life, we can consider that the novel has a confessional style. Opposite to Holden, Salinger is the younger sibling, he only has an older sister. The obsession with protecting innocence in Holden comes from Salinger's post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from seeing the atrocities of war. The character grieves over his younger brother's death at such a young age, and he tries to protect his sister and romanticizes his childhood and anything related to it. At an age when his friends are thinking of college, work, or even marriage; he dreams of becoming a catcher in a field of rye full of children, and he catches and protects them from falling off a cliff. Just like Holden,

Salinger wants to preserve youth and innocence. Instead of witnessing and joining war battles or becoming rich and famous; he exerted his desire for peace, stability, and isolation from society in his novel and acted by it in his real life.

6.1.2. Confessionalism in The Bell Jar

For Plath, everything she wrote was a reflection of her own experiences especially in her only novel *The Bell Jar* and her latest book *Ariel*. The novel retells Plath's transition to adulthood, her first suicide attempt, and her existential crisis. The narration is in a retrospective point-of-view, Plath mirrors everything she has been through as a nineteen-year-old into her protagonist. Just like Plath telling us her experiences, Esther started writing a novel about herself which confirms that Plath wanted to confide her thoughts and feelings into writing. "My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. Elaine. I counted the letters on my fingers. There were six letters in Esther, too. It seemed a lucky thing." (Ch. 10). She shunned herself away from writing after she wrote a few lines because she thought to herself that she has zero experience in life. Plath confides her emotions and experiences as a mentally ill person into the character Esther to share her experience struggling with mental illness and her suicidal tendencies. In an interview, Plath explained that she gets inspiration from her life.

> What I've done is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color—it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown… I tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar (Plath qtd in. Bryfonski 83)

Plath fictionalized her real-life experiences to distance herself from the person struggling with adulthood and self-discovery. Additionally, she also wanted to keep her personal life private by changing the names of people and places. She also used the pseudonym because she did not want people to associate the novel with her and her life. Nevertheless,

readers and critics would often use the novel as an autobiographical source due to the close similarity between the author's life and the novel's events. For Plath, writing about her own experiences is an exciting experiment. Despite the efforts to distance herself from her art, the parallels between Plath's life and Esther's story were too striking to ignore, leading to intense speculation and analysis of the author's personal history. The blurred lines between fiction and autobiography in *The Bell Jar* have contributed to its enduring fascination, inviting readers to ponder the intricate relationship between an author's life and their art.

> I think particularly the poetess Ann Saxton [sic], who writes about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who has had a nervous breakdown, is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting. (*A Sylvia Plath Interview with Peter Orr*)

Plath took inspiration from many authors at the time, and she was specifically inspired and fascinated by Anne Saxton, a confessional writer who suffered from mental illness and suicidal tendencies, and her writings centered on her own emotions and experiences. Plath finds excitement and therapy in writing about her struggles and past traumas as a way to cope with her reality. This therapeutic aspect of writing became a cornerstone of Plath's creative process, allowing her to explore and externalize her inner turmoil. Like Sexton, Plath delved into deeply personal topics, including her own battles with depression and her complex relationships, particularly with her father. Her unflinching examination of these themes in works like "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" set new standards for emotional honesty in poetry. The influence of confessional poetry on Plath's work is evident in the raw, often uncomfortable truths she presents in her writing. This style not only helped Plath process her own experiences but also resonated strongly with readers who found solace and understanding in her words.

Plath's poetry often blurred the lines between personal experience and universal themes, creating a powerful connection with her audience. Her vivid imagery and metaphors, often

drawing from nature and mythology, added layers of complexity to her confessional style. The intensity of her work, coupled with her tragic death by suicide, has led to ongoing debates about the relationship between art and personal suffering. Plath's legacy continues to influence contemporary poetry, inspiring generations of writers to explore their own vulnerabilities and inner landscapes. Her work also sparked important conversations about mental health, gender roles, and the pressures faced by women in mid-20th century America.

6.2. J.D. Salinger's and Sylvia Plath's Literary Techniques

The Catcher in the Rye and *The Bell Jar* were written during a period of transition in literary movements. They retain many modernist elements while incorporating themes and techniques that would become more prominent in postmodern literature. Their focus on individual experience, skepticism towards societal norms, and exploration of mental health issues align them with early postmodern concerns.

Both novels share several narrative techniques as both present the psychological turmoil of young protagonists navigating the complexities of adulthood. While separated by a decade in their publication, both novels offer sharp critiques of 1950s American society through their distinctive use of language. Salinger and Plath create a distinctive narrative style that deeply immerses readers in the protagonists' perspectives allowing readers to sympathize with the protagonists. Both novels utilize first-person narration, unreliable narrators, and open endings to create deeply engaging and thought-provoking narratives.

The two novels are narrated in the first-person point of view creating an intimate connection between the reader and the protagonist. This technique evokes an emotional response from readers placing them in the protagonist's perspective and providing an intimate view of the intricacies of complex feelings of existential angst. Additionally, the use of the first-person pronoun places the narrator, and the reader, as someone experiencing the events first-hand. For instance, Holden uses raw emotions and personal reflection to draw the reader into

his experiences, making him more relatable and sympathetic. Showing vulnerability and anger, perplexity and hopefulness demonstrate the complexities of human emotions.

Similarly, Esther's narration offers intimate glimpses into her psyche. She describes her experience in the bath, saying, “The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft, white, hotel bath towels I felt pure and sweet as a new baby.” (Ch. 02) Esther shares intimate moments and uses vivid, sensory details with the use of many adjectives that easily draw the image for the reader and render her relatable, and with the use of the first-person pronoun “I”, the reader easily sympathizes and relates to her expressions.

Both novels employ first-person narration, but their narrative voices are markedly different. Holden's voice is colloquial and conversational, peppered with slang and repetitive phrases that reflect his age and social background. This informal tone immediately establishes Holden as an outsider, rebelling against the adult world he perceives as "phony." In contrast, Esther's voice is very demure, more formal, and educated, befitting her role as a high-achieving college student. However, as Esther's mental state deteriorates, her narrative becomes increasingly fragmented and detached, mirroring her growing alienation from society.

The dialogue in both novels reveals much about the social dynamics of 1950s America. Holden's interactions with adults are frequently characterized by misunderstanding and frustration, highlighting the generational divide of the era. His conversations are filled with sarcasm and cynicism, reflecting his disillusionment with the adult world. Holden’s random thoughts: “Anyway, I'm sort of glad they've got the atomic bomb invented. If there's ever another war, I'm going to sit right the hell on top of it. I'll volunteer for it, I swear to God I will.” (Salinger Ch.18). The quote encapsulates his disillusionment and cynicism towards the world. His seemingly nonchalant attitude about sitting on an atomic bomb reveals a deep-seated despair and a provocative rejection of societal norms. Moreover, Esther's dialogues, particularly

with male characters, often underscore the limited roles available to women in the 1950s. Her stilted conversations reflect the societal expectations that constrain her, with language serving as a tool to expose gender inequalities. “These conversations I had in my mind usually repeated the beginnings of conversations I'd really had with Buddy, only they finished with me answering him back quite sharply, instead of just sitting around and saying 'I guess so'.” (Plath Ch.5). The quote provides a glimpse into the character's psychological state, highlighting her inner strength and desire for self-assertion, even as she struggles to manifest these qualities in her real-life interactions.

Both novels were banned in the 1970s and the 1960s for the use of profanity and sexual references, deeming them immoral. However, this censorship raises important questions about the nature of morality in literature and society at large. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the morality of something is not determined by the use of explicit language or irreverent words, but rather by actions that diminish or devalue human dignity and well-being. In fact, it's the impact on human life and its inherent worth that truly defines what is unethical or immoral, not merely the words used to describe it (Edwards 40). This perspective suggests that the novels' censorship may have been misguided, focusing on superficial elements rather than the deeper ethical implications of the stories and characters' actions.

Holden uses colloquial language full of vulgar expressions, slang, and loose sentence structures, which makes the novel a historical linguistic record of the popular speech of 1950s American teenagers (Costello 172). Holden's liberal use of terms like "goddamn" and "phony" not only characterizes him as a rebellious teenager but also reflects the emerging youth culture of the 1950s. His language is a direct challenge to the polite, conformist society of the time. Esther, on the other hand, employs more sophisticated language, which underscores her academic background but also highlights the pressure she feels to conform to societal expectations. However, similarly to *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Bell Jar* carries sexual

references, and also the overt rejection of the woman's role as wife and mother made the novel controversial.The contrast between their linguistic styles reflects their different social positions and the varied pressures they face.

Through their distinctive use of language, both novels explore themes deeply rooted in 1950s American society. Alienation and isolation are central to both works, with the protagonists' linguistic styles setting them apart from their peers and the adult world. The theme of coming of age is explored through Holden's reluctance to use adult language and Esther's struggle to find her voice in a world that seeks to silence her. References to material goods and social status in "The Catcher in the Rye" highlight the post-war prosperity and increasing materialism of the era. The pressure to conform to the "American Dream" is evident in the language used to describe social interactions and expectations in both novels. Gender roles and expectations are particularly scrutinized in "The Bell Jar," with Plath's linguistic choices highlighting the limited options available to women.Both novels use language to rebel against societal norms, with Holden's crude expressions and Esther's increasingly honest and raw narrative challenging the polite façade of 1950s culture.

The overall tone of each novel further reinforces their themes and reflects different responses to societal pressures. Holden's narrative is marked by a sarcastic, often humorous tone that masks his underlying pain and confusion. This tonal choice reflects a common coping mechanism for teenagers feeling out of place in adult society. Esther's tone, initially observant and slightly detached, becomes increasingly depressive as the novel progresses. This shift mirrors her deteriorating mental state and her growing awareness of the limitations imposed on her by society.

The two protagonists can be considered unreliable narrators, which adds depth and complexity to the storytelling. This technique is evident in the contradictions in the narrators' statements and actions, their distorted perceptions due to mental health struggles, and their

subjective interpretations of events and people. Their mental health struggles and the subjective nature of their experiences lead to narratives that challenge the reader's understanding of truth and authenticity. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden's unreliability is demonstrated through his contradictory statements. For instance, the statement at the end of the novel makes the reader question all the judgments Holden makes about people, saying, “About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice. It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody.” (Ch. 26) Another instance that shows Holden’s unreliability as a character: “Then, just to show you how crazy I am, when we were coming out of this big clinch, I told her I loved her and all. It was a lie, of course, but the thing is, I meant it when I said it. I'm crazy. I swear to God I am.” (Ch. 17).

Another example of his unreliability as a narrator is when he claims to hate movies yet mentions going to them several times. “If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me.” (Ch. 1). In another instance, Holden claims: “I hate the movies like poison, but I get a bang imitating them.” (Ch. 4). Despite his vocal hate about the movies, he often goes to the movies with his friends. In another instance: “I almost was once in a movie short, but I changed my mind at the last minute. I figured that anybody that hates the movies as much as I do, I'd be a phony if I let them stick me in a movie short.” (Ch. 11) The fact that he entertained the idea of making an appearance in a short movie shows his interest in them. He was reluctant to do it because he seemed to want to maintain his public principle of hating movies, he tried to not appear phony to other people.

“You take somebody that cries their goddam eyes out over phony stuff in the movies, and nine times out of ten they're mean bastards at heart. I'm not kidding.” (Ch. 18). A public image is very important to Holden, and to maintain that upright public image that does not translate to a phony, Holden has to put an effort to act to like and dislike certain things.

According to Maxwell Geismar: "For the later sections of the narrative are simply an episodic account of Holden Caulfield's 'lost weekend' in New York City which manages to sustain our interest but hardly deepens our understanding." (Geismar cited in. Trowbridge 682). The first-person narration draws the reader to feel for the character, and the unreliability of the narrator permits the reader to read critically and to form his own opinion and judgment of events.

For *The Bell Jar*, Esther's descent into depression profoundly impacts her worldview and her reliability as a narrator. As she grapples with her mental health, her perceptions of events and people become distorted. Her subjectivity as a narrator may lead to a skewed understanding of events, as Esther often focuses on her internal struggles rather than objective reality.

Her descriptions of her surroundings and interactions are colored by her emotional state, which can mislead readers about the true nature of her experiences. Before the start of her asylum treatments, she is more self-conscious, and she is suspicious of the people around her. An instance that is worth to be mentioned is George Bakewell's visit, her ex-boyfriend's roommate. She thought: "he just wanted to see what a girl who was crazy enough to kill herself looked like" (Ch. 14). There is no evidence to suggest such ill intentions. A more apparent delusion Esther has is when she suspects Joan to "It occurred to me that Joan, hearing where I was, had engaged a room at the asylum on pretence, simply as a joke." (Ch. 16). When Joan tells her why she ended up in an asylum, she concludes that "she must be trying to see how crazy I was— believing all that." (Ch. 16).

> I had gone to bed right after supper, but then I heard the piano music and pictured Joan and DeeDee and Loubelle, the blonde woman, and the rest of them, laughing and gossiping about me in the living room behind my back. They would be saying how awful it was to have people like me in Belsize and that I should be in Wymark instead. (Ch17)

Her self-consciousness can be interpreted as her existential uncertainty. Her delusions are projections of her own insecurities. She is ashamed of her public image that she does not

construct a solid relationship with anyone. She has shallow relations with both the people she considers similar to her and the ones who are not.

Her constantly fluctuating opinions on marriage are another example. In instances, she imagines herself fabricating a new name and having a family with many children like Dodo, in another she despises the idea of marriage and children. Publicly she is advocating that she is a successful person who hates the idea of marriage, but when she runs away she imagines an alternative life with a stranger having a bunch of kids. Similarly to Holden,

Both Esther and Holden show the inconsistency of their thoughts about important things in their lives and their judgement of people shows the complex and humanly complex thought process and shows their desperation for authenticity and freedom, and their troubling existential angst. The stories are told in retrospect. The narrators call events from their memories from a place presumably in a better head space. Salinger and Plath create character development but stop at open endings where it is up to the reader to imagine what happens to the protagonists and their future trajectories and decisions. This narrative technique of ambiguous endings serves multiple purposes in enhancing the literary work. Primarily, open endings contribute to a heightened sense of realism within the narrative, as they more closely mirror the ambiguity and ongoing nature of lived experience. Therefore, the two protagonists' stories appear more realistic and add a sense of authenticity.

The absence of clear-cut conclusions renders the protagonists more relatable and multi-dimensional, as it acknowledges the complexity of human experience beyond simplistic "happily-ever-after" scenarios. Moreover, the two novels encourage the reader’s imaginative engagement by refraining from providing definitive resolutions. This approach to narrative closure aligns with modernist and postmodernist literary tendencies, which often eschew traditional plot resolutions in favor of more ambiguous, thought-provoking conclusions that reflect the complexities of contemporary existence.

6.3. On the Essence of Being: A Comparison between Holden and Esther's Angsts

Holden and Esther like any adolescent strive to find meaning in the things they pursue. Adolescence is a period known for teenage angst that stems from worrying about figuring out the self in the present and what will it become in the future. Holden is a perfectionist; however, he is too unsatisfied with reality to commit any strength to excel in anything. He sees hypocrisy in every individual he encounters, and he prefers the world of childhood. To that end, he prefers living in the woods isolated from society. In contrast, Esther has been the perfect student for all her life; she did what she is told to do and she excelled in it for the pursuit of a good life. With all the efforts and hard work that she commits herself to, she finds herself in an absurd situation. All her life was a pursuit for perfection; but when she paused and observed the reality that she is not perfect, she nitpicked every flaw she could think of herself, and she found herself analyzing people and getting unsatisfied with reality.

There are two Holdens in the novel. The first is a sixteen-year-old that the events are happening to, and the second is him a year later telling the story from a retrospective view. Holden expresses his teenage angst and worries about adulthood. The success of the novel can be traced to the authentic language that captured well the teenage vernacular of prep school students or young adults. Similarly, in The *Bell Jar*, Esther is telling her story in retrospect. There are two Esthers, a married woman with a child telling the story of a second Esther who is a nineteen-year-old who is confused about the future.

6.3.1. The Anxiety of Growing Up : A Comparison of Angst between the Sexes

Adolescence is an important phase where individuals plan for their future adult selves and part ways with childhood. The protagonists are anxious adolescents because they are emerging out of habitual ways of being in childhood, but they are not yet at the place where they can quite comprehend the status quo as adults. They stepped out of their daily comfort as children into a new start. They are faced with the reality of the world and the reality of the human condition. Humans are the only mammals that are conscious of the human condition; however, as children, one does not think of growing up, death, or change. The protagonists were happy free-spirited children. On top of the normal anxiety of growing up, they had to witness the death of a close one. The sudden death events must have traumatized them and hindered a slow and gradual phase of maturation. As they are jolted out of their childhood by the traumatic events of losing a loved one, the death of a father, a little brother, or a friend, their experience of the world appears more difficult and cruel. Not only they were expected to conform to the society of that time, but they were also exposed to the reality of the inevitability of death at a young age which is a new unrecognizable phase in their lives. They distanced themselves to reflect on their existence by fleeing from society.

The symbolism of innocence is prevalent in both novels. They seem to cherish their childhood and anything that reminds them of the past. Holden dreams of being a catcher of innocent kids in a big field of rye and saves them from falling off a cliff. He tries to protect his little sister from the adult world, and his red hunting hat seems to be his favorite because it hides his gray hairs, and his love for the museum. After all, nothing changes in a museum but he is unable to go in because he is afraid to see change. All these are redundant symbolism of him cherishing innocence and being a child. Holden and Esther try to flee reality by running away from society. While the first despises everyone and considers them phonies, the second wants to cut her life short as a way to escape reality.

For Esther purity was the word that described her childhood and diligent student phase. She associates happiness with childhood, “I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old.” (Ch. 07) The age of nine is when her father passed away. She cannot help but reminisce when she is happy. It is understandable because the older one gets the more responsibilities they accumulate and the more they understand how the world functions. Childhood represents simpler times and a carefree spirit whether for males or females. It is a preferable time for both genders because in both cases adolescence is a hard time to go through, and it can be frustrating.

Moreover, they both are scared of following the traditional route in life. Holden sees phoniness in every person he encounters and despises the idea of having a normal office job afraid of seeing himself turning into a phony. Similarly, for Esther, the traditional route implies complying with double standards and the fear of missing out on something great. She is left with a paralyzing feeling when she thinks of the future, or even when planning something productive for the summer. Whenever she thinks of something, she immediately thinks that she is either inadequate to pull it through or it is not for her. Both protagonists see that the traditional route in life does not satisfy them. Holden wants to live in the woods far from people for the sake of not growing up to be one of the phonies, and having an ordinary job. Among the different ideas she had for herself, Esther thinks of changing her name and marrying and having a lot of children. Unable to decide she commits suicide and gets admitted into different asylums for treatment.

> I would be simple Elly Higginbottom, the orphan. People would love me for my sweet, quiet nature. They wouldn't be after me to read books and write long papers on the twins in James Joyce. And one day I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway. (Ch. 11).

They are both scared of being adults because that implies integrating into a society they despise. They both hold angst toward their future because they are scared of change. As a result,

they want to run away and hide. Moreover, uncertainty is a common theme in the two novels. Similarly to Esther's analogy of the fig tree that describes her uncertainty, Salinger shows the uncertainty of the protagonist by saying, "In my opinion. I mean how do you know what you're going to do till you do it? The answer is, you don't. I think I am, but how do I know? I swear it's a stupid question." (Ch. 26).

They are simply afraid of living in their skin. Although they try to resist adulthood, at other times they force a grown-up façade. Holden often lies about his age to engage in adult situations, wants to get married in the woods, and flirts with older women. His posturing as an adult is proof of his hypocrisy. His encounter with the prostitute in the hotel and his failure to go along with the act is proof of his desire to act bigger than his age. Moreover, Holden seeks two girls. One platonically and the other sexually. The same kind of double standards are seen in *The Bell Jar* where Buddy seeks a pure girl and undermines the fact that he is not. However, he is completely interested in Jane and not in Sally. He considers sexual intercourse with the person he considers as phony and does not respect. The girl that he respects, he does not imagine himself having sex with. Therefore, Holden is influenced by the 1950s traditions and believes that he can be sexually active and interested in marrying a pure girl.

6.3.2. The Search for Salvation and the 1950s Social Standards: Intuition, Purity, Innocence, Hypocrisy, and Phoniness.

The 1950s are considered a conservative time; however, the two novels show that people covertly did not follow them and had double standards. Holden and Esther seem to have a common need for a sense of belongingness, human connection, and sincerity. Holden was looking for innocence in a phony and cruel world. Esther craved purity and intuition in a hypocritical world. Terms differ amongst the two characters but the search is the same.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, phony is an adjective that describes something or someone as "represented as real but actually false; intended to deceive"; and as "a person

who falsely pretends to be something". Moreover, the definition of hypocrisy is "pretending to be what you are not, or pretending to believe something that you do not" (Cambridge Dictionary). These two terms the two protagonists seem to obsess over are similar in meaning. The subtle difference lies in the fact that "phony" often implies a more general falseness or inauthenticity, while "hypocrisy" specifically refers to a contradiction between one's stated beliefs or values and their actions. The protagonists' preoccupation with these ideas may reflect broader societal concerns about genuineness and integrity in an increasingly complex and often deceptive world.

Furthermore, the terms intuition, purity, and innocence are the positive words the protagonists obsess over. Intuition, defined as "an ability to understand or know something without needing to think about it or use reason to discover it, or a feeling that shows this ability" (Cambridge Dictionary), is often associated with a kind of innate wisdom or understanding. This concept of intuition adds another layer to the cluster of idealized qualities, potentially seen as a form of untainted knowledge free from the corrupting influence of societal expectations or formal education. Closely related to intuition is the concept of purity. Someone pure is described as "behaving in a way that is morally good, especially in things related to sex" (Cambridge Dictionary). In the context of *The Bell Jar*, this notion of purity is specifically applied to women, where a "pure" woman is one who preserves herself for marriage. This preservation is intrinsically linked to the idea of innocence, defined as "the quality of not having much experience of life and not knowing about the bad things that happen in life.". The idealization of these qualities - intuition, purity, and innocence - reflects broader societal attitudes, particularly those prevalent in the mid-20th century, regarding women's roles and virtues. However, these concepts can also be viewed as restrictive, placing unrealistic expectations on women and limiting their capacity for growth and experience.

The protagonists' fixation on these qualities may indicate an internal struggle between societal expectations and personal desires for knowledge, experience, and self-determination. This tension highlights the complex interplay between individual aspirations and societal norms, a central theme in many literary works exploring women's experiences during this era. These terms can be viewed as binaries detected throughout the novels, shaping how the two protagonists perceive and describe their environment. For Holden, innocence is in opposition to phoniness. It is represented in Phoebe, his deceased brother, children, childhood, and everything that reminded him of the past.

This perspective stems from his belief that children are genuine and authentic, untainted by the phoniness and hypocrisy he perceives in the adult world. In contrast, he views phoniness as an inherent characteristic of adulthood, representing a lack of genuineness and authenticity. For Esther purity and intuition are juxtaposed to hypocrisy. The state of being pure is associated with being clean and holy; however, society takes purity for granted and Esther comes to understand her society's hypocrisy. Both protagonists find themselves on a journey to navigate the complexities and contradictions of their respective societies. Their struggles reflect a broader search for authenticity and meaning in a world they perceive as often hypocritical or phony. This quest for understanding and self-definition amidst conflicting societal expectations forms a core element of their character development throughout their respective narratives.

To conform to society in the 1950s was to pretend to value traditions, yet men had to have sexual experiences and women had to stay virgins for their future husbands. In Holden's words, people had to act phony; they had to fake conversations, fake relationships, and fake smiles to get along with other people. The grown-up world was full of phony people.

> "You ought to go to a boys' school sometime. Try it sometime," I said. "It's full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day, and you have to keep making believe you give

> a damn if the football team loses, and all you do is talk about girls and liquor and sex all day, and everybody sticks together in these dirty little goddam cliques. (Ch 17).

Holden complains about people's motives to do things. Boys in his school who look well-educated and put together are described as phonies; however, their motives for cultivating a well-presentable image are to become rich, have girls, and have meaningless fun. He gives an example of people buying fancy cars to just sell them again, and of lawyers that defend criminals for the sake of being terrific lawyers. “How would you [lawyers] know if you did it because you really wanted to save guys’ lives, or because you did it because what you really wanted to do was be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you […] How would you know you weren’t being a phony? The trouble is, you wouldn’t.” (Ch. 22). People do not seem to have noble unselfish goals. They do not have a meaningful and morally correct purpose in life like Holden’s dream of becoming a catcher in the rye.

Holden’s solution for society’s hypocrisy is to flee from it all. He proposed to Sally, a girl he admitted he sees as a phony, to flee into the woods and marry him. Sally recognized the silliness of the proposal given that they are a couple of teenagers and one cannot live without a guaranteed and steady financial income. Holden seems to be delusional for thinking his proposal through. Although Holden hates his life, he does nothing to change it. Instead, he is running away from his problems, which further supports the argument that he is a spoiled kid for not facing his problems.

Since the start of his journey running away from school, Holden meets different people and engages in conversations; however, he never feels fully satisfied. Holden is in search of a sincere human connection, someone who can listen and understand his inquiries, contemplations, and reflections. “What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could

call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it." Holden is in search of someone to empathize with him. Moreover, he does not like his life but he does nothing to change it. Instead, he looks for someone to listen to his talking.

Holden cannot ride the carousel anymore because he is too old for it and decides to watch Phoebe riding it and trying to get a hold of a gold ring. She looks like she is near to fall; however, Holden holds back and does not help her. He believes that it is her adventure to live. "I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything" (Ch. 25). Holden comes to the realization that no matter how much he tries to protect his sister, she is bound to learn and depend on herself. She will eventually grow up and Holden's dream of being a catcher in the rye is unrealistic. Therefore, change comes when he stops analyzing and dissecting the world of adults, directs his attention to himself, and becomes invested in what kind of change he needs to make as an individual since one cannot change society.

Esther associated anything good with the state of being pure and clean. She was raised to be a lady that cares for her reputation and chastity. She believes that a hot bath would make her pure again. "I felt myself growing pure again. I don't believe in Baptism or the waters of Jordan or anything like that, but I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water." (Ch. 02). The state of being pure is very important to her until she was confused about society's perception of pure. The society promotes being pure like Betsy; however, people like Doreen seem to have intuition. "Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones" (Ch. 01). What juxtaposes the word hypocrisy in the novel is intuition. For Esther, a lot of people represented purity; however, people like Buddy and his mother seemed to have a free pass on purity which seemed hypocritical. "What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure,

when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face." (Ch. 06). Moreover, although Doreen was not a great example of how a woman should conduct; however, Esther admired her for what she called "intuition". She could see through society's hypocrisy and her ability to have fun and mingle with the crowd, something Esther is not capable of doing. Moreover, Doreen is described in a good light despite her mischievous immoral doings because she is true to her identity. Contrary to Buddy, she does not try to pretend she is pure and does not look for society's approval.

Esther does not seem to relate to any character in the novel, and she feels better when she is alone walking home or taking a hot bath. She praises Doreen for having intuition but she does not relate to her because she sees her as rebellious, beautiful, and wanted by a lot of men. Esther thinks she is similar to Betsy, but in fact, she does not want the conventional route for herself and she sees many flaws in the role of a mother and a wife. Esher imagines herself as Jay Cee because she represents a career woman; however, she is described as ugly and her life does not seem interesting outside of the office. Additionally, Esther thinks of herself as incompetent and makes a list of the things she cannot do. Her self-confidence is further shattered when she is not accepted into a summer writing course. The only thing she thought she excelled in, which is creative writing, proved to be bad at it. She does not think of herself as cool enough to relate to the characters she likes, and she does not relate to the conventional ones because she hates conformism. In short, Esther does not see herself in any one of the characters.

Holden and Esther are experiencing so much freedom and are presented with so many opportunities in New York, yet they are suffering from existential angst because they are too overwhelmed with the numerous choices they could follow in life. Although Esther worked hard to be part of the scholarship, she seemed to be equally confused and lost as Holden who did not want to be part of a fancy school or have a normal office job. The two characters are on

a journey to understand themselves as they are emerging into a new phase in life, and the self is not in a stagnant state. Humans evolve and crave human connections and being accepted in a society no matter how one despises social standards.

Holden and Esther's inability to conform to social standards incited a sense of rebellion. The difference between Holden and Esther is that Holden wants to change the world through his unrealistic dream of being a catcher in the rye. Esther on the other hand despite the flaws she recognizes in society, mostly sees her flaws and the lack of sense of belongingness to any group or any specific dream for her unskillfulness. She self doubts herself and dissects her flaws. Nonetheless, both characters are searching for salvation that exempts them from the pressure of growing.

Phoniness and hypocrisy seem to be emblems of everything that is wrong with the world and are marked as excuses for why Holden and Esther isolate themselves and cast blame on society. However, the fact that they are submitted into asylums is a sign that they do want to change and approve their situations.

6.3.3. "L'enfer C'est les Autres": The Look

According to Sartre's theory of 'the look', other people's gaze takes part in fueling individuals' angst which is explained in detail in the first chapter. Holden always tries to be the observer rather than the object of observation. First, he ran away to a hill to watch the game from far away. Second, he always wears a red hunting hat as a protective shield from people's gaze when he does not want to be recognized. And third, he ran away from Mr. Antolini's house when he found him staring and patting his head when he was asleep. He also judges him and his wife, Mr. Haas, his school, the boys who attend it, and also the girls. Holden has an opinion on everyone and everything. He tries to be understood which is why he roams the city in search of people to listen to him; however, the only person who listens and understands is his little sister Pheobe. Although he wants to be understood, he hides to avoid people's judgments and

gazes. He is often the observer due to his constant desire to hide or flee. Holden seemed like an outsider who kept to himself. He often observes people, places, or even pigeons and he hides behind a red haunting hat and roams the city alone where no one recognizes him.

For Esther, the look can be detected in many instances in the novel. First, Esther makes use of a fake name whenever she does not want to be recognized. when she goes to a bar with her friend Doreen, when she meets a sailor and dreams of having a big family with him, and when she tries to write a novel about herself. “I didn’t want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston” (ch.11). She is scared of people’s stare and judgment so she hides with a fake name

Second, when she is with Buddy, all their conversations lack the presence of her true thoughts, she creates a façade that always agrees with him. In this situation, she wants to be loved so she presents a favorable persona, and she hides and confines her true thoughts to the reader. The reasoning behind that is she does not want to be looked at as someone different and unlikable by the one person she is attracted to. Third, when she is at home staring out the window and seeing Dodo Conway taking a walk with her children, she hides when Dodo looks back at her. Even after she hid, she still felt the gaze.

> I watched Dodo wheel the youngest Conway up and down. She seemed to be doing it for my benefit. Children made me sick. A floorboard creaked, and I ducked down again, just as Dodo Conway's face, by instinct, or some gift of supernatural hearing, turned on the little pivot of its neck. I felt her gaze pierce through the white clapboard and the pink, wallpaper roses and uncover me, crouching there behind the silver pickets of the radiator. I crawled back into bed and pulled the sheet over my head. But even that didn't shut out the light, so I buried my head under the darkness of the pillow and pretended it was night. I couldn't see the point of getting up. (Ch. 10).

Dodo Conway had seven children, while Esther despised the idea of having children of her own at the time. Esther is the subject and Dodo is the object of the look; however, soon that changes when Dodo turns to look at who is looking at her, and Esther feels the need to hide. As she was judging Dodo for having so many children, she hid away from her gaze to not be judged for despising the idea of marriage and children. She did not want to be an object of observation. Despite crouching, and then hiding in bed with the sheets over her head, she still felt the gaze. Here, the gaze is the judgment of the observer, Dodo, felt by the observed, Esther, even after not being in sight, which explains that the look has lingering effects on the observed. Even after she hid away, Esther still felt the gaze.

Fourth, when Esther is supposed to smile at the camera and fails to take a picture and breaks down in tears that is her giving up to shame. She had already told Jay Cee that she did not know what she wanted to do, and was being looked at by a room full of people waiting for her to pose happily. She always was a diligent girl; however, it was her first time not having anything to look forward to, and that made her feel a sense of shame. In all these instances, she is protecting herself from the gaze of others, and by doing so, she is refusing to be seen as an object and be defined by others fearing shame. She is protecting herself from others. In all these instances, Esther attempts to hide and avoid being the object of the gaze.

Both characters developed ontological insecurity; therefore, the public self and the private self are drastically different. Furthermore, Joan did not have a problem opening up to Esther. She told her about her mental struggles and how she got into a mental asylum, and she talked about her suicidal thoughts. She was an open book, something that Esther could not do. Opening up to someone is something that would attract gaze to her and make her the object of observation and judgment. She could only open up to Dr. Nolan, her second psychiatrist who performed her later shock therapy treatments because she did not have a choice.

People are conscious of themselves when they are with other people. J. D. Laing explained this behavior in his book The Divided Self (1960) which is explained in chapter four of this thesis. The difference between Holden and Esther is that Holden is not confused about his dislike of society's standards and conformity. He is actively pursuing an isolated different life from his peers because he is convinced that the adult world is full of phonies. On the other hand, Esther cannot decide what she wants to do as an adult, so she is opting for destructive behavior through suicidal thoughts.

6.3.4. Mental Health and Choices: Depression, Suicide, and "Bad Faith"

Both Holden and Esther live in a similar society. They are encouraged to excel in school and lead a normal conservative life. Holden comes from a middle-class American family that enrolled him in a fancy school and has teachers encouraging him to do well. Similarly, Esther is doing a scholarship. She expressed: "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" (ch. 01). Although they are blessed to be presented with such opportunities, yet they seem to have more to complain about than thankful. They do not seem to appreciate how lucky they are which begs the argument that they are spoiled kids who cannot fathom and appreciate their blessings.

According to Existentialist thought, we as humans are free entities, and the felt sense of our freedom scares us and creates anxiety. A response to the felt freedom is denying it through affirming facticity, which is the definition of bad faith. In the following quote, Esther feels like everything is fixed and she has no control over herself or her actions.

> The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence. I knew perfectly well the cars were making a noise, and the people in them and behind the lit windows of the buildings were making a noise, and the river was making a noise, but I couldn't hear a thing. The city hung in my window, flat as a poster, glittering and

> blinking, but it might just as well not have been there at all, for all the good it did me (Ch. 02).

The passage shows Esther's existential moments. To be existential is to have those dark nights of the soul when the loneliness of existence becomes transparent and the structure of our confidence lies shattered around us." (Cotlin, 3). Although the world is moving and vivid, and as a part of it she should be feeling alive, she is caught in the sense that she is a fixed thing, and she has no control over her actions. Esther is affirming bad faith. She is affirming that she is an entity caught in the control of events, environment, and a fate that she has no control over. The previous quote can be described through Heidegger's concept of freedom and nothingness. Esther caught herself in a self-reflection moment. She is a straight-As student who had a moment of realization. She was jolted out of her environment and her habitual robotic way of living and reflected on her existence and how she exists as a free entity and this is disclosed as nothingness. Individuals are always free in relation to our world; therefore, the state of freedom and nothingness is always present. Although the state of freedom and nothingness is always present, anxiety comes to the surface in certain contexts. As a consequence, anxiety is always present; however, we experience it only when we step back and recognize our being. So far this is normal human behavior since it is part of the human condition. Esther's feelings of nothingness are amplified due to her mental issues.

Mental illness isolates a person in their mind. Plath described the feeling of isolation as a bell jar that hung above her head, and it did not matter where she was because she was held captive under the bell jar. Furthermore, Plath creates images to describe her depression. She depicts the image of the world moving on, and she is in a place unable to make the smallest sound. Depression distances her from reality and creates two different worlds. A world is full of excitement, youth, joyfulness, noise, and people living their lives. The second world is inside a bell jar where she is isolated, silent, and unable to mingle with everyone else which reinforces

the idea of bad faith. Faced with her freedom and multiple choices, Esther says: “Then plan after plan started leaping through my head, like a family of scatty rabbits.” (Ch. 22). This quote captures a moment of mental frenzy, where multiple possibilities or solutions are rapidly presenting themselves to the speaker in a somewhat overwhelming manner. The simile comparing the plans to "a family of scatty rabbits" suggests that these thoughts are numerous, quick, and somewhat chaotic or disorganized. "Scatty" implies scattered or erratic behavior, reinforcing the idea that these plans are not well-formed or carefully considered. The word “leaping” suggests that she is losing these opportunities and they are fleeing out of her hands. Succumbed to her despair, she draws the following imagery to her life:

> I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three... nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth (Ch. 10).

In the previous quote, Esther is hinting that 19 is her last year as she is planning to commit suicide. The imagery in the previous quote shows a blurred inexistent future because she sees herself ceasing from existence. She does not wish to be dead at 19 or want to be dead, she is foreseeing her death at that age as an inescapable event. Suicide is an unnatural behavior. If one comes to think of killing oneself, it is because they are experiencing a serious symptom of mental illness and it needs urgent care and attention from professionals. It is normal to have angst, but it is very against our human nature to end the life of oneself. Therefore, the quote shows Esther’s bad faith since she has the freedom of choice and she can choose to live. In her case, she needs to seek help to prevent her illness from taking over her.

As for *The Catcher in the Rye*, as the novel progresses, readers come to understand that Holden is retrospectively narrating his story from an asylum. Furthermore, his disturbed mental state made him admit that: “What I really felt like though is committing suicide” (Ch. 14).

Although he does not follow his suicidal thoughts, it shows that his rebellious nature is a result of his illness. Salinger shows that having good opportunities and being in a good financial situation does not immune one from mental issues. This serves as a poignant reminder that mental illness does not discriminate based on socioeconomic status.

The death of his younger brother and witnessing a suicide at his dorms are indicators of holding on to traumatic events. His wish to be a catcher of children can be seen as him wishing he could have helped or prevented the suicidal kid from throwing himself out of a window. These experiences seem to have instilled in Holden a preoccupation with death and a desire to protect innocence, as symbolized by his fantasy of being a "catcher in the rye" who saves children from falling off a cliff. He has a hard time accepting the concept of death. Moving forward and living seems utterly absurd as he cannot fathom that one ceases to exist and people can move on and live normal lives. This perspective helps explain his alienation from society and his difficulty in finding meaning or purpose in conventional life paths.

Salinger's portrayal of Holden's mental state invites readers to consider the complexities of adolescent psychology and the lasting impacts of trauma. It challenges simplistic notions of teenage rebellion and instead presents a nuanced exploration of how past experiences, mental health, and existential questions can profoundly shape an individual's worldview and behavior

It is normal behavior to have angst toward life decisions, especially as a teenager. Adolescence is a phase full of angst due to the accumulation of different life decisions that could determine one’s life course. Having a mental illness in such a crucial phase can make the angst magnified and more difficult which can be seen in Holden’s and Esther’s struggles with their mental states.

Conclusion

The common thing between Holden and Esther other than angst, is that they both want to run away. For Holden, change comes when he stops analyzing and dissecting the world of adults directs his attention to himself, and becomes invested in what kind of change he needs to do as an individual since you cannot change society. When Holden watches his sister reach for a ring and does not help her is the moment he understands that he has to let go of what he cannot control. While Holden seeks perfection in the world around him, Esther seeks perfection in herself. She wants to be everything and do everything, so she compares herself with other people.

A binary can be withdrawn from the two novels. In *The Catcher in the Rye* phoniness is opposed to innocence, in *The Bell Jar*, hypocrisy is opposed to intuition and purity. Phoniness and hypocrisy are close in definition as well as innocence and purity. Both characters look for sincerity and human connection. Holden looks for human connection through having different conversations and searching for someone to listen to and understand. Esther comes to understand the double standards of society that tainted the concept of purity. She came to appreciate intuition in a hypocritical environment. This chapter analyzes the similarities between the two novels.

Salinger and Plath masterfully employ these literary techniques to create complex, engaging narratives that explore the psychological depths of their protagonists. By using first-person narration, unreliable narrators, and open endings, they invite readers to empathize with and critically examine the experiences of Holden and Esther, resulting in richly layered and thought-provoking novels. These techniques not only serve to deepen the reader's understanding of the characters' inner worlds but also reflect the complexity and ambiguity of the human experience, particularly during the tumultuous transition to adulthood.

The fear of growing old comes with the fear of change and the fear of losing precious people in our lives. For Holden, change meant losing his younger brother Allie; therefore, he is afraid of change that can bring similar traumatic events. For Esther, change meant the inevitability of choice and she had to choose between marriage and her career. Moreover, she believes that she has no choice but to submit herself to the faith of ending her life. Humans are not wired to kill themselves; mental illness alters one's thinking.

The language employed in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar* serves not only to develop complex, relatable protagonists but also to craft a searing critique of 1950s American society. Through their distinctive narrative voices, use of vernacular, imagery, dialogue, and tone, Salinger and Plath create works that continue to resonate with readers decades later. These novels use language as a powerful tool to expose the underlying tensions in a society often remembered for its prosperity and conformity, giving voice to the discontent and alienation felt by many in the post-war era.

They both suffer from turbulent emotions of adolescent angst which is a common and normal behavior for teenagers. However, as both novels progress, it becomes more apparent that the protagonists are suffering from serious mental health issues. Holden seems to be a spoiled brat teenager. He comes from a middle-class family, he is faced with countless opportunities, and he goes to a prestigious school. Compared to less fortunate people, he is leading a good life; however, he seems to be discontent with it. It shows that his rebellious nature is a result of his illness. Both authors show that having good opportunities and being in a good financial situation does not immune one from mental issues.

General Conclusion

The thesis analyzed *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar* as a case study of the postwar American novel and used existentialism and feminist thought as the basis of the study. J. D. Salinger and Sylvia Plath portray postwar American society through the perspective of two teenagers. The thesis is a thematic study that explores themes of angst, isolation, disillusionment with society, and themes of suicide, death, and mental illness. Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood express their inner turmoil as they narrate their journey navigating through the standards of 1950s American culture. The two protagonists experience existential angst amid their transition to adulthood.

The postwar period gave rise to a generation of writers that questioned everything and wrote down their experiences which popularized even more to the concept of confessionalism. These works reflect the broader societal shifts in post-World War II America, including changing gender roles and a growing disillusionment with traditional values. Both Holden and Esther grapple with feelings of alienation and disconnect from the world around them, mirroring the experiences of many young people in this era. The novels' enduring popularity speaks to their ability to capture universal themes of identity formation and societal pressure. Furthermore, by presenting flawed and complex protagonists, Salinger and Plath challenge readers to confront their own biases and expectations. This confrontation often leads to a deeper exploration of the human psyche, revealing that existential angst is part of the human condition. The two novels are a means to comfort and reassure readers that they are not alone in their puzzlement. Writing down their experiences enabled the protagonists to use writing as a therapeutic mechanism and to share their experiences.

While existential angst is part of the human condition and is universal, it became particularly pronounced in the postwar period due to the abundance of traditions being questioned and the pervasive skepticism towards established norms. Moreover, the state of

freedom and nothingness is always present as part of the human experience; however, the feeling is amplified in certain moments where the individual contemplates his existence. When Holden and Esther come in realization with freedom and nothingness, they experience existential angst. Freedom is a burden because with the realization that everything is possible and the premise that people are brutally free, one is forced to contemplate existence and face angst. Anxiety is a means to understand one's self and gives us the ability to ask who we are and why we are here which is the journey Holden and Esther are going through as adolescents. Although it is a global phenomenon, it was not much discussed before the popularity of confessionalism as a trend in literary texts in the 20th century. The experience is often not shared and kept to oneself; therefore, people often think they are going through it alone. Confessionalism brought a sense of genuineness to artistic works. The postwar era's rapid social changes and technological advancements further exacerbated feelings of alienation and existential doubt. Salinger and Plath masterfully capture the prevailing spirit of the times, using very relatable themes to explore the complexities of human existence in a changing world. Their works not only reflect the anxieties of their time but also continue to resonate with readers today, highlighting the timeless nature of existential questioning. Furthermore, by giving voice to these internal struggles, both authors contributed to a broader cultural shift towards greater openness about mental health and personal experiences.

Literature's role in society and its relationship with philosophy has evolved dramatically since ancient times. From Plato's critical view of poets in his ideal republic to the Romans' elevation of poetry as the highest art form, literature has long been a subject of philosophical debate. This ancient discourse provides a fascinating contrast to the transformation of literature in the 20th century, particularly in its exploration of mental illness and individual struggles.

The 20th century saw a shift from modernist alienation to postmodern complexity in literature, reflecting broader societal and philosophical changes. Works like *The Catcher in the*

Rye and *The Bell Jar* captured the existential crises and disillusionment of the post-World War II era. Postmodern literature, with its fragmented narratives and multiple perspectives, became a powerful tool for exploring mental health, challenging societal norms, and giving voice to marginalized experiences. This evolution in literary representation has played a crucial role in destigmatizing mental illness, fostering empathy, and promoting a more nuanced understanding of the human psyche. Today, literature continues to serve as a vital medium for illuminating the diverse spectrum of mental health experiences, encouraging dialogue, and contributing to a more inclusive

The Catcher in the Rye is a novel expressing existence's absurdity. Holden as an adolescent character questions people's genuineness, and motives, and seeks to understand the grown-up world. While people try to motivate him to go to school to land a good job and be financially stable, he is too worried about change, growing up, and the quest for genuineness and happiness. He is more immersed in profound thoughts instead of superficialities. People tend to search for meanings when the reality does not satisfy them. This was the protagonist's search for meaning because humans cannot live without meaning and a purpose in life. Holden is in constant search for a humane and real human connection. Holden fears growing up, and he does not want to be part of the adult world due to people's phoniness and shallowness. Life is portrayed as a game that favors people who fit standards and social status. In his journey, Holden searches for genuine human connection, someone who could listen and understand his struggles which he could only find in his sister Phoebe.

The Bell Jar is a feminist novel that explores the double standards of the 1950s, ambivalence between rebellion and purity, and women's confusion with their role in society. The 1950s were a traditional time that encouraged chastity, the institute of marriage; however, it encouraged that only in women. Men were not obtained by such social standards. *The Bell Jar* is both to express feminine and humane struggle. It shows Esther's indecisiveness as a

woman to be a traditional wife or pursue a career, and it also shows humane existential angst and how total freedom is a burden. The feminine struggle is contained in the humane struggle. Therefore, existentialism is a philosophy that can decipher and speak of feminist problems. The unfairness of double standards, her confusion about her future, and her deteriorating mental state are all reasons that fuel Esther's existential angst. The novel unravels existential angst in a way that readers can empathize and identify with Esther. The novel not only unraveled existential confusion but also discussed and spread awareness of the seriousness of mental illness. Similarly, to *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Bell Jar* offers company to the people who feel alone in their mental struggles.

The two novels discussed, *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, share many similarities with their respective authors' lives and perspectives. While *The Bell Jar* is widely recognized as a semi-autobiographical novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*'s classification is less definitive. Although the novel is fictional, it contains the author's unfiltered thoughts toward society and his feelings of estrangement and the sense of not belonging. This raw honesty and relatability have contributed to the novel's enduring popularity, as readers across generations continue to find resonance in its themes. Nevertheless, both works deeply reflect their creators' worldviews and experiences.

Both novels are often compared due to the similarity between the two protagonists. Both are set in the 1950s and were written in retrospect. Holden and Esther share similar struggles with angst and a desire to escape. Both characters grapple with societal expectations and personal growth. Holden learns to focus on self-improvement rather than criticizing others, while Esther seeks perfection in herself. The novels contrast phoniness with innocence and hypocrisy with intuition, respectively to demonstrate the protagonists' search for genuine human connections and struggle with the fear of change and growing up.

Salinger and Plath use first-person narration, unreliable narrators, and open endings to explore their characters' complex psychologies. The authors also employ distinctive language to critique 1950s American society and highlight the mental health issues underlying their protagonists' behaviors, demonstrating that even those with apparent advantages can suffer from psychological distress.

Examining existential angst in the two novels is not a way to disregard the two protagonists' mental illnesses. Clinical anxiety and depression are very real and should be taken seriously. Although angst is part of the human condition, suicidal thoughts are not. No human is wired to kill themselves. The thesis does not discuss in depth mental illness; however, it discusses man's reaction to death and anxiety.

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Résumé

Cette étude vise à analyser comment "L'Attrape-cœurs" (1951) et "La Cloche de Détresse" (1963) réinterprètent et transforment les concepts existentialistes de l'angoisse, servant d'étude de cas sur la culture de la jeunesse américaine des années 1950 et l'émergence d'une conscience féministe. Ces deux romans s'inscrivent dans le contexte de la société américaine des années 1950, une époque marquée par la peur et la paranoïa dues à la Guerre Froide et aux séquelles traumatiques des guerres mondiales inhumaines. La popularité de l'existentialisme, promouvant des idées d'absurdité, de liberté et d'absence de sens, a captivé l'attention des écrivains américains de cette période. Cette thèse se présente principalement comme une étude philosophique et féministe, examinant les thèmes existentialistes dans les deux romans. Elle se concentre sur les théories et les termes relatifs à la condition humaine, ainsi que sur la manière dont les protagonistes des deux romans, Holden Caulfield et Esther Greenwood, abordent les thèmes liés à la condition humaine et à la maladie mentale. En explorant les parcours de ces personnages, l'étude met en lumière les défis uniques auxquels sont confrontés les jeunes adultes dans l'Amérique d'après-guerre. De plus, elle examine comment les expériences personnelles des auteurs ont influencé leur représentation de l'angoisse existentielle dans leurs œuvres respectives. Par la suite, des sections sont consacrées à l'analyse des romans à travers le prisme de la critique littéraire féministe, introduisant une critique sociale de la société américaine des années 1950. Cette analyse multidimensionnelle permet à la théorie féministe de compléter l'existentialisme, ce dernier s'intéressant à la condition humaine sans distinction de genre. En combinant ces approches philosophiques et critiques, la thèse vise à fournir une base riche pour examiner comment les thèmes existentiels se manifestent différemment selon les lignes de genre et les expériences individuelles dans l'Amérique d'après-guerre.Mot clé : Angoisse existentielle, philosophie, existentialisme, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Bell Jar*, Feminisme

الملخص

يهدف البحث إلى دراسة القلق الوجودي في روايتين "الحارس في حقل الشوفان" و "الجرس الزجاجي" لجيروم ديفد سالنجر و سيلفيا بلاث، و ذلك كدراسة حالة للرواية الأمريكية في خمسينيات القرن الماضي. تدور أحداث هاتين الروايتين في المجتمع الأمريكي خلال فترة الخمسينيات، و هي حقبة اتسمت بالخوف و الشك بسبب الحرب الباردة و آثار الحروب العالمية اللاإنسانية. استحوذت شعبية الفلسفة الوجودية، التي روجت لأفكار العبثية، الحرية، و اللامعنى، على إهتمام الكتاب الأمريكيين خلال هذه الفترة. هذه الأطروحة هي دراسة فلسفية تدرس مصطلحات الحركة الوجودية في الروايتين ثم دراسة نسوية. تهتم هذه الدراسة بالنظريات و المصطلحات المتعلقة بحالة الانسان التي تفسر القلق الوجودي و استخدامها في تحليل الشخصيات الرئيسية في الروايتين. إن الأطروحة متعددة الأبعاد لإحتوائها على النظرية الوجودية و النسوية بحيث لا يوجد تناقض بل تكامل للنظريات التي تهدف إلى دراسة حالة الإنسان. ينصب تركيز الدراسة على النظريات و المصطلحات المتعلقة بالوضع الإنساني، و كيفية تعامل الشخصيتين الرئيسيتين، هولدن كولفيلد و إستر غرينوود، مع المواضيع المرتبطة بالحالة الإنسانية و الإضطرابات النفسية. تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الطرق التي يستكشف بها هذان البطلان تعقيداتالوجود البشري و تحدياته، مع إيلاء إهتمام خاص لكيفية تصويرهما للصراعات الداخلية و الخارجية الناجمة عن الظروف النفسية و الاجتماعية المعقدة التي يواجهانها. تتضمن الدراسة أيضا أقساماً لمناقشة الروايتين من منظور النقد الأدبي النسوي، مقدمة نقداً اجتماعياً للمجتمع الأمريكي. يسمح هذا التحليل متعدد الأبعاد للنظرية النسوية بأن تكمل الفلسفة الوجودية، حيث أن الأخيرة تهتم بالحالة الإنسانية بشكل عام. تسعى هذه الأطروحة، من خلال الجمع بين المناهج الفلسفية و النقدية، إلى تقديم قاعدة ثرية لتحليل كيفية تجلي المفاهيم الوجودية بصور متباينة عبر الاختلافات الجنسانية و التجارب الشخصية في المجتمع الأمريكي لفترة ما بعد الحرب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القلق الوجودي، الفلسفة الوجودية، الحركة النسوية، "الحارس في حقل الشوفان"، "الجرس الزجاجي".