

## *Original Paper*

# Madness and Resistance under the Flashback and Juxtaposition—Spatial Narration in *The Bell Jar*

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### **Abstract**

*The Bell Jar*, the only novel by American poet and writer Sylvia Plath, vividly portrays the marginalized experience of American women in the mid-20th century and depicts the struggles of female intellectuals in constructing their own identities.

This paper, by using the concepts of flashback and juxtaposition in spatial narration theory, explores three key aspects: the physical spatial changes in the whole story, the interplay between psychological and physical spaces under flashbacks and juxtaposition, and the protagonist Esther's resistance against the male-dominated society and her awakening of female consciousness in the bell jar. It analyzes how Esther's psychological space evolves within the ever-shifting physical spaces, leading to her feelings of helplessness, despair, and madness. Furthermore, it examines how through her rebellious madness, Esther achieves her awakening of female consciousness, constructs her own identity as a female intellectual, and raises her voice in a male-dominated society oppressive at the time.

### **Keywords**

*The Bell Jar*, Flashback, Juxtaposition, Spatial Narration

## **1. Introduction**

Sylvia Plath, the American poet and writer, is known as a representative of the confessional poetry movement and is considered one of the most important female poets in the United States, following in the footsteps of Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop. In 1982, Plath became the first poet to posthumously receive the Pulitzer Prize. Her notable works include *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) and *Ariel* (1965). Apart from poetry, she achieved great success in the field of novels after her death.

*The Bell Jar* is an autobiographical novel that follows the protagonist Esther Greenwood, a sophomore student, as she goes through a series of experiences, such as working as a guest editor for a prominent magazine, being rejected from a writing course, attempting suicide, undergoing psychological treatment,

and rebuilding her confidence in anticipation of returning to society and embarking on a new life. The novel specifically explores how she and other women characters are oppressed by patriarchal societal ideals, the traumas in her emotional life, her conflicting maternal identity, and the challenges she faces in her artistic pursuits, which ultimately push her to the brink of mental breakdown.

This work showcases Plath's distinct artistic style, nonlinear narrative and multidimensional narrative spaces, to authentically depict the inner thoughts of women and vividly portray the marginalized experiences of American women in the mid-20th century. It highlights the difficulties faced by female intellectuals in constructing their own identities. Moreover, through the novel, Plath reflects on personal life, explores women's spiritual growth and existential value, and reveals the acquisition of subjectivity in the process of women's growth, making it socially significant.

One of the most prominent features of *The Bell Jar* is the constant use of flashback and juxtaposition of physical spaces, as well as its fragmented narrative technique. Unlike traditional linear narratives, the ever-changing physical and narrative spaces reflect the psychological changes of the protagonist, Esther. Through these constant shifts, she gradually descends into mental collapse and despair.

## 2. Literature Review

*The Bell Jar* initially received a lukewarm response upon its publication but gained widespread attention after Sylvia Plath's death, particularly in the 1980s when the feminist movement reached its peak in the United States. As her only novel, *The Bell Jar* captured the interest of numerous scholars both domestically and internationally.

### 2.1 Studies Abroad

Foreign scholars' researches on *The Bell Jar* primarily focuses on areas such as psychoanalytic studies, feminist criticism, and biographical research of the author.

Psychoanalytic studies primarily shift the focus from the connection between the novel and Sylvia Plath's experiences of psychological trauma, and madness to a greater emphasis on exploring the mental states of the numerous female characters within *The Bell Jar* itself. In the work "The Mirror and the Shadow: Plath's Poetics of Self-Doubt" (1985), Axelrod (1985, pp. 286-301) examines Plath's work from the perspectives of depression, anxiety, and the desire to write, rather than focusing on the author herself and her life experiences.

Feminist criticism primarily examines Sylvia Plath's portrayal of women and began in the 1960s and 1970s. In Marilyn Boyer's work (2004) "The Disabled Female Body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*", she discusses the relationship between the female body and the mind. Boyer argues that the disability of the female body represents a "temporary disability caused by patriarchal and feudal systems" (2004, p. 201), highlighting how the female body in Plath's novel can be interpreted as a symbol of suppressed, controlled, and manipulated female discourse.

Biographical research primarily focuses on Plath's life and her relationship with her former husband, Ted Hughes, beginning in the 1970s. For example, Linda Wagner Martin's (1988) "Sylvia Plath: A Biography"

not only tells the story of Plath's life but also includes a substantial collection of her manuscripts, letters, and journals. Heather Clark (2010), in "The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes", points out the artistic and intellectual similarities between Plath and Hughes, both had a shared appreciation for D. H. Lawrence and themes of violence and war, and suggests that they influenced each other in their literary creations after they met.

## 2.2 Studies Home

In 1980s, Chinese scholars began to pay attention to Sylvia Plath's poetry, and it was not until 1990 that the first Chinese translation of *The Bell Jar* by Yan Weiming was published by Northern Literature and Art Press. Domestic scholars' researches on *The Bell Jar* mainly involves feminist criticism, psychoanalytic studies, and thematic analysis, etc.

Feminist criticism primarily focuses on the portrayal of mentally disturbed female characters in the novel. Liu, in his work "Madness under the Bell Jar: Interpreting the Story of Sylvia Plath's Madwoman", points out that the narration of the madwoman serves as a "special strategy of feminist literary creation" (2008, p. 92), suggesting that her madness plays a unique role in her resistance against patriarchal oppression. Psychoanalytic studies offer diverse perspectives. Yang, in "Examining the Anti-Psychiatric Theme in *The Bell Jar* through Sylvia Plath's Adaptation of the Film *The Snake Pit*", highlights the critical tone towards psychiatric institutions in Plath's work and directs criticism towards the modern medical system and societal disciplinary mechanisms. (2015, pp. 70-84)

Thematic analysis primarily focuses on the different themes portrayed in *The Bell Jar*. Guo, in her paper "The Unique Growth Pattern of Women: An Interpretation of *The Bell Jar*," examines the theme of growth in the novel and introduces the universal pattern of "separation-transformation-return." (2007, p. 51) She suggests that the "separation" experienced by women is actually a result of confinement and limitations, where they struggle to transform into women rather than adults, and their "return" is a return to the patriarchal society as women.

In summary, both domestic and international research on *The Bell Jar* mainly focuses on feminist criticism, psychoanalytic studies, and thematic analysis. However, there is relatively less research on the spatial narration in *The Bell Jar*.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the changes in Esther's psychological space within the constantly shifting and intertwined physical spaces in *The Bell Jar*, and how these changes lead to her feelings of helplessness, despair, and madness. Additionally, it explores how Esther achieves her awakening of female consciousness through her rebellious madness, constructs her own identity as a female intellectual, and raises her voice in a male-dominated society oppressive at the time.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Narrative is a phenomenon that occurs in specific time and space. Any narrative work inevitably involves a specific set of events and one or more specific spaces. Narrative studies exist in both a temporal dimension and a spatial dimension, but in traditional narrative research, the latter is often overlooked.

Since the 1990s, structuralist narrative studies have shifted towards post-classical narrative studies, expanding the scope of narrative research and gradually developing the theory of spatial narrative.

The theory of spatial narrative explores the spatial elements, spatial construction, and narrative modes of narrative works. It focuses on the locations, environments, scenes, and the movements and relationships of characters within the narrative space. The theory of spatial narrative recognizes the significance of space in storytelling, as it can influence the development of the plot, the characterization of the characters, and the narrative structure.

### 3.1 Flashback in Nonlinear Narration

Flashback is a narrative technique that involves a non-linear storytelling approach by going back to past events or plot points within the narrative. Through the use of flashback, the chronological order of the story is disrupted, and the readers or audience are taken back to previously occurring events or time periods in order to better understand the background and context of the story.

Nonlinear narration is a narrative form that breaks away from the traditional chronological order of events. Unlike linear storytelling, nonlinear narration organizes and presents the story in a non-traditional manner. In nonlinear narratives, the timeline of the story can be disrupted, fragmented, or overlapping. This means that events in the story can be presented through techniques such as flashbacks, flash-forwards, retrospectives, glimpses, or parallel narratives, requiring the audience or readers to infer and piece together the complete plot from fragmented information. Nonlinear narration can be achieved through various methods, such as time jumps, parallel storylines, nested stories, reverse chronology, reverse playback, and more. This narrative approach enhances complexity and allure, stimulating the audience or readers' thinking and puzzle-solving interests.

Nonlinear narration has emerged as a storytelling technique through the exploration and experimentation of many writers, directors, and artists. William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* employs a nonlinear time structure, and director Quentin Tarantino is well-known for his use of nonlinear storytelling in works like *Pulp Fiction* and *Inglorious Basterds*. It has become an integral part of modern narrative art, widely adopted and developed, and extensively used in literature, film, art, and other fields.

### 3.2 Juxtaposition by Long Diyong

Juxtaposition is a narrative technique where multiple images, symbols, or stories without specific causal connections or a clear chronological order are placed together in a narrative text. They are juxtaposed solely because they collectively illustrate a thematic or conceptual connection. In his book *Spatial Narrative Studies*, Long divides the spatial aspects of narrative text into story space, formal space, psychological space, and existential space (Long, 2014, p. 526). He focuses on the analysis of two unique formal spaces: thematic juxtaposition and fractal narrative.

Thematic juxtaposition refers to the coexistence of several images, symbols, or stories in a narrative text that lack specific causal connections and a clear chronological order. They are placed together because they collectively illustrate a shared thematic or conceptual connection (Long, 2014, p. 176). Long uses the example of two sets of narrative sculptures in the ancient Greek temple of Parthenon to illustrate this

longstanding narrative form, which likely originated from the common thematic narratives of ancient sacred places and has been gradually abstracted and preserved throughout history.

Fractal narrative refers to a narrative form in which events in a narrative text have causal connections but do not form a linear sequence. Instead, they diverge at a certain key point (Long, 2014, p. 215). This narrative form reflects the complexity of non-linear causality in the real world and is manifested in two forms within the narrative text: one effect with multiple causes oriented towards the past and one cause with multiple effects oriented towards the future.

The research on story space and formal space in *Spatial Narrative Studies* fills a gap in the academic field and theoretically demonstrates how the temporal medium of the novel represents space. The study of story space begins with a broad perspective, examining various spatial narrative functions. The study of formal space, on the other hand, is groundbreaking, clearly defining thematic juxtaposition and fractal narrative, providing a clearer and more powerful interpretation of narrative texts that were once taken for granted.

#### 4. Analysis

Soja's "Thirdspace" theory suggests that space can be seen as a concrete material form that can be identified, analyzed, and revealed, while also being a construct of the mind, representing the ideological forms of space and its lived meaning (1996, p. 81). In *The Bell Jar*, the most notable spaces are physical space and psychological space. Physical space undergoes constant transformations through techniques such as flashback and juxtaposition, leading to the increasing confinement and anguish of Esther's psychological space. This mental anguish is presented to the readers through fragmented narratives and recurring imagery, vividly depicting the process of Esther's gradual fragmentation and despair.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the changes in Esther's psychological space within the constantly shifting and intertwined physical spaces in *The Bell Jar*, and how these changes lead to her feelings of helplessness, despair, and madness. Additionally, it explores how Esther achieves her awakening of female consciousness through her rebellious madness, constructs her own identity as a female intellectual, and raises her voice in a male-dominated society oppressive at the time.

##### 4.1 *The Interplay between Physical and Psychological Spaces under the Use of Flashbacks*

The physical space, in literary works, refers to the geographical space of the story world. In literature, physical space takes on a more social dimension and can be elevated into a unique humanistic space that embodies social, moral, and aesthetic aspects, reflecting the context of human social relations. In *The Bell Jar*, the physical changes are exceptionally clear and can be divided into four locations: the women's college, New York City, the suburbs of Boston, and the mental institution. This linear progression in forward time, intertwined with narrative flashbacks, forms the space of the entire novel. Plath, through the continuous progression of physical space, utilizes the first-person narrative perspective to insert narrative flashbacks, interrupting and disrupting the traditional chronological order of storytelling.

In narrative studies, “flashback” refers to a narrative technique where the story jumps backward in time. Through flashbacks, events or periods prior to the current timeline can be showcased or described. At the beginning of the novel, Esther has already transitioned from the women’s college to the bustling city of New York, marking the initial forward progression. While working as a guest editor at the renowned magazine “Ladies’ Day”, she goes out for drinks with her magazine colleagues Doreen and two unfamiliar men. Doreen eventually goes home with one of the men, and Esther follows but decides to leave afterward. When she returns to her hotel, Esther lies in bed, and the narrative unexpectedly shifts to her high-achieving life at the women’s college and her chance encounter with Buddy Willard. The next day, her female superior, Jay Cee, talks to her at work and invites her to an evening dinner, the existing storyline is interrupted again as the narrative returns to her memories of chemistry and physics classes at the women’s college. Overall, the recurring use of flashback disrupts the original forward storyline of the novel, intertwining the past and the present, and distorting the linear narrative style, resulting in a convoluted narrative path. Mickelsen, in “Types of Spatial Structure in Narrative”, points out that the use of juxtaposed plotlines, narrative flashbacks, and recurring imagery interrupts and disrupts the chronological order, creating spatiality within the narrative structure. (1981, pp. 68-69)

Within the context of social space, Esther’s psychological space undergoes a process of longing, repression, confinement, and collapse. As Esther’s mental condition deteriorates, the use of flashback narrative techniques becomes more frequent and often appears without warning. For example, in the fifth chapter of the novel, after attending a dinner, Esther lies in bed reading and experiences a series of flashbacks and present events in a seemingly random sequence. This includes her current encounter with a new ambiguous love interest, Constantin; going to the hospital with Buddy in the past; memories of tipping in the present; being invited to a dance by Buddy in the past; reading about a fig tree in the present; reflections on Buddy’s hypocrisy and their relationship development in the past; present loneliness; debates with Buddy about poetry in the past; imagining a comeback to Buddy’s words in the future; and Buddy proposing to Esther in the distant past. In just one chapter, there are numerous instances of flashback.

The text breaks away from a linear narrative following the progression of physical space and enters a fragmented narrative. Esther frequently traverses between the present, the past, and the distant past, blurring the boundaries between them. The past and present intersect and blend together, with the “now” becoming a branch of the “past” within the narrative. Time is no longer an objective and causal process. While it may seem chaotic, these continuous flashbacks and fragmented narrative resonate with Esther’s feelings of helplessness, anguish, and collapse. Moreover, through this narrative technique, Esther’s mental transformation is vividly conveyed to the readers in the changes of physical spaces.

#### *4.2 The Interweaving of Physical and Psychological Spaces in the Juxtaposition of the Image: The Bell Jar*

Thematic juxtaposition refers to the placement of multiple images, symbols, or stories in a narrative text that lack specific causal relationships and clear chronological order, but are placed together because they

collectively illustrate a theme or concept. In the novel, recurring images such as the bell jar, the fig tree and the tornado serve this purpose. On one hand, each appearance of these images allows the author to present Esther's changing state of mind through different descriptions. On the other hand, the repeated occurrence of these images connects the fragmented narrative of the present and the past into a cohesive whole.

The imagery of "the bell jar" appears a total of seven times throughout the text, with the first two occurrences reflecting Esther's inner turmoil and her initial exploration of the concept of death. After Esther meets Buddy at the women's college, the bell jar is first mentioned in the hospital where Buddy is interning. Buddy takes Esther to a hall to see babies that had died before they were born, and after observing several of these specimens, Esther states, "I was quite proud of the calm way I stared at all these gruesome things." (Plath, 2005, p. 224) She does not fear death, and this awareness of "unnatural death" quietly takes root in Esther's mind. The imagery of the bell jar reappears when Esther returns to her hometown in Boston after leaving New York. During the summer in her quiet hometown, she faces rejection from a writing course she wanted to enroll in and decides to write a novel on her own. However, due to the struggles in her artistic pursuit and the oppressive atmosphere of her hometown, she gradually experiences insomnia and depression. Intertwined with these struggles are flashbacks of her past with Buddy. It is during this time that she recalls the babies in the bell jar at the hospital. The concept of "unnatural death" provides her with an escape from her current predicament: suicide. After a failed suicide attempt at home, Esther is eventually sent to a mental hospital and undergoes electroconvulsive therapy.

After being subjected to electroconvulsive therapy, Esther's mindset gradually becomes calm, but in a state of resignation. Due to the curiosity of the renowned writer Mrs. Guinea about Esther's experiences and her desire to use them as material for her writing, Esther is transferred by Mrs. Guinea from the crowded city hospital to a private hospital in the suburbs of Boston. Regardless of where she is, Esther feels hopeless about her future, stating, "I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air." (Plath, 2005, p. 622) While passing over a bridge, Esther contemplates jumping from the car but ultimately fails, saying, "I sank back in the gray, plush seat and closed my eyes. The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn't stir." (Plath, 2005, p. 633) Due to emotional setbacks, struggles in her artistic pursuits, and the conservative and oppressive nature of a patriarchal society, Esther begins to question her self-worth and feels a strong urge to resist. She attempts to rebel against the constraints and sense of unreality imposed by the world through her madness and suicidal thoughts, hoping to attain freedom in her own mind.

The last three appearances of the bell jar occur when Esther is about to be discharged from the hospital after receiving careful treatment and undergoing another round of forced electroconvulsive therapy. She still harbors fear toward the physical space around her. "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream." (Plath, 2005, p. 796) Despite seemingly nearing recovery, Esther still carries an unfillable sense of insecurity within her. She questions, "But I wasn't

sure. I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (Plath, 2005, p. 809) In reality, although the physical space may change, the social and cultural space in which Esther exists remains unchanged. In the unchanging social space, her "recovery" is filled with uncertainty, and the bell jar continues to hang overhead, as Esther can never truly escape its grip.

By utilizing thematic juxtaposition, the novel highlights the thematic connections and underlying ideas that run throughout the narrative. The repetition of these images reinforces their significance and contributes to the overall meaning of the story.

The bell jar's seven appearances occur in four physical spaces, serving as a subtle thread representing Esther's psychological space beyond the physical realm. The two intertwine with each other, as the physical space constantly shifts and transforms through narrative techniques such as flashback and juxtaposition, gradually enclosing Esther's psychological space and intensifying her suffering. This emotional anguish is presented to the reader through fragmented storytelling and the repeated appearance of certain motifs.

#### *4.3 Madness and Resistance under Depression: The Awakening of Female Consciousness*

As an autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* reflects the authentic experiences of female intellectuals in the mid-20th century. The protagonist Esther confronts the oppression of patriarchal societal ideals, emotional traumas, conflicting maternal identities, the struggles of artistic pursuits, and an inability to escape her mental turmoil, all of which are experiences shared by Plath herself. Throughout the novel, as the physical space progresses forward while constantly intertwining with moments of flashback and juxtaposition, Esther's awakening to her female consciousness becomes an underlying thread.

Plath portrays a range of female characters in *The Bell Jar*, and through Esther's observations of these women, she rejects the limited roles assigned to women within traditional family life. Esther's neighbor Dodo Conway, who has already raised six children and is about to have a seventh, is proud of her identity as a mother. Similarly, Buddy's mother, Mrs. Willard, resigns from her job to become a housewife, fulfilling her duties as a wife and mother. Esther finds it pitiful that women like Dodo and Mrs. Willard, who are confined to traditional family roles, remain unaware of their oppression under patriarchy and are assimilated by patriarchal ideologies. Additionally, Esther also rejects women who excessively pursue career development. Her boss in New York, Jay Cee, is a successful career woman, but Esther believes she has sacrificed her femininity, stating, "Jay Cee's ugly as sin." (Plath, 2005, p. 44)

These women, despite their different social positions, all lack self-awareness. Their identity as "women" is reduced to gender and familial attributes, and they conform to the value system imposed by a male-dominated society, ultimately becoming objects of patriarchal culture.

In Esther's initial interactions with Buddy, he dominates the relationship and emphasizes the importance of the "purity" of female, believing that "women have to be pure for their husbands." (Plath, 2005, p. 281) Meanwhile, men can be "not pure": "even if they weren't pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex." (Plath, 2005, p. 281) However, by the end of the story, Esther undergoes a uterine



cap operation and rejects the concept of female “purity” imposed by patriarchal society. She refuses Buddy’s multiple marriage proposals and declares that she will never marry. Moreover, from initially silently listening to Buddy express repugnant ideas whenever a controversial topic arises, Esther gradually gains the courage to express her own thoughts and questions and challenges Buddy. Ultimately, Esther achieves true independence both physically and mentally, liberating herself from the oppression of a male-dominated society.

By reclaiming women’s own discourse, gaining power over her own body, and challenging male expectations and fantasies, Esther boldly defies male authority. Through her writing, she constructs a female identity, recognizes the deceptive nature of the maternal myth, and ultimately rejects the perpetuation of the maternal lineage. All of these actions reflect her awakening of female consciousness. In the novel, Plath explores female growth through the character of Esther, even though the bell jar continues to hang over Esther’s head. Tragically, Plath herself committed suicide three weeks after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, ending her mental torment and permanently escaping the bell jar.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper, by using the concepts of flashback and juxtaposition in spatial narration theory, explores three key aspects: the physical spatial changes in the whole story, the interplay between psychological and physical spaces under flashbacks and juxtaposition, and the protagonist Esther’s resistance against the male-dominated society and her awakening of female consciousness in the bell jar. Physical spaces are constantly transformed through narrative techniques, which gradually bring about a sense of confinement and anguish in Esther’s psychological space. The mental suffering that she experiences is conveyed to the reader through fragmented storytelling and the recurring presence of certain symbols, vividly depicting Esther’s gradual mental breakdown and despair.

In the end, Esther rejects traditional female roles and the objectification of women in society by observing the women around her. She reclaims her own voice, asserts control over her body, and challenges the expectations and illusions imposed on women by men. Through her bold defiance of male authority and the abandonment of societal notions of chastity, Esther ultimately achieves an awakening of her female consciousness.

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