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The Mirror Stage as the Formative of the Function of the ‘I’: A Lacanian Reading of *The Bell Jar* and Kate Chopin’s “A Pair of Silk Stockings”

Abstract: *The aim of this research paper is to examine the psychological struggles of the protagonists in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and Kate Chopin’s “A Pair of Silk Stockings” through Lacan’s theory of the Mirror Stage, showing how their sense of self is shaped and troubled by an illusory ideal “I” they attempt to embody. The protagonists in both works grapple with the conflict between their inner desires and the societal roles imposed upon them, leading to shattered identities. Esther Greenwood’s role confusion and struggle to establish a complete self, and Mrs. Sommers’s experience reconnecting with an imagined, ideal self, are triggered by a pair of silk stockings. Through this comprehensive reading, I seek to illustrate how Lacanian theory sheds light on the various ways women internalize, resist, or manage societal expectations. To support my analysis, I have thoroughly studied relevant scholarly articles and reference materials beyond the primary texts, using the inductive approach of the qualitative method by applying Lacan’s Mirror Stage to explore the protagonists’ distorted identities. I offer a fresh perspective on female psychological struggle and hope to encourage further research at the intersection of psychoanalysis and literature.*

Keywords: Mirror stage, Ideal-Ego, Lacanian theory, female psychology, social expectations

The Mirror Stage as the Formative of the Function of the ‘I’: A Lacanian Reading of *The Bell Jar* and Kate Chopin’s “A Pair of Silk Stockings”

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Introduction

“Literary theory encourages critical thinking by challenging scholars to question their assumptions about texts, authors, and readers” (Sekar). Agreeing with this assertion, this research deconstructs Jacques Lacan’s theory of the Mirror Stage and reinterprets its implications through the lens of literature. Lacan defines the Imaginary as an internalized representation of the visual world, which initiates the construction of the self as a subject. In the early stages of life, typically between six and eighteen months, the infant experiences a fragmented identity with undefined boundaries between itself and the external world, prior to the acquisition of speech. The encounter with one’s image in the mirror induces a powerful illusion, or misrecognition, of a unified and coherent identity. In this phase, the subject perceives its reflection as a complete and autonomous self - the Ideal-Ego - though this identity is fundamentally alienated, rooted in an external image. “The Mirror Stage is a drama... which manufactures for the subject... the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality” (*Écrits* 4). The Imaginary, along with the Symbolic and the Real, forms Lacan’s three registers of subjectivity.

This research does not treat the Mirror Stage in its conventional psychoanalytic context, which primarily analyzes infant development. Instead, it deconstructs the theory by applying it to the literary texts, Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and Kate Chopin’s “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” to examine how identity and self-perception evolve in adult female characters. Here, the Mirror Stage is reinterpreted as a recurrent psychological structure in which the illusory Ideal-Ego is not simply formed in infancy but continuously shaped and reshaped through social variables, upbringing, economic conditions, and cultural norms. Specifically, this study posits that protagonists experience an acute tension between the Ideal-Ego (an idealized version of the self seen as complete and autonomous) and the fragmented subject produced by the Symbolic Order, particularly under the relentless pressure of societal expectations.

A critical review of the scholarly literature reveals a unique gap: while both texts have been subject to extensive psychoanalytic and feminist scrutiny, no prior study has simultaneously and comparatively applied the three registers of Lacan’s theory to an analysis of *The Bell Jar* and “A Pair of Silk Stockings”. This research thus focuses on Lacan’s seminal essay, “The Mirror Stage as

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Formative of the Function of the 'I'" to explore how this foundational process is recursively reflected in the adult psychological development of Esther Greenwood and Mrs. Sommers.

The novel *The Bell Jar* revolves around Esther Greenwood's psychology, her goals, and her attempted suicide, often focusing on the trauma of identity formation. Similarly, critical discussion of "A Pair of Silk Stockings" has repeatedly centered on self-awakening or feminist habitats. The focus here is on the inner introspection of the female subject: how the formation of the "I" takes place in an individual and is constantly challenged. Mrs. Sommers's activities, triggered by the stockings, are an attempt to form and explore the structured Ideal-Ego she has suppressed for too long. Once she briefly establishes her worth and is no longer suppressed by the societal norms embedded in her psyche, she chooses a moment of self-fulfillment. While Jacques Lacan's theory is often strictly applied to the development of a child's brain and the formation of the concept of "I," this paper attempts to deconstruct that belief and establish that although the fundamental "I" may form in early childhood, the psychology of adulthood involves a continuous development and struggle. This process can be seen as the act of forming a fragile identity through a sense of autonomy.. This reflection underscores the central aim: to expand the dimensions of Lacan's literary theory by breaking away from conventional interpretations of these two texts. The connection between Lacan's theory and these texts is deeply relevant in our modern era, where every individual undergoes the psychological and social dynamics reflected in the Mirror Stage. This paper seeks to illuminate how the formation of the 'I' is not simply a product of passive societal impositions, but a process rooted in individual will and self-understanding, thereby encouraging readers to realize that identity is consciously shaped.

Literature Review

"A literature review summarizes and evaluates writings on a topic, addressing what studies examined, what they concluded, and the state of the art" (Knopf 127). Guided by this principle, this paper analyzes the psychological dimensions of female protagonists through the lens of Jacques Lacan's theory, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I". The study focuses on Lacan's three registers: the Imagery, the Symbolic, and the Real, as they manifest in the inner lives and identity formations of the characters. By applying Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, the research traces the development of the protagonists' sense of self as shaped by illusion within their social and emotional environments. This examination of how the protagonists navigate their psychological landscapes, and how unconscious drives and imaginary ideals catalyze their actions, gives the paper a broader perspective.

While previous research has addressed feminist, psychoanalytic, and Lacanian interpretations of female characters, including those in *The Bell Jar*, a noticeable gap remains in focusing on the deeper psychological underpinnings from a parallel Lacanian perspective. This paper attempts to bridge that specific gap by offering a psychoanalytic reading that highlights the inner conflicts and unconscious

motivations of these characters, thus extending the scope of literary analysis in gender and identity studies.

In their 2015 article, ‘Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*: A Mirror of American Fifties,’ Azra, Bozorgian, and Sabbag explore the societal aspects that hinder the growth of women through a Freudian lens. The study highlights the inadequacy felt by women and the artificial constraints placed on their journey. The researchers primarily focus on the patriarchal tendency to restrict women to the role of childbirth, noting Esther’s confusion as her yearning to become a writer is questioned. Critically, the novel is analyzed from a conventional sociological perspective without a deep analysis of the Lacanian psychological perspective of the protagonist.

Likewise, Ali Khoshnood, in his 2014 paper “To Conform or Not to Conform: Conflicts of Motherhood in Kate Chopin’s Selected Fiction,” examines “A Pair of Silk Stockings”. The paper discusses the concept of the “New Woman” and the deprivation of minimum luxury that marriage often imposed. The expectation was that a mother should solely devote herself to the family. While Khoshnood notes Mrs. Sommers's hidden desire and her eventual fulfillment of it, the paper does not connect this fulfillment with the illusion and ideal of the self, nor does it bear any connection with Lacan’s theory of the formation of the I.

Mahrukh Baig’s 2014 article, “Sylvia Plath’s *Bell Jar* as a Psychological Space,” documents a woman’s journey from imprisonment to freedom through her will, focusing on Esther’s determination to overcome emptiness. The study connects the plight of the Pakistani woman with that of the American woman to strengthen the notion that "women are sisters everywhere". Despite covering a contemporary and important topic, this research also had no bearing on the theory of Lacan. Correspondingly, Isobel Sigley, in her 2020 article “Tactile Awakenings: A Working-Class Mother’s Self-Fashioned Emancipation in Kate Chopin’s ‘A Pair of Silk Stockings’ (1897),” discusses how tactile sensors can bring new hope and desire into an individual. Sigley details how Mrs. Sommers enjoys her newfound independence by purchasing opulent items and entering traditionally male-coded public spaces, viewing the shopping binge as an example of female agency freed by sensory experience. Even though this concept of sensory experience is new, the formation of the I in the psyche was not mentioned. Furthermore, in their 2017 paper "Esther Greenwood’s Finding Identity Process in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*," Permatasari and Ayu analyze Esther's identity creation and psychological growth. Their research places Esther's identity conflict in a psychoanalytic perspective by concentrating on her adolescence and psychiatric crises, drawing attention to how her inability to balance her desires with society’s causes her sense of self to become fragmented. While this analysis provides valuable insights, the imagery, the symbolic, and the real - registers of Lacan’s Mirror Stage are not clearly addressed, revealing a critical theoretical gap that this study aims to fill.

After an extensive investigation, it has been observed that while feminist and general psychoanalytic analyses of *The Bell Jar* and “A Pair of Silk Stockings” exist, there is a marked deficiency in scholarly discourse that simultaneously and comparatively examines these two texts through the systematic application of Lacan's three registers. Therefore, this study explores the formation of the Ideal-Ego and how it differs from the subjective Symbolic and the unrepresentable Real in order to better understand the development of the adult female psyche in characters such as Esther Greenwood and Mrs. Sommers.

Discussion and Analysis

The Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real are the three interconnected registers that form the foundation of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. These aspects of human experience influence the subject's identity and desires, aiding in deciphering the psychological tensions, unmet wants, and provocative behaviors among the female protagonists in *The Bell Jar* and “A Pair of Silk Stockings”.

The Symbolic Order in *The Bell Jar*: Language, Patriarchy, and Social Identity

In Lacanian theory, the Symbolic register encompasses language, law, social norms, and the authoritative structures that Lacan refers to as the “Name-of-the-Father,” all of which shape subjectivity and repress instinctual desires. Entering the Symbolic means becoming a speaking subject governed by rules, roles, and prohibitions. In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood's psychological unraveling is deeply rooted in her conflict with the Symbolic order, particularly its patriarchal foundations that define what a woman should be.

Esther's conflicted feelings about marriage and motherhood, roles forced upon her by a society steeped in strict gender norms, are the most obvious manifestations of the Symbolic. Esther expresses her opposition when she states, “I couldn't stand the idea of a baby coming out of that little hole in the front of me. I think if you do something to yourself and then you get what you want, that's a kind of science” (Plath 82). Childbirth is made hideous and foreign in this context ; this biological fate, which she cannot avoid yet rejects, is perceived as an encroachment of the Symbolic into her body. Her refusal to wed Buddy Willard, who personifies the principles of the Symbolic order - rationality, masculine authority, and social convention—further demonstrates her disdain for traditional female roles. He stands for a double standard that disgusts Esther, who remarks, “What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb” (Plath 196). Esther finds Buddy's assumption that she will be content with domestic life to be confining. She becomes acutely aware that the Symbolic order defines femininity as a self-sacrificing, subservient, and reproductive identity, which she finds incompatible with her quest for independence and intellectual aspirations.

Esther's experience with the fig tree metaphor, where she imagines her life branching into multiple roles (mother, poet, bride, traveler), reflects the symbolic pressure to "fit in". However, she is paralyzed by the knowledge that selecting one path implies sacrificing all others. She writes: "I could not decide which of the figs I would choose, so I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death" (Plath 77). Offering a variety of socially acceptable possibilities, the fig tree turns into a compelling symbolic structure that imprisons her in uncertainty and the fear of losing her possible self. For Esther, even language, the main medium of the Symbolic, becomes untrustworthy. She finds it difficult to express her emotions at the asylum: "The words darted back and forth like silver minnows in a shallow stream, and I couldn't catch them" (Plath 183). This breakdown of speech indicates her departure from the Symbolic. Since identity in Lacanian theory is formed through language, Esther's incapacity to speak or be heard represents a deeper existential collapse, a point at which the Symbolic no longer sustains her subjectivity. The *Bell Jar* itself is ultimately a symbolic enclosure that the Symbolic imposes, capturing the gender norms, psychological constraints, and cultural expectations that stifle her. Esther states, "I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air, whether I was on a ship's deck or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok" (Plath 197). The *Bell Jar* is transparent but unavoidable, much like the symbolic order, which is ubiquitous and internalized.

The Symbolic Order in "A Pair of Silk Stockings": Maternal Identity, Constraint, and Loss

The Symbolic in Lacanian psychoanalysis refers to the areas of language, law, and social institutions, particularly those that govern desire, gender roles, and identity. The Symbolic is the means by which subjects are regulated by expectations and prohibitions. In "A Pair of Silk Stockings," Kate Chopin depicts Mrs. Sommers as a woman who briefly breaks free from the Symbolic order before being drawn back into it, emphasizing the oppressive influence of economic constraints and parental responsibilities in forming the feminine subject.

Mrs. Sommers's position within the Symbolic is defined, above all, by her role as a mother. Her thoughts are initially shaped by her children's demands: "She would buy so and so many yards of percale for new shirt waists for the boys and Janie and Mag" (Chopin 1). This maternal duty is governed by the law of sacrifice, which dictates that a woman must set aside her own desires for the benefit of others. There is no room for individual subjectivity in her identity, which is shaped by her symbolic obligation. However, the purchasing of the silk stockings creates a momentary break in the Symbolic. Mrs. Sommers acts impulsively and out of personal desire for the first time, breaking away from the expected maternal reasoning. Her entire existence had been a performance inside the Symbolic, dictated by social conventions rather than her own free decision, as Chopin states, "She seemed for the time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function ... and freed her of responsibility" (Chopin 2). The

stockings represent an entrance into the Imaginary, where she temporarily creates a self apart from her socially enforced identity.

This escape, however, is only momentary. While eating at the restaurant, she develops a hyper-awareness of other people's gazes, which Lacan links to the Symbolic function of the "Other," the social gaze that gives the subject meaning. "When she entered her appearance created no surprise, no consternation, as she had half feared it might" (Chopin 3). She briefly feels like she belongs because of this illusory identity, but it is actually a misrecognition. The symbolic is ever-present, observing, evaluating, and judging. Mrs. Sommers's return is inevitable; the cable car will come to a stop. The basic structure of her life, based on gendered constraint, economic scarcity, and parental obligation, cannot be undone by her fleeting escape into self-indulgence. As a result, Chopin criticizes the societal structure that confines women like Mrs. Sommers to identities that the Symbolic enforces.

Mirror, Delusion, and the Disjointed "I" in the Imaginary of *The Bell Jar*

The Imaginary, the register of images, illusions, and misrecognition, emerges most prominently during the Mirror Stage, when the infant connects with an external picture of itself. The ego is created by this identification, but it is a false and deceptive one that conceals the subject's internal chaos, dominated by the need for coherence, unity, and idealization. Sylvia Plath exposes Esther Greenwood's entrapment in imaginary identifications through distorted perceptions of womanhood and socially imposed unachievable goals. Esther tries to conform to the idealized ideals portrayed by her family, society, and the media. Esther's discomfort with the glitzy young ladies of New York- "I thought it must be the worst thing in the world " (Plath 1)- demonstrates the tension between her inner self and the public persona she believes she must present. Conflict constantly arises from the discrepancy between who she is and how she should look. She identifies with an Ideal-Ego that differs from her inner experience, just as in the Mirror Stage.

When Esther faces her reflection in a mirror following her breakdown, this is depicted both physically and figuratively: "The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian " (Plath 108). This disturbance of self-image indicates a collapse of the imaginary illusion. She no longer sees herself as a cohesive entity; despair has shattered the unified self she once saw in the mirror. Just as Lacan asserts that the ego is a fiction of the Imaginary, this moment of disidentification shows that the ego Esther once believed in was constructed and not real. Esther's awareness is influenced by both her own reflection and other people's perceptions of her. She is continuously acting out a version of herself in this external gaze, which turns into a mirror. She states: "In a world without racetracks, I felt like a racehorse" (Plath 129). She has evolved into a personified image, trained and composed, yet lacking any real room for her actual desires. This aligns with Lacan's theory that the subject of the Imaginary lives through reflected images, constantly under the Other's gaze.

Fantasy, Illusion, and the Underappreciated Self in the Imaginary of “A Pair of Silk Stockings”

Mrs. Sommers' abrupt immersion in affluent settings and consumer pleasures symbolizes a fleeting identification with an idealized self. This fantasy, though, is fragile. The story becomes a study of how the Imaginary deceives the subject by providing a false sense of wholeness that eventually vanishes when the Symbolic order reinforces itself. The luxurious touch of a pair of silk stockings, which serve as a reflection of an idealized, sensual self, marks Mrs. Sommers' entry into the Imaginary. After putting them on, she loses herself in a fantasy: "Her stockings and boots and well fitting gloves had worked marvels in her bearing—had given her a feeling of assurance, a sense of belonging to the well-dressed multitude." (Chopin 2). Adorning the stockings turns into a mirror-like moment of misrecognition: she identifies with the attractive, well-dressed, and deserving version of herself that society finds desirable. She is able to hide her broken reality as a poor, overworked mother by projecting a fake unity through the Imaginary.

According to Lacan, the Imaginary encompasses not just one's image but also one's perception of oneself as reflected in the gaze of the Other. Mrs. Sommers thinks she fits in among wealthy diners at the restaurant: "She counted the money out to the waiter and left an extra coin on his tray, whereupon he bowed before her as before a princess of royal blood " (Chopin 3). This instance emphasizes the imaginary's delusion: she and others are tricked by her look. By accepting this outwardly consistent picture as her self, she conceals her inner deficiency, but it is a performance rather than an essence. Mrs. Sommers' luxurious day-lunch, a play, and the purchase of gloves-serves as a sequence of identifications with what Lacan would refer to as the Ideal-Ego: a composite of social values. While at the theater, she blended in with her surroundings. "It is safe to say there was no one present who bore quite the attitude which Mrs. Sommers did to her surroundings" (Chopin 3). This supports Lacan's theory that identity is founded on borrowed images, and she creates her identity using models from outside sources to temporarily escape her actual, shattered subjectivity. However, the Ideal-Ego is a dream that masks her social helplessness and unmet desire; it is never genuine. The Imaginary is naturally unstable, and this illusion will not last when the Real or the Symbolic return.

When Mrs. Sommers boards the cable car, she experiences a powerful longing for it to travel on indefinitely. "In truth, he saw nothing—unless he were wizard enough to detect a poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever " (Chopin 3). This statement encapsulates the desperation to stay in the Imaginary and postpone going back to the Symbolic Order, where she is once more a poor, selfless mother. She is aware that the ideal self she briefly occupied is vanishing. The "longing" is the unconscious awareness of shortfall, or what Lacan refers to as the *manque-à-être* (the incapacity to be full). Mrs. Sommers' temporary escape is a vision of selfhood created through idealization and misrecognition. Chopin exposes the hollowness that lies behind such illusions, leaving Mrs. Sommers longing for a self that never really existed.

Trauma, Breakdown, and the Unrepresentable Real in *The Bell Jar*

The Real, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, is a space that transcends image, symbolization, and language. It is the unadulterated, chaotic, and traumatizing essence of life that cannot be adequately conveyed or incorporated into the subject's comprehension. Through Esther Greenwood's experience of mental collapse, suicidal thoughts, and detachment, Sylvia Plath examines this area in *The Bell Jar*. Esther is exposed to the Real at these points—a place where words fall short, order breaks down, and unadulterated pain shows.

The breaking down of language is one way the Real shows up in Esther's existence. Words become meaningless as she descends further into depression, making communication impossible: "I was unable to catch the words as they darted back and forth like minnows in a shallow stream" (Plath 183). Esther's inability to retain language indicates that she is being drawn away from the Symbolic and exposed to the Real. This demonstrates how her despair pushes her to the boundaries of symbolization, where the Real, the indescribable, is experienced as quiet and bewilderment.

Esther directly confronts the Real through her suicide attempts. When she takes sleeping drugs and hides in the cellar, she cannot rationally think or communicate. She muses: "At first, I thought that, like the Indian yogis, I could will myself to death if I just focused" (Plath 156). Death is viewed as a means of escaping the Symbolic order. Esther's attempt at death represents a meeting with the Real as complete emptiness—something unthinkable and outside of identity. Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is another experience with the Real, piercing any delusion of self-control with fear, confusion, and bodily shock. What Esther remembers: "Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world... and the blackness bloomed" (Plath 142). The Real, a furious force beyond description or understanding, explodes into Esther's body in this potent moment. The blossoming "blackness" is a lyrical representation of stepping into that emptiness and experiencing the unimaginable.

The Bell Jar is sometimes interpreted as a metaphor for Esther's mental suffocation, but it also represents the Real's intolerable closeness. She states: "Wherever I sat... I would be stewing in my own sour air while seated beneath the same glass bell jar (Plath 197). The bell jar keeps her isolated from true communication, trapping her in an intolerable reality; it serves as a metaphor for how, when symbolic safeguards fail, the Real isolates and overwhelms the subject. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath depicts the Real as a background to Esther Greenwood's suffering, showing up when identity disintegrates, language fails, and social norms lose their significance.

Absence, Loss, and Reality's Return in "A Pair of Silk Stockings"

The Real is the component of the human experience that exists beyond language, image, and meaning. Mrs. Sommers briefly enters the realm of the Imaginary, daydreaming of grace, affluence, and

independence, before being faced with the Real—the harsh reality of her poverty, her lost self, and her unfulfilled life. In this short narrative, the Real quietly resurfaces as the absence (*manque-à-être*) at the core of her existence. Mrs. Sommers is shown as a woman without a distinct personality; her name is only associated with marriage, and her wants are suppressed. The text notes: "She had no time—no second of time to devote to the past. The needs of the present absorbed her every faculty" (Chopin 1). This statement demonstrates how her identity and ego have already begun to disintegrate, creating a space where lack—a crucial component of the Lacanian Real—dominates. She just acts out of need; she lacks a language for her desires. Her unconscious need is reawakened when she unexpectedly receives money, but this suppressed desire can never be totally satisfied, as the Real is characterized by absence rather than fulfillment.

Although Mrs. Sommers feels momentarily exalted during her buying spree, there is always an unsettling feeling that this isn't real. In the theater, she loses herself in the performance: "She gathered in the whole—stage and players and people in one wide impression, and absorbed it and enjoyed it." (Chopin 3). This dreamy absorption, however, suggests a deficiency, a Real that is being temporarily obscured. There is no language for this immediate taste of yearning, which is a defining characteristic of the Real's closeness.

The story's conclusion marks the Real's most powerful rise: "In truth, he saw nothing—unless he were wizard enough to detect a poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever" (Chopin 3). Deprived of all symbolic roles, Mrs. Sommers is no longer thinking, speaking, or acting. All that is left is a "powerful longing," but it is impossible to identify the object of that longing. This is the Real: an unfulfilled longing with no apparent end in sight. She expresses her desire for the cable car to "never stop" to postpone returning to her real life. The Real, however, is the realization that nothing in her fantasy can endure and that her need will always be greater than what can be satiated. Chopin examines how fiction conceals the emptiness at the heart of the self in "A Pair of Silk Stockings". The novel concludes with an encounter with the Lacanian Real, a realm of unspoken yearning and social invisibility.

Comparative Analysis: The Socio-Historical Divergence of the "I"

While both protagonists struggle with the formation of the "I," their struggles diverge critically based on their distinct socio-historical contexts: Plath's post-war American fifties and Chopin's late-nineteenth-century America.

Esther Greenwood's conflict in the 1950s is one of Symbolic Overload and Imaginary Fragmentation. The Symbolic Order demands she be simultaneously a brilliant intellectual and a subservient domestic wife - an impossible multiplicity of Ideal-Egos, symbolized by the fig tree. Her

descent into the Real is a violent, linguistic breakdown, as the Symbolic's excessive demands shatter her sense of coherence. Her goal is escape from the Symbolic structure that attempts to over-define her.

In contrast, Mrs. Sommers's struggle in the late 19th century is one of Symbolic Absence and Imaginary Compensation. The Symbolic Order has so completely reduced her identity to the role of "mother" that her subjectivity is nearly invisible; she is defined by lack. Her brief escape is an entry into a commercial, fleeting Imaginary Ideal-Ego purchased by luxury. Her encounter with the Real is not a violent explosion, but a quiet, melancholy return to the emptiness (*manque-à-être*) of her constrained life. Her deepest longing is not for escape from over-definition, but for a permanent sense of being recognized as an autonomous subject.

Ultimately, the texts demonstrate that while the Mirror Stage creates the illusion of a unified Ideal-Ego for both women, the Symbolic Order enforces two different kinds of oppression: for Esther, the pressure is to embody too many contradictory ideals, leading to fragmentation; for Mrs. Sommers, the pressure is the total erasure of the personal self, leading to a desperate, fleeting fantasy of recognition.

Conclusion

Literature frequently acts as a delicate lens that illuminates the hidden architecture of the human psyche. Works such as Kate Chopin's "A Pair of Silk Stockings" and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, when analyzed through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, reveal a deeper psychological drama rooted in hidden desire, a split sense of self, and the illusions that support subjectivity. Examining Lacan's three registers - the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real - opens up fresh perspectives on these works and enables readers to understand how the surroundings, societal norms, and unconscious imaginations influence the inner lives of the characters.

By applying this theory to the narratives of Esther Greenwood and Mrs. Sommers, this study demonstrates that the Mirror Stage is not merely an infantile developmental phase but a perpetual psychological structure of adult female experience. The analysis uniquely reveals the Symbolic Order's varying pressures on women across two centuries - one leading to the fragmentation and trauma (the Real) of an intellectual woman in the 20th century, and the other to the fleeting, consumerist illusion (the Imaginary) of a constrained mother in the 19th. This Lacanian framework expands feminist critiques by precisely locating female alienation not just in external patriarchy, but in the internalized, inescapable conflict between the self-as-ideal (Ideal-Ego) and the self-as-social-subject (Symbolic subject). This interpretive approach promotes a more thorough examination of the systems that characterize contemporary identity and advances the field of literature and psychoanalysis studies. Ultimately, this reading serves as a powerful call for further interdisciplinary inquiry, demonstrating

that the search for a coherent 'T' is an unending struggle against the very systems that purport to define it.

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