

Mental Illness in Literature:

Case Studies of Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Darby Dyer, Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences & Honors College

Faculty Mentor: Daryl Scroggins, Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences

ABSTRACT

I am researching mental illness in literature, with a focus on Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and would like to uncover any connections the authors had with mental illnesses and disorders. Did the author personally suffer from a mental illness, have a close friend or family member diagnosed with such a disorder, or did the idea of it merely intrigue the author so that she included it in her work? In order to discover any associations the authors had to their mentally diagnosed characters, I must research the mental health of Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Both women committed suicide and I believe their writing of women in similar situations might have been a cry for help. I must also research the time period of each author and whether or not social status disparities could have been a factor in their deteriorating mental health.



BACKGROUND

Sylvia Plath

The central themes of Sylvia Plath's early life are the basis for *The Bell Jar*. She was born in 1932 in Massachusetts. When she was eight, her father died after a long, difficult illness. Plath underwent electroshock therapy during the summer and autumn of 1953 and was hospitalized. In spite of the help of her friends and therapy, she was despairing and ill. To those around her, she did not appear to have given up. However, on the morning of February 11, 1963, she ended her life. Plath set some bread and milk in her children's room, then cracked their window and sealed their door off with tape. She went downstairs and, after sealing herself in the kitchen, knelt in front of the open oven and turned the gas on. Her body was discovered that morning by a nurse scheduled to visit and the construction worker who helped the nurse get into the house (Ames 247, 254, & 264).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Gilman was born on July 3, 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut. During the summer of 1882, Gilman suffered her first bout of depression. In the spring of 1885, she gave birth to her first and only child, and in the fall, she recuperated from "hysteria" and depression. In 1886, she was treated for neurasthenia. In 1887, she was considered cured. She began to write and publish. In 1932, Gilman was diagnosed with breast cancer, and on August 17, 1935, Gilman committed suicide by taking an overdose of chloroform (Gilman 29, 31, 38, & 39).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Both Sylvia Plath, who committed suicide in 1963, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who took her own life in 1935, wrote about mental illness in their works of literature. It seems as if they were crying out for help through their writing.

An important author-character connection between Plath and her main character is established in the article "The Disabled Female Body." As Boyer discusses both began their lives with a "fragmented, disabled conception" of who they were. Both Plath and the narrator, Esther, bravely break through the "bell jar of the confining 1950s culture" (Boyer 201). In Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the narrator is a young girl with an overwhelming negative outlook on just about everything. She should be enjoying herself in captivating New York, after having won a fashion magazine contest, but instead she obsesses over the death of the Rosenbergs. They were electrocuted and their executions were constantly being discussed on the radio. Esther could not seem to get them off her mind (Plath 1). A similar fixation occurs in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The narrator's husband has brought her to a nice house in the country to relax, yet she obsesses over dingy wallpaper, believing it to have "unblinking eyes" and a woman trapped inside (Gilman 46 & 50). These fixations appear to drive both women mad.

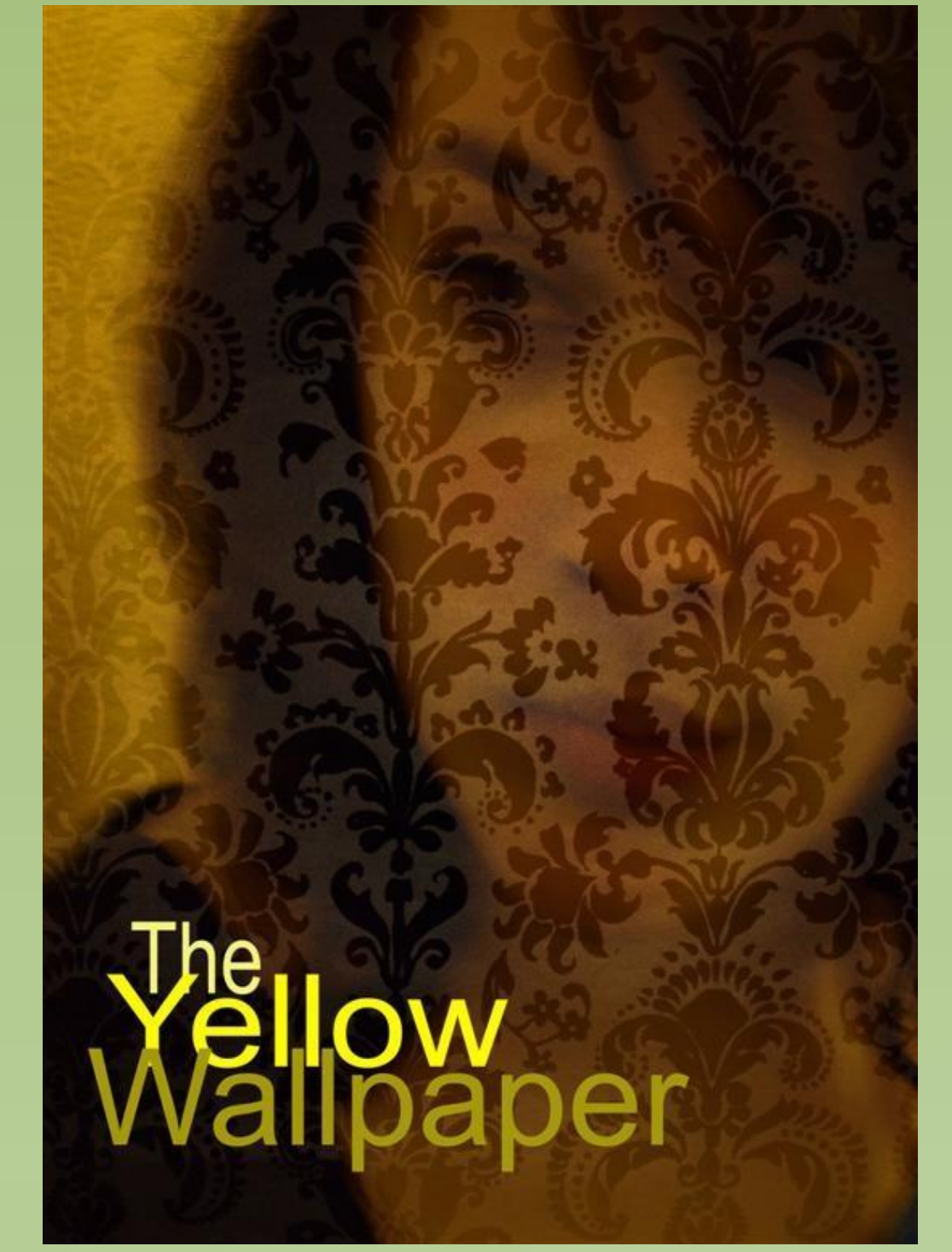
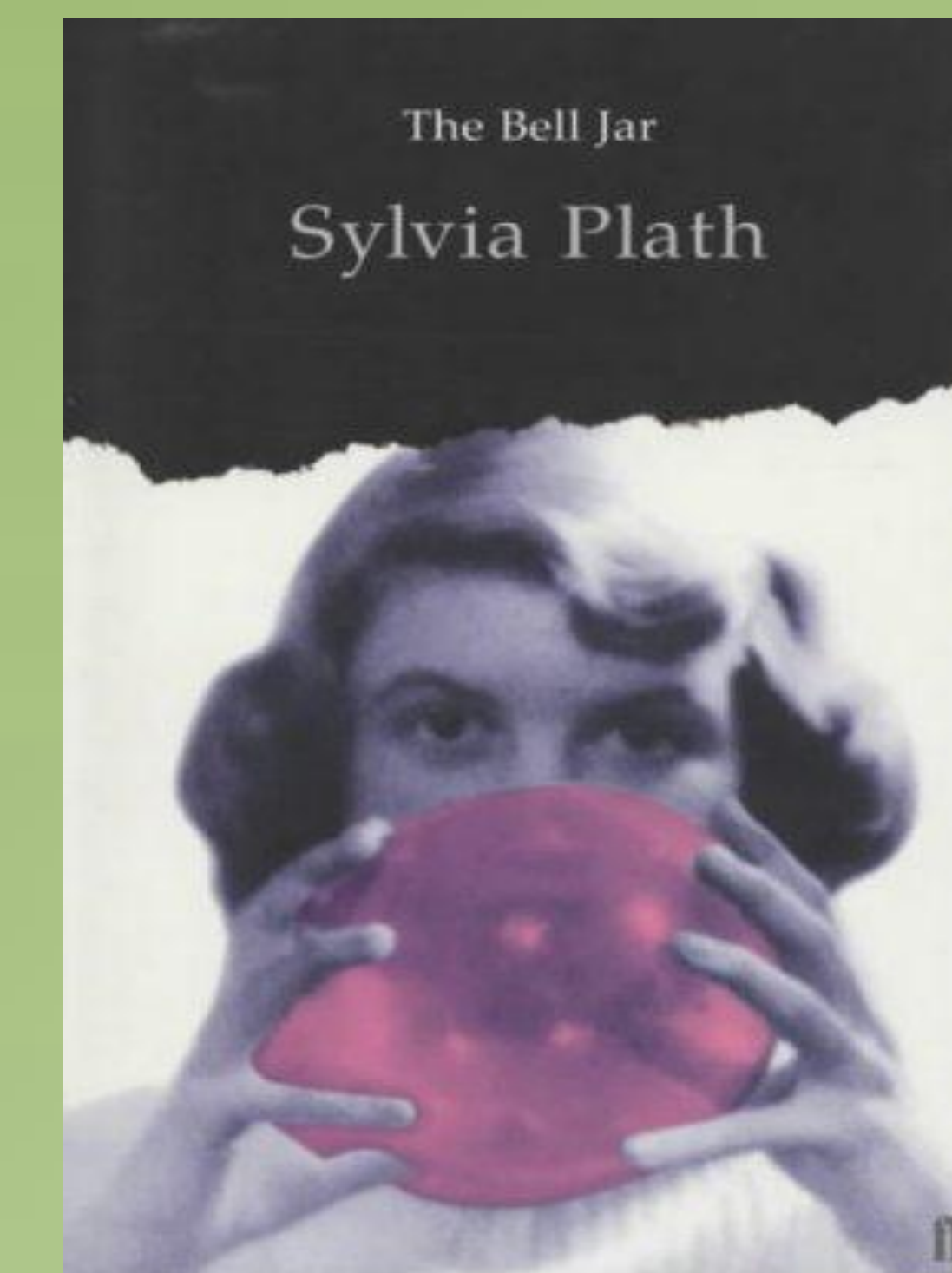
The concept of submission is present in both *The Bell Jar* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Esther constantly feels inferior like "a small black dot," and perhaps she feels this way because she is a woman (Boyer 202). Although she breaks out of the cultural bell jar, she still suffers from an inferiority complex because women during her time were meant to be housewives and mothers. This second-rate position in society that she is expected to endure gradually leads to her depression. A parallel situation occurs in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as the narrator speaks of hiding her writing from her husband, because he "hates to have [her] write a word" (Gilman 44). She also is expected to play the role of wife and mother. Any self-expression or talents are looked down upon.

I would like to further my research on the personal lives of Plath and Gilman. I feel that both women probably encountered entrapping submission, for as one can see, they each conceptualize it in their literature. This could have very well led to their suicides. Both were daring women, choosing to write and become something rather than adhere to what is expected of them—to be a wife and mother only. Although they succeeded with their feminist aspirations, the lack of acceptance during their time might have caused them to see no reason to live on.



METHODOLOGY

- I must further research the mental health of these two women.
- I plan to study the time in which each lived in order to determine if their status as women affected their mental state.
- I will explore whether or not they showed any suicidal tendencies before committing suicide.
- I plan to continue drawing connections the authors had with their mentally unstable characters.



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The pictures were derived from *Google images*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Wendy K. Wilkins, Ph.D., Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Gloria C. Cox, Ph.D., Dean, Honors College

Susan Brown Eve, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Honors College

Daryl Scroggins, Ph.D., Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences