

Hagenberg, James. "Prescribing Depression: An Analysis of Patriarchal Perpetuation in *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*," 2021.

ABSTRACT:

Since at least 1960 women in the United States have been roughly twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression, leaving observers to wonder: is the cause social or biological? By looking to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Otessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), this project asks: what can fictional literature reveal about women's increased vulnerability to depression? By drawing upon research from feminist psychology, specifically theories of social causation and social constructionism, the project analyzes the ways in which external social pressures and patriarchal superstructures cause the female narrators of these novels to be increasingly vulnerable to depression. In order to evaluate these social pressures the project first assesses what the narrators themselves are seeking for personal fulfillment. This is followed by an analysis of what others "prescribe" the narrators, which includes both the literal pharmaceutical prescriptions given by the doctors of these novels, but also the "figurative prescriptions" that the narrators receive, specifically from foil characters, mother figures, and lovers.

The novels suggest that the reason why women are historically diagnosed with mood disorders at higher rates than men is because they are discouraged from pursuing personal goals, and are instead taught to uphold patriarchal values through figurative prescriptions. These figurative prescriptions, which are most commonly shared between women, operate as a method of perpetuating patriarchal standards, and generally attempt to make the subject more desirable to the male gaze. Conversely, the novels suggest that literal prescriptions combined with a sort of "feminist therapy," as outlined by Melva Steen, can actually be productive in dispelling the

narrators' depression. This is because the combination of feminist therapy and literal prescriptions allow the narrators to lift the oppressive burden that figurative prescriptions created, and allow the narrators to pursue their personal goals. Finally, the research makes it evident that, although it may seem as if the standards society holds women to have changed drastically in the last fifty years, it may be more accurate to say that societal treatment of women has not evolved as much as one would initially expect. Instead the novels' parallels propose that patriarchal values are just as present in modern society as they were in 1963; they are just more covert in modern society. In this way the novels propose very real world implications, and offer feminist psychologists an interesting perspective as to why women continue to be disproportionately diagnosed with depression and other mood disorders.