



When the Self Cannot Hold: Cognitive Splitting and Identity Fragmentation in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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ABSTRACT

The Bell Jar (1963) by Sylvia Plath provides one of the most linguistically accurate representations of fragmented identity in twentieth century literature. While there has been significant critical discussion of the novel's feminist and autobiographical aspects, the systematic connection between cognitive splitting and its linguistic construction in Esther Greenwood's narration has not been explored. Using a cognitive stylistic approach, this study investigates the narration of identity fragmentation in the story of Esther Greenwood. Based on the cognitive theory of depression developed by Aaron Beck (dichotomous thinking), Roger Fowler's mind style theory, and the cognitive stylistic theory of Elena Semino, the study takes a qualitative interpretive approach to analyze selected passages throughout the psychological journey of the novel. The analysis shows that cognitive splitting in the novel is not only a thematic issue but a linguistic one too, which is manifested in the binary syntactic structures, distancing pronouns, self-negating metaphors and absolutist lexical patterns. The results also enrich cognitive stylistics by providing evidence of the construction, maintenance, and performance of the fragmentation of a depressive identity through language in the first-person literary narration.

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) tells the story of a mind in conflict with itself. Esther Greenwood, the narrator, is not only depressed. She has a feeling of a broken self. The narrator's voice is divided, distant, separated from herself, from what she is becoming, from what she was meant to be; it is divided from the self that sees and the self that suffers; it is divided from the selves that she imagines and the self she is stuck with. Not only is this division thematic. It is a linguistic state, like it were inscribed in her narration.

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The Bell Jar has been critically analyzed from feminist and autobiographical perspectives, with a focus on issues of identity fragmentation. Modern feminist scholars have interpreted Esther's divided self as a reflection of the mid-twentieth century gender ideology, which was incompatible with the creation of a single female identity in postwar America (Friedan, 1963). Bonds (1990) has explored the novel's response to issues of selfhood, embodiment and institutional power. Some critics have traced Esther's psychological breakdown to Plath's own breakdown and institutionalization (Wagner-Martin, 2003). Gill (2008) points to the problem of Esther's inability to reconcile the competing self-understandings she has within her cultural moment as the novel's central tension. Peel (2002) also places the novel in the context of the ideological pressures of cold war America, which directly impact Esther's divided identity and sense of possibility. These readings are very useful and informative. They do have one thing in common, however: they are both limited. They consider identity fragmentation as a theme to be read, not analyzed, as a linguistic structure. The problem of the construction, maintenance, and performance of fragmentation in language is still largely neglected.

This study directly addresses this issue. It examines the linguistic dimension of the fragmentation of identity in *The Bell Jar*, applying the cognitive stylistics approach. The main theoretical concept is the theory of cognitive splitting, a dichotomous or all-or-nothing thinking approach, where the self, the world and the future are perceived as two extremes with no middle ground (Beck, 1976). This thinking style is not only described in the words of Esther. It is expressed in binary syntax, with self-negating metaphors, distancing pronouns and absolutist lexical expressions. These patterns are read in a stylistic framework that Roger Fowler (1977) calls mind style, which is a way of representing a fractured cognitive world in a systematic fashion. The cognitive stylistic approach by Elena Semino also allows the study of the way in which particular linguistic features create and convey mental state in narrative fiction (Semino, 2002).

The study is an extension of the research of Bisma and Khan (2026) who showed that the use of absolute language in *The Bell Jar* is not a stylistic device but a linguistic enactment of depressive cognition. The present paper builds on this argument, however, by focusing on the mechanisms of identity fragmentation, in order to demonstrate how a cognitive splitting produces a narrative voice that is structurally divided against itself. The main thesis is: Identity fragmentation is not depicted in language in *The Bell Jar*. It is produced by it. Each binary construction, each expression of self-negation, each distancing pronoun increases the cognitive division that constitutes Esther's sense of self. The novel does not tell of a split self. It is one.

2. Literature Review

This study is based on the theoretical framework of Aaron Beck's cognitive model of depression. According to Beck (1976), depression is maintained by systematic errors in thinking, called "cognitive distortions." Of these, dichotomous thinking (also known as cognitive splitting) is especially pertinent to the study of identity. It is a tendency to see the self, the world and the future in all-or-nothing terms. This is a basic defect in the process of integrating one's cognition, as described by Beck (1976), in which the depressed person is unable to integrate contradictory experiences into a unified whole. Rather, experiences are classified in mutually exclusive categories such as success or failure, worthiness or worthlessness, without any gradation in between. This model, when used in literary analysis, offers a clear conceptual tool for analyzing the language of the narrator's self-concept in terms of unresolvable binary oppositions.

The concept of negative self-schemas is another addition to Beck's model. They are strong cognitive frameworks that screen experience from a perspective of inadequacy and self-negation (Beck, 1976). In the narrative, schemas are represented by themes of self-deprecation, identity denial and evaluative extremes. The narrating self and the experiencing self becomes more distant from each other, not only psychologically, but also linguistically. The language in which Esther Greenwood tells the story of *The Bell Jar* expresses this alienation at every level of expression. The link between language and identity construction has also been fruitfully examined in other literary contexts, with the most recent being diasporic fiction where mimicry of language is the main site of negotiation of identities (Abid & Khan, 2026).

Cognitive stylistics is the analytical instrument which links Beck's psychological approach to literary language. This interdisciplinary field investigates the representation and transmission of mental processes in the structure of the language. The study of language is inseparable from the study of mind, as readers build up mental representations of characters and narrators, interpreting the texts based on the cues they provide (Stockwell 2002). Leech and Short (2007) stress the point that there is no such thing as a neutral choice of style in a narrative. Every lexical choice, each syntactic structure and each figurative pattern has a cognitive and an evaluative significance. For the purpose of the present study, the most fruitful idea in this tradition is the idea of mind style put forward by Roger Fowler. Mind style is the linguistic manifestation of a character's or narrator's worldview, in other words, the "how" of the narration, as opposed to the "what," as defined by Fowler (1977). Semino (2002) further develops this model, showing that mind style can be used to represent the unique perceptual styles arising from particular psychological states, such as fragmented or distorted cognition.

Recent advances in cognitive literary research have helped to strengthen the theoretical underpinning of this approach. Herman (2017) claims that narrative is a basic tool used to model, organize and react to experience, and that it is not a simple description of events. Zunshine (2015) places cognitive literary studies at the productive meeting point of literary theory on the one hand, and linguistics and psychology on the other, claiming that literary texts create meaning through the mental states that they ask readers to simulate. Both frameworks are based on the same methodological principle that underlies this study: reading the text cognitively is not a critical imposition but a direct response to the text. Burke (2010) further argues that literary language can evoke cognitive and affective responses in its readers, thus directly contributing to the argument that Esther's disjointed narrative voice does not just mirror a divided self but actually produces one, for the reader as well as the narrator.

The psycholinguistic studies of Al-Mosaiwi and Johnstone (2018) provide an important empirical aspect that complements this framework. They identified a number of language patterns in the online mental health communities, including the high percentage of words that convey "always," "never," "nothing" and other absolute words among people with depression. These words are indicators of thinking in black and white and cognitive rigidity. Importantly, Al-Mosaiwi and Johnstone (2018) distinguished between absolutist language and general negative emotionality, and they found that the inflexibility of language is better indicator of psychological distress than the negative content. This distinction is analytically significant for literary studies. It brings focus away from the sadness of the theme and towards the rigidity of the structure of the language. In the cognitive stylistic analysis of *The Bell Jar*, Bisma and Khan (2026) show that the expressions of absolutism in Esther's narration are not just stylistic but also linguistic enactments of cognitive distortion. The present study builds on that line of argumentation by exploring the role of the same processes of linguistic rigidity in the development of a fractured identity specifically.

The Bell Jar has received a wide variety of critical responses, which have been mostly thematic. According to Gill (2008), the novel's internal conflict is that Esther is not able to integrate multiple perspectives of selfhood in her cultural era. Peel (2002) places this tension in the context of the ideological push and pull of cold war America, which is directly relevant to Esther's sense of possibility. The novel is read by Wagner-Martin (2003) as a documentation of Plath's own psychological journey. These readings shed light on the cultural and biographical aspects of the novel's exploration of identity. But they always view language as a transparent medium and not as the place where identity fragmentation is produced. This is the gap that the current study aims to fill. The study shows that identity fragmentation in *The Bell Jar* is not only represented in language, but is also present in the micro-structures of the narration such as its syntax, lexis, figurative patterns, and pronoun choices. It is, rather, constructed by it.

3. Methodology

This study uses qualitative interpretive research design based on cognitive stylistic. This is suitable for qualitative methodology, since the primary goal is to interpret the ways in which language is used to create and maintain fragmentation of identity in a literary work, rather than to quantify or measure linguistic elements. Qualitative research, as Creswell (2014) says, is about meaning, and how people or, in this case, fictional narrators, represent and construct their experience of the world in a linguistic way.

The primary data is the text of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963/1971). Purposive sampling is used to select textual data, as described by Patton (2015) as a technique of deliberate selection of "information-rich cases" (105) that directly serve the research objectives. Passages are chosen based on two criteria: first, whether they contain cognitive splitting and second, whether the fragmentation of identity is apparent in language. Selected passages are selected across the psychological journey of the novel from disorientation to increasing fragmentation to partial recovery, providing a full analytical coverage of the whole novel.

The analytical framework is based on Beck's (1976) cognitive theory of depression which focuses on dichotomous thinking, Fowler's (1977) concept of mind style and Semino's (2002) cognitive stylistic approach to mind style in narrative texts. Al-Mosaiwi and Johnstone's (2018) psycholinguistic model of absolutist language adds more empirical perspective to the analysis. The syntactic binary structures, self-negating metaphors, distancing pronouns and absolutist lexical patterns are analyzed in each passage. The analysis is interpretive in nature, and does not claim to be clinically or empirically generalizable.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of Esther Greenwood's narration through the psychological journey of *The Bell Jar* demonstrates a consistent and evolving process of identity fragmentation that is embedded in language. The careful study of selected passages reveals four interwoven findings. First, cognitive splitting is evident in the structure of language prior to its explicit appearance in binary vocabulary. Second, the fig tree metaphor is the most condensed place in the novel where the cognitive splitting of identity is spatialized, that is, divided in an exceptional manner. Third, in self-negating metaphors and distancing pronouns, a linguistic distancing is created between the experiencing self and the narrating self. Fourth, absolutist lexical patterns grow in intensity

at the novel's psychological low point and create a closed discursive system which precludes the possibility of a coherent or unified identity. Lexical choice, syntactic structure, figurative patterning and the use of pronouns are all discussed in detail, one by one, for each finding.

The first indications of cognitive splitting are not in the binary nature of the statements, but in the way Esther tells her story. The opening sentence of the novel sets the tone: "IT WAS A QUEER [sic], sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York" (Plath, 1963/1971, p. 1). The public catastrophe and private disorientation are placed on the same syntactic plane. These clauses are grammatically coordinated and are cognitively meaningful. It shows a mind that is unable to rank experience in a hierarchy, that can see politics and the personal equally, and that cannot distinguish between them. This experiential leveling is an early sign of the cognitive splitting which Beck (1976) defines as the failure to differentiate between categories of experience, to quantify or rank them, or to synthesize them into a coherent whole.

The split structure gets more entrenched in Esther's initial reflections about herself. She speaks of feeling very still and very empty, like the eye of a tornado, "moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo" (Plath, 1963/1971, p. 3). Simile is cognitively accurate. The eye of the tornado is a place of total calm in the midst of total devastation. It is a binary image, where the middle is calm and the outer parts are very chaotic, and there is nothing in the middle. Esther stands at the intersection of two. She is both IN the world, and NOT in the world. She is in the middle of the split. This is not an illustration of ambivalence or complexities. It is the description of a self that is only the point in between two irreconcilable states, which is just what cognitive splitting creates (Beck, 1976).

The passage in the novel that most explicitly reflects an analytically complex notion of identity fragmentation is the one about the fig tree. Esther envisions her future as a branching fig tree: "From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked" (Plath, 1963/1971, p. 90). The different figs are different possible selves, such as "a poet," "a brilliant professor," "an Olympic lady," "amazing editor" (p. 91). The metaphor starts with a generative element, indicating that the self can be expressed in various ways. However, Esther's mind cannot hold this multiplicity. The passage goes on to read, "I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose" (p. 91). The spatial transfer from the branch tip to the crotch of the tree is the linguistic embodiment of the cognitive split. The selection of one self implies the rejection of all other selves; it is all-or-nothing as Beck (1976) states. As Esther is unsure about her identity, the figs that "wrinkle and go black" (p. 91) become a system of irreversible loss. Possibility degenerates into nothingness. A self that cannot choose, is a self that is lost.

This passage is also informative from a syntactical point of view. The rhythm of the enumeration of parallel clauses, each a different future self, is then reversed by the passage. Each identity is conjured only to be foreclosed. This syntactic pattern is exactly the same as the thought pattern of splitting, in that possibilities are raised and then made mutually exclusive, leaving the self hanging between them. According to Herman (2017), narrative structures and represents mental experience. In this passage, the narrative illustrates a mind that has lost the capacity for identity more than it has become hard to achieve.

One of the most enduring aspects of Esther's identity disruptions is the dichotomy between the self that tells the story and the self that is experiencing the story. This division is rendered in language through distancing language and self-objectifying constructions. Esther often speaks of herself as if looking at a different person: "I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life" (Plath, 1963/1971, p. 11). The metaphor of the photographic negative is a perfect likeness. A negative is an inversion—the reversal of presence and absence, light and dark. To be a negative is to be totally characterized by what one is not. This is a double process of overgeneralization and identity negation: a fleeting sense of estrangement made into a permanent and total inversion of selfhood in the absolute of the metaphor. Fowler (1977) suggests that grammatical and figurative selections reflect the cognitive universe of a narrator. The negative is a self-image that contains a self that is absent.

This distancing is also manifested in the use of pronouns. In the novel, Esther's narration always leaves a gap between the "I" who observes and the "I" who is observed. Her voice is detached, like that of an outsider, in describing her own actions and experiences. The self as both subject and object in this splitting of the pronominal form is the linguistic expression of the cognitive dissonance that Beck (1976) states is central to the depressive identity. As the language in which the self is narrated systematically divides it, the self can not be experienced as unified. According to Zunshine (2015), the meaning of literary texts is created through the mental states they call for the reader to imagine. The pronominal structure of Esther's narration invites the reader to experience this kind of self-division – to enter into a consciousness that sees itself from the outside. Mind style can be used to describe the unique perceptual patterns that accompany fragmented or distorted cognition; and the narrative of Esther is precisely that—a consciousness divided against itself, whose grammar reflects the division. (Semino 2002)

This sense of identity fragmentation is heightened and reinforced by the novel's psychological nadir, in the shape of the absolutist lexical patterns. The compounding absolutism of "nothing" and "never" in Esther's statement "If you expect nothing from somebody you are never disappointed" (Plath, 1963/1971, p. 70) is not just an expression of emotional withdrawal. It builds a self which has emptied out all possibilities of connection. The conditionality in the sentence creates the impression of rational self-protection in this evacuation. But what it actually carries is a self, which can only be coherent if it is empty. Al-Mosaiwi and Johnstone (2018) define the following types of absolutist constructions as linguistic evidence of cognitive rigidity. This rigidity brings about a coherence that is only possible by erasing the self in the process of identity—the paradox of coherence through self-obliteration.

The interpersonal aspect of identity splitting is most evident in Esther's interaction with Joan Gilling, another patient at the psychiatric hospital. In the novel, Joan serves as an externalized mirror image of an alternative self, a psychological double of Esther. Significantly, Esther had "never known Joan, except at a cool distance" (Plath, 1963/1971, p. 235). But Joan's parallel path of collapse and institutionalization keeps her from being easily forgotten. Esther responds to this recognition not with integration but with splitting. She "gathered all my news of Joan into a little, bitter heap, though I received it with surface gladness" (p. 246). Here the contrast of the languages is analytical, and 'bitter heap' and 'surface gladness' are opposites that cannot be brought together. Esther is unable to feel a single way about Joan. She can only split it. This splitting is most cognitively illuminating as Esther reflects "Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me" (p. 246). The term "double of my old best self" is very important. Joan is not a whole new person. She is a part of Esther's own split self that is externalized, projected, and perceived as persecution. This is the most advanced interpersonal form of cognitive splitting—the self confronts the self in another person, and reacts with hostility instead of recognition. However, Beck (1976) has stated that depressive schemas affect not only self-perception but interpersonal perception as well. In Esther's construction of Joan, this distortion is performed in a linguistic manner—another person turns into a mirror and a threat; a double and an enemy; the cognitive system that sees her cannot handle the complexity of what she actually is.

At the same time, Joan challenges Esther's identity in a manner beyond the capacity of the language of dismissal. Joan has been on a parallel psychological journey—breakdown, institutionalization, and, in her case, ultimately death by suicide. She is the most extreme projection of the trajectory of Esther, not the recovered self, but one which was not able to live after the split. It is not just a social discomfort that Esther feels in Joan's presence. It is ontological. Joan is an image of the possibility that Esther's divided self has an external double; that the division within is visible without. Esther is unable to assimilate this recognition. She can only split it—either Joan is entirely other or entirely a mirror. The language she uses moves back and forth across these poles, and never becomes the more complex and ambivalent recognition that would demand a more integrated sense of self. According to Burke (2010), readers' cognitive and affective responses are stimulated by literary language. In this context, the words of Esther's Joan-perception evoke the discomfort of the encounter with oneself in the other, the cognitive uncanny of the double.

Towards the end of the novel, the patterns are slightly and tentatively modulated. Esther reflects that the bell jar has lifted: "I am, I am, I am" (Plath, 1963/1971, p. 289). It is the simplest possible statement of selfhood, devoid of any qualification and complexity. Importantly, it is communicated by repetition not elaboration. At the end of the novel, the self that is discovered is not complex and integrated. It is simply a continuity of existence, a pulse. Cognitive splitting does not go away. It recedes. In the final pages, the binary structures and self-negating metaphors which prevail in the previous narration are not as prominent, but they are not absent. The underlying schemas remain intact even after acute symptoms decrease, Beck (1976) suggests. This persistence is enacted at the end of the novel; the bell jar is not broken, but hung. At the end of the novel, Identity is claimed but not re-constructed.

Furthermore, Esther's assumption of a false identity—"My name's Elly Higginbottom.... I come from Chicago" (Plath, 1963/1971, p. 13)—reveals the fragmentation of self in an especially direct form. She does not merely conceal her identity. She replaces it entirely. The ease with which she adopts an alternative name and origin suggests that her sense of self is already so unstable that a surrogate identity offers genuine, if temporary, relief. Safety is achievable only through the complete substitution of one self for another—a formulation that is itself a binary. The real self is dangerous. The invented self is safe. There is no middle ground. This is cognitive splitting enacted not merely in language but in identity performance itself.

Taken together, these analytical findings confirm that identity fragmentation in *The Bell Jar* is not a theme that language describes. It is a structure that language produces. The binary syntactic patterns, self-negating metaphors, distancing pronouns, absolutist lexical choices, and pronominal divisions all work together to construct a narrative voice that is constitutively split against itself. As Bisma and Khan (2026) demonstrate in their analysis of absolutist language in the novel, the language of depressive cognition does not simply reflect psychological states—it enacts them. The present analysis extends that argument to show that identity itself, in *The Bell Jar*, is a linguistic construction—built, sustained, and ultimately partially rebuilt through the specific choices Plath makes in giving Esther her voice.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that identity fragmentation in *The Bell Jar* is not merely a thematic concern but a linguistic one. Through the application of a cognitive stylistic framework—integrating Beck's (1976) cognitive theory of depression, Fowler's (1977) concept of mind style, and Al-Mosaiwi and Johnstone's (2018) psycholinguistic model of absolutist language—the analysis has shown that Esther Greenwood's narrative voice is systematically structured by cognitive splitting. Binary syntactic patterns, self-negating metaphors, distancing pronouns, absolutist lexical choices, and pronominal divisions work together to construct a narrative consciousness that is constitutively divided against itself. The language does not describe a fractured self. It produces one.

The study also confirms the value of interdisciplinary methodology in literary analysis. As Bisma and Khan (2026) demonstrate in their analysis of absolutist language in the same novel, depressive cognition in *The Bell Jar* operates at the micro-level of language rather than simply at the level of theme. The present study extends that argument by showing that identity itself is a linguistic construction in this novel—built through specific stylistic choices that enact cognitive splitting at every level of expression. Semino's (2002) cognitive stylistic framework further illuminates how these linguistic patterns construct a fictional consciousness that is structurally and irreparably divided. Plath does not give Esther a divided self and then find language to describe it. She constructs the division through language itself—and in doing so, produces one of the most precise literary representations of depressive identity in twentieth-century fiction.

5.1. Recommendations

This study opens several productive avenues for future research. First, the cognitive stylistic framework applied here could be extended comparatively to other literary representations of identity fragmentation, including Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, to determine whether similar patterns of cognitive splitting are linguistically encoded across different literary traditions. Second, the qualitative interpretive approach adopted here could be supplemented by corpus-based computational methods, enabling systematic quantitative analysis of binary syntactic structures and absolutist lexical patterns across the full text. Third, future research might examine identity fragmentation in *The Bell Jar* through the lens of narrative unreliability—analyzing how cognitive splitting complicates the reader's trust in Esther as a narrator. Finally, the framework developed here could be productively applied to contemporary autofiction dealing with identity dissolution and mental illness, where the boundaries between fictional consciousness and authorial experience are deliberately and productively unsettled.

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