

## DIVERSION/ PERVERSION: READING THE PERVERT IN

### *THE BELL JAR AND THE COLLECTOR*

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#### ABSTRACT

A pervert can be understood as someone with independence and insight contrary to its popular meaning. This paper intends to find a similar strain in the novels *The Collector* and *The Bell Jar*. The protagonists in these novels are standing at the peripheries of society who do not 'fit in'.

*The Collector* can be read as an abduction narrative which builds up insightful arguments in the favor of the abductor in the given story. Although *The Bell Jar* can be read under the rubric of feminism, it being Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel this paper tries to read Esther Greenwood as another captive, one of her metaphorical 'bell jar'. To me Frederick Clegg is born where 'real' Esther Greenwood has died through treatment of insulin shock therapy, her 'perversity' has been sacrificed in favor of being a conformed social being. Ferdinand Clegg lives on in his perversity. He is the archetype of the original 'species being' and a foil to Esther Greenwood. But Ferdinand Clegg is also a murderer of human life. So it might seem very fancy to argue in favor of Charles Shobraj type figure but this would lead to sociological debates about where one should draw a line between madness and perversity.

**KEYWORDS:** Diversion, Perversion

#### INTRODUCTION

Who or what is a pervert? In most general definition of this word a pervert is defined as somebody whose behavior is different from the norm or "a person whose sexual behavior is regarded as abnormal and unacceptable". But according to Google pervert as a verb is defined as distortion or corruption of the original course, meaning, or state of (something). It is to "turn around" and see things from different perspective. This paper analyses perversion as a liberating revolutionary instinct which drives one toward a certain creativity. Perversion has a kind of Rashomon effect to it where the artistic definition of this word is entirely different from its clinical definition. Perversion is exciting because it breaks away from the monotony of life. This perverted self is in a state of existentialist crisis unlike the Marxist capitalist notion of a pervert who is grappling with the alienation of situation around him.

To understand the notion of pervert this paper aims to inquire into two texts which are *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *The Collector* by John Fowles. John Fowles character Frederick Clegg is clearly a pervert whose perversion needs no explanation or defense. He has been read as the most evil character of American literary history, a villain who captures a young art student and kills her eventually. This narrative has been read romantically, criminally and something much akin to 'Stockholm effect', though Miranda, the captive never falls in love with her captor. But where does one find perversion in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*? Where in Esther Greenwood would like to "be everything". This novel has been read as a female bildungsroman, a feminist writing questioning notions of femininity and womanhood.

In view of the foregoing how the two novels can be read in a singular thread? How Frederick's crime narrative can be juxtaposed with Esther's bildung because both the narratives talk to their readers in entirely different languages. *The Collector* talks about the power struggle between "the few" and "the many" whereas Esther's story talks about her perennial angst of being in a society which offers very few choices to American women. A feminist debate about Miranda, Frederick's captive and Esther cannot be ignored. To understand this labyrinth of human mind, gender, sexuality and crime one needs to understand perversion as not something constraining but something which is not monotonous, it is in fact cathartic.

But if perversion has a cathartic effect than one has to defend criminality too and understand it in positive terms rather than negative. By doing this a reader chooses to move away from sociological realm where any kind of criminal behavior concerning with human lives is not justified. A reader too is caught in fictional narrative like Esther Greenwood and Frederick where perversion is cathartic only to him. This perverted self echoes an 'I' which is free from any kind of Freudian, historical or philosophical understanding of an 'I' which is somewhat like the anarchist in *The Dark Night* series who calls himself a Joker and gives no excuses for his criminality. It could be argued that he is the most distilled form of 'species is', one who destroys the product of capitalism which alienates a worker from his "essential source of identity". But how does a female bildungsroman and a narrative of an inarticulate anti-hero, much like the celebrated anti hero of the movie *Darr* from Bollywood, helps us understand and resolve the Hegelian dialectic between master-slave relations.

Hegelian dialectic tries to understand human beings in relation to each other. *The Bell Jar* continuously echoes this distorted relationship between women and society where Esther's submission to insulin shock therapy to prove her more normal is a failure of a pure species being. It is a failure of human spirit, that spirit, however negative, cruel or distorted which keeps us motivated to live. But then who is Frederick Clegg who would live in order to save her. He is the collector who captures a beautiful art student Miranda. The two are from different social, ethical and moral background. The story of the collector has been told from Frederick as well as Miranda's perspective. She dies in the end due to pneumonia and Frederick after reading her diary in which she mentions that she didn't care about him anyways plans to kidnap another girl Marian. The story is very dark for an average reader. What is disturbing is not the fact that Miranda died of pneumonia nor the fact that Frederick is planning to capture and kidnap another girl, but it lies in the futility of meeting of two individuals. So if Miranda had to die and Frederick could never realize his mistake than what was the point of it all. Similarly if Esther had to submit to insulin shock therapy to become more like a woman than why the "old brag of I am, I am, I am."

The choice of defending Frederick Clegg arises from the fact that Miranda is perfect, reasonable, and articulate in her thought process and understanding of the world. But her perfection, her sense of time is claustrophobic whereas it is Frederick Clegg, our anti hero who lives in a modernist time, a time which is internalized, which has a sense of freedom to it. Than where does Esther Greenwood fit in our schema of understanding? *The Bell jar* remains a haunting description of a woman who wants to be everything and surrenders to society. Esther Greenwood has to die like Septimus Warren Smith in order to give life to Frederick Clegg.

A pervert or a criminal does not play according to the rules of the symbolic order; he unlike Freudian 'I' is never in search of the Big Other. There is not a split in his personality. This 'I' recognizes his subjectivity and is not looking for the 'Name- of -the- Father'. This inarticulate self does not care about approval from society. If it is a 'happy

consciousness' than it is one at the cost of sacrificing another human life. But this would be a very depraved view of the civilization we live in. The birth of Ferdinand Clegg is the birth of human spirit, one which keeps us going despite all odds. Despite what society makes of us and think about us. Miranda is suffocating in her views in a society which recognizes the 'Name- of- the- Father' and doesn't rebel against the symbolic order. Ferdinand is exciting and fascinating in the way he twists around this symbolic order and becomes a figure whose is unlike an artist but who strives to turn ugliness into an art . Esther's narrative dwells in an ambivalence which is much like the ambivalence of our own lives where we are caught between our split selves of what we want to be and what society expects us to be. In *The Collector* this ambivalence is resolved and Frederick Clegg becomes all that we want to be .Somebody so ordinary that he needs no comparison, or a pervert within ourselves from which we run away all our life. In Frederick Clegg, perhaps, is the resolution, the anti hero who is the ultimate destroyer of alienating capitalism. This pervert Frederick Clegg fascinates us in his in articulation because articulation or language is symbolic order/ Other which kills the 'I' within us. According to Marx's theory of Character Mask in a capitalist society we keep fulfilling the intricate and complex roles of being a father, mother, sister etc. our 'idealized I' is not an 'I' but a 'me' imposed upon us by others .Esther Greenwood lacks any kind of liberation because she is stuck in the Lacanian mirror stage where notions of her identity are dependent on others. Ferdinand Clegg provides us with a certain hope because even though he knows that he is a mad man his criminality or evil self is not dependent on this ' ideal -I ' recognized by the Other .Esther Greenwood in her angst and suicidal imaginary remains disillusionary character because after all Frederick lives despite him being evil . What in the end is this attempted goodness which kills the 'I' or the 'species being' within us. A feminist critic could argue that Frederick Clegg can choose criminality because he is after all a male and is not caught in any kind of 'bell jar' like Esther Greenwood. But Ferdinand Clegg is an impotent hero. The sexual encounter between Miranda and Clegg renders him cold .He is disgusted at the sight of naked Miranda whereas Esther is at least trying to fit in despite her hemorrhage with Irwin so her struggles to achieve an 'idealized- I' cannot be put aside in defense of a muted self as Ferdinand Clegg.

Both Esther Greenwood and Frederick Clegg remain freaks in their own ways the only difference being that Esther tries to break out and Frederick doesn't even tries to do so.

Frederick and Miranda's story is one of an ultimate "catastrophe" where two different individuals are not able to understand each other. It seems like the reenactment of Rose and Jacks story in the movie *Titanic* which Slovak Zizek in his movie *A perverts guide to cinema* mentions, that, "the ultimate catastrophe will be one when Jack and Rose would live together and recognize each other's original self and than their love would be dead because of class differences " In both *Poor Koko* and *The Ebony Tower* Fowles comments how " the absence of or the inability to embrace women's alternative perspective condemn modern man / women to the contemporary wasteland defined by abstraction , self absorption and disconnection".

Ferdinand and Esther are subverted images of each other. The two contradictory figures are bound by the effect of alienation in their times .What also joins them together is the absent fathers and the absent mothers in their lives which shapes their personality .What is interesting is that both the novels were published in Europe in 1963. If one reads it artistically as an extension of a common event than can we substitute Frederick's Miranda with Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood. To understand the themes of perversion in both the books one has to pay close attention to the physical spaces Ferdinand and Esther resides in. Both the books talk about closed physical spaces and the final or major action takes place in a cellar. Esther crawls in the cellar and in vain attempt tries to kills herself Similarly Clegg's major planning and action

also takes place in a basement where Miranda eventually dies. In both the books these cellars become a liberating as well as confining experiences for the individuals. This cellar is symbolic of a womb in which the insane / sane takes shelter. According to Northrop Frye,

There are two social conceptions which can be expressed only in terms of myth. One is the social contract, which presents an account of the origins of society. The other is the utopia, which presents an imaginative vision of the *telos* or end at which social life aims. These two myths both begin in an analysis of the present, the society that confronts the mythmaker, and they project this analysis in time or space. The contract projects it into the past, the utopia into the future or some distant place. (Ramp ton 304)

The most obvious image of a physical space which is the bell jar in Sylvia Plath's narrative in which Esther Greenwood finds herself trapped transforms into an exciting fantasy world in *The Collector*. A distorted image of a personal museum where he keeps his collection of dead butterflies including Miranda. According to Freud the cellar is a space of the unconscious where the 'pleasure principal' is not socialized.

*The Collector* has been mostly read through Marx's Ideology of the class war, the conflict of 'the few' against 'the many'. In exploration of a pervert figure or perversion which could take the shape of a crime in the perspective of the normative society we live in Esther's ambition too could be a crime in traditional American society. But how do we resolve the schism between the two narratives because ultimately this study is not an attempt to defend Freudian Cleggs because it would also mean to defend the rapists, molesters of six years old in our daily lives. One cannot escape into phantasmagorical world of a moving bus where it has to disembowel living Mirandas.

Frederick's story is not a romanticized version of *Romeo and Juliet* but is an existentialist angst of a Lumpenproletariat who is an impediment to class struggle. So my premise remains that perversion is an answer to this kind of automatised society we live in.

In her 1929 essay *Womanliness as a Masquerade* Joan Riviere argues that what culture calls pure womanliness is indistinguishable from masquerade. It is an act of concealment by which women disguise their masculine strivings. In other words women perform as "women" to divert the male gaze from the supposed transgressive nature of their ambitions (Peel90)

Whenever one thinks of Sylvia Plath's narrative in *The Bell Jar* in which most of the passages are filled with dry humor one gets an image of a woman hardly engaged in her surroundings. "I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to." The death of Esther Greenwood is the birth of Frederick Clegg. An image where Clegg stands erect against the coiled up body of Esther Greenwood in a cellar. Even though a disengaged laborer of Capitalism Clegg doesn't surrender to suicide he finds his happiness in collecting dead butterflies. It is in the death of Miranda that Frederick Clegg transgresses from being a lumen proletariat to a revolutionary one. Esther Greenwood's tries to kill herself because her feminine self is a masquerade to hide the otherness which she fears. She never transgresses from being a Lumpenproletariat in a capitalist society and is doomed to drudgery.

[Hegel's master-slave dialectic] provides a memorable and persuasive Model for understanding the complex dynamics of intersubjective relationships. Selfhood is a social product that individuals crave; identity has to be constructed Through contentious interaction with and relation to others; this process makes us dependent on

others, and thus inclined to resent and fear them; and such dependence involves forms of psychological and social power that are distinct from physical force or the power afforded by superior wealth. Whenever modern literary theorists and critics have been interested in questions of identity and of the self's confrontation with the other (however understood), Hegel's famous account of the master-slave dialectic has hovered in the background. (Leitch 627-28).

The Bell Jar is a Cinderella fairytale gone wrong where as The Collector is a depraved version of *Beauty and the Beast*, the only difference being that here evil win's over the good depending on our conventional definition of the good and the evil .The intent of this paper is not to analyze how the capitalist structure of our society would favor the few. It attempts to analyze perversity as a revolutionary instinct which has to be carried on in order to keep the spirit of human life alive. We can argue that the definition of pervert as we are trying search through this paper is akin to the definition a nihilist one who "believes in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy." When we think of the Bell jar motif in the book it is evocative of the protection "that kills, the preserving that mocks life". A similar motif of preserving dead butterflies is seen in Clegg's narrative which too mocks life but it is in this destruction that 'Neitzein Übermensch' lives on who is also an "artist tyrant".

There is no acknowledgment of madness in *The Collector*. There are times when Clegg questions his obsession but that only happens for a moment and then he puts it aside whereas Greenwoods narrative is one that of counter bildungsroman where she descends into the attic of her madness because she cannot find answers to the questions she is seeking .But then how does she fit in our concept of criminality and perversion .One can argue that her struggles are completely different and she is not somebody evil who needs an aesthetic affirmation. But is she not criminal in sacrificing herself. In her suicidal attempts she stands hand in hand with Edna Pontellier. It is the stifling of creativity within her. What is the use of these artistic, articulated, and harrowing; haunting images if it finally cajoles us into death instead of reaffirming life .But in the exploration of her madness can we really give it any resolution?

*The Collector* is a prototype of a fairytale coming from the lowest strata of society .So if we superimpose Esther Green wood over Miranda who is Frederick's captor than according to a Marxist analysis of the novel the beast/ Frederick should have turned into a handsome prince and should have won the battle of the many against the few. But even after its evident circularity it is not the victory of the beast over the few or the articulate Miranda. According to Chamoiseau these stories contain no revolutionary message, and their remedies for misfortune are not collective ones .The hero is alone, and selfishly preoccupied with saving his own skin. And so we might conclude as Edouard Glissant suggests ,that what we have here is an *emblematic detour* , a system of counter values , or a counter culture , that reveals itself as both powerless to achieve complete freedom and fiercely determined to strive for it nonetheless.(Chamoiseau 1998 :12-13)

The same fairytale myth has been found in *The bell Jar* where the whore and the angel never truly are able to reconcile themselves in one woman and finally doomed to madness .Such dichotomy however is not seen in Frederick Clegg because he doesn't acknowledge himself as an outcome of bad parenting or arrested development and with intense curiosity observes and questions the law of the state. According to Zips the fairytale monster is not looking for redemption in fairy tale because "despite the promise of the happy ending, the logic of the tale suggests that is there an after to the happily ever after that seriously qualifies the projected happiness.

When her prince becomes a king and she becomes a queen what will her life be like .trained to domesticity by her

dwarf instructors ,will she sit in the window , gazing out on the wild forest of her past ,and sigh, and sew and prick her finger and conceive a child white as snow , red as blood , black as ebony wood ?, surely fairest of them all, snow white has exchanged one glass coffin for another , delivered from the prison where the queen put her only to be imprisoned in the looking glass from which the kings voice speaks daily .There is after all no female model for her in this tale except the good dead mother and her living avatar the bad mother and if snowwhite escaped her first glass coffin by her goodness, her passivity and docility her only escape from second glass coffin , the imprisoning mirror , must evidently be through badness, through plots and stories ,duplicitous schemes , wild dreams, fierce fictions , mad impersonations .the cycle of her fate seems inexorable .(Zipes 206)

Note how madness has been substituted with badness in the above paragraph. So Esther Greenwood cannot live by becoming the emblem of the ‘good woman’ she has struggled against most of her life but by being someone who believes in “building up a glamorous picture of a man who would love me passionately the minute he met me, and all out of a few prosy nothings.” In their perversion Ferdinand Clegg and Esther Greenwood become conjoined twins where one dies in order to save the other.

Historically one cannot ignore the fact that 1963 was an important year in world history. 1963 was the year of the Beatles whose song “please please me” was on number one on UK billboard. 1963 was also the year of the *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan who was the precursor of second wave feminism .So if we approach Ferdinand’s narrative through a Freudian framework it is just a conflict to regain recognition and stability which he finds in capturing and keeping girls in a womb like cellar and trying to befriend them

Clegg can safely be put into the category of a stalker. His ambivalence towards the world and its people makes us question our own normative perspective towards life. Superficially he seems like Frankenstein’s monster or even Caliban from *The Tempest* who question their creator. He neither charms reader like Humbert Humbert’s eloquence. Nor does he love or hate “Forgetting is not something you do, it happens to you. Only it didn’t happen to me.” Both Humbert Humbert and Frederick Clegg are out of the nexus of family structure in society, such escape from familial ties has rarely been seen in female narratives .Esther despite her wry humor and insightful perspectives on things around her fails to become a female picaro .Her suicide both in real and fictional narratives makes us reconsider our perceptions about perversion

The circularity of the narratives in *The Bell Jar* doesn’t gives reader their cathartic impetus with Esther being sane and trying to get grip on herself the reader chooses to remain with distorted grotesque male image of ‘Lady of Shallot’ reaffirming herself through Frederick Clegg who at least offers us an escape into demonic yet enchanting world of butterflies with his abstract morality. The resurrection of Miranda through Marian gives us a hope of illusionary happiness which is otherwise impossi

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues for the inverted understanding of the two texts, where the ending of *The Bell Jar* leaves us disturbed whereas the horror of *The Collector* re installs a hope.The question with which it leaves us grappling is that Esther Greenwood is already dead in her quest for normativity whereas a sociopath like Ferdinand Clegg lives in a fictional world of his own ,he unnerves the reader with his sense of morality and justice and nevertheless leaves us with more questions rather than resolving the idea of perversion which the paper tries to explore

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