



## Self-Actualization in Main Character's Life Journey in *The Bell Jar*

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### Abstract

Self-actualization is term that is commonly used in psychology theories. The term can be simply translated as the full realization of someone's potential or true self. The purposes of this study are to describe the character of the main character in *The Bell Jar* and to describe the main character in achieving self-actualization and how it is portrayed in the novel. This study was done using a descriptive qualitative method and using Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs theory and New Criticism theory to explain the main character and her journey in achieving self-actualization in the form of words. The object of the study was the novel *The Bell Jar* and this study focused on Esther Greenwood as the main character. List of an observational sheet was used as the research instrument and the data was taken through library research. The analysis was conducted by interpreting Esther's utterances and actions using New Criticism theory to describe Esther's characterization and Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs theory to describe Esther's self-actualization. The study results showed that Esther's self-actualization is the results of her being able to fulfill her previous stages both directly and indirectly before reaching self-actualization stage along her life journey.

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## INTRODUCTION

Self-actualization is a term that is commonly used in psychology theories. The term can be simply translated as the full realization of someone's potential or true self. The examples of self-actualization may vary, like expressing their creativity, a journey for spiritual enlightenment, or pursuit of knowledge. The term self-actualization was first coined by Kurt Goldstein. As quoted by Modell (1993), Goldstein viewed that the real motive of someone in doing something is the tendency to actualize itself as fully as possible is the basic drive, the drive of self-actualization.

The concept of self-actualization was widely known after Abraham Maslow brought the term in his hierarchy of need theory. Maslow defined self-actualization by claiming that "what a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization" (Maslow, 1943). Self-actualization can also be translated as "the psychological process aimed at maximizing the use of a person's abilities and resources. This process may vary from one person to another" (Couture et al., 2007).

There are some well-known public figures that Maslow and many others believed had achieved the level of self-actualization. The most popular one is Albert Einstein.

Albert Einstein was born into a middle-class Jewish family; his father was a salesman and engineer, and his mother ran their household. It would appear that in Einstein's earlier life, he comfortably met his basic needs, as his family could support him, and his childhood proved to bring no challenging and concern-inducing difficulties. However, as early schooling passed, life began to introduce fresh issues. Once graduated from Polytechnic Institute, Einstein's next few years proved to bring him to his lowest point in life. Einstein disagreed with the operations of the school system, and he expressed this opinion by often skipping classes and simply studying on his own. His studying was a success, too, as he taught himself natural science, geometry, and philosophy by reading books on his own (Weinstein, 2013). Regardless, his professors strongly disagreed with his decisions, and his professors' poor letters of recommendation led to Einstein's inability to obtain a job post-graduation. Einstein, with no career, struggled

greatly to support his family. Einstein's necessary dedication to securing a source of income hindered him from advancing his state of being to a higher level on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which may be why we see no great discoveries from him in this era of his life (Folsing, 1997).

Albert Einstein's life shifted in one of the years to come. After finally obtaining a job evaluating patent applications for electromagnetic devices, it was not long before he mastered the skill. Because he could work so quickly, Einstein had additional free time to think independently. It was in this free time that Einstein formulated the principle of relativity, which quickly proved to be his "big break." It was not long before Einstein became well-known within the scientific community. Ironically, as Einstein's career escalated (escalating his basic needs and consequently, his safety and security), his marriage fell apart, compromising the love and belongingness in that aspect of his life (Folsing, 1997). However, this does not confirm that Einstein did not achieve this level. In fact, Einstein is quoted, "My relationship with the Jewish people became my strongest human tie" (Folsing, 1997)." This is understandable when it is considered that Einstein lived among the World War II era. In fact, Einstein was so well affiliated and connected with the Jewish community that in November of 1952, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion asked Einstein to be Israel's second President (Federer). This proves that Einstein did not neglect the love and belongingness aspect of self-fulfillment. Einstein was well-established and accepted within the Jewish community, he remarried to woman named Elsa Löwenthal after various affairs, and he had strong ties within the scientific community. His solid achievement in this area allowed him to continue onto greater self-evolvement (Folsing, 1997).

Self-esteem is defined as confidence in one's own worth or abilities, and it is usually a result of others' feelings of respect towards that person. Esteem arises from a feeling of accomplishment and prestige, the feeling that others value you, and the feeling that you are making a contribution to the world (McLeod, 2007). In his life-long career at Princeton, Albert Einstein formulated his mathematical equation about the nature of energy,  $E = MC^2$ , wrote a paper that contradicted the former

understanding of the structure of light in his discussion of the photoelectric effect, and he made significant scientific contributions to the United States during WWII with the creation of the atomic bomb (Folsing, 1997). In reflection of Einstein's scientific success, it is undeniable that he not only strongly participated in his professional activity, but also had incredible academic accomplishments- both of which are markers of self-esteem individuals. Albert Einstein is considered to be the most influential physicist of the 20th century; clearly, by achieving so remarkably in his field, Einstein had also achieved Maslow's fourth level of the hierarchy: esteem.

The fifth and most paramount level, self-actualization, is left much more to interpretation. It is stated that any individual, provided the necessary conditions, has the potential to reach their fullest potential. By looking at Einstein's life, it can be concluded that he did reach self-actualization. It is further confirmed by what Einstein says after refusing surgery, "I want to go when I want...I have done my share, it is time to go. I will do it elegantly" (Folsing, 1997).

In this study, the writer wants to analyze the Esther Greenwood's journey in achieving her self-actualization by analyzing the background that leads to her confused self and how she finally reaching her true self since Esther must struggle a lot because of her own inability to fulfill her needs at the beginning. Esther is a character that seems to have a great positive change at the end compare to the beginning of the story that actually a process of achieving self-actualization.

## METHODS

This is a descriptive qualitative study, which relies on the power of words or explanatory reasoning. According to Hancock et al (2007) qualitative research concerns with developing explanations of social phenomena. It aims to help us understand the social world in which we live and why things are the way they are. It concerns with the social aspects of our world and seeks to answer questions about; why people behave the way they do, how opinions and attitudes are formed, how people are affected by the events that go on around them,

how and why cultures and practices have developed in the way they have.

As a final point, the best-suggested method accustomed to analyzing a novel, which undeniably tells the readers about people's life and problems is qualitative method. Hence, in order to explain how the main character in *The Bell Jar* novel by Sylvia Plath visualized self-actualization, I used Maslow's characteristics of self-actualization and New Criticism theory to support it

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Self-actualization in main character's life journey in *The Bell Jar*

Before exploring more about main character's life journey in achieving self-actualization, the writer would like to explain a little about *The Bell Jar*. *The Bell Jar* was written by Sylvia Plath in London in 1961. This novel is the only novel ever published by Sylvia Plath. The novel concerned with the struggling of the main character of this novel, Esther Greenwood, in facing her "madness." Her uncommon goals as a woman in that era and her reaction after comparing her imagination and reality of a life in a big town lead her to this so called madness and later in the story, it tells about how Esther deals with that madness. *The Bell Jar* novel has been adapted into big screen production which directed by Larry Peerce in 1979 and Kirsten Dunst in 2016.

#### • Esther Greenwood's Character

Abram (1999) says that characters are the person represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as being endowed with particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their distinctive ways of saying it-the dialogue- and from what they do-the action. Di Yanni (2002) says a character in fiction can be conveniently classified as major and minor, static and dynamic.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood is included in the major character because novel itself tells about Esther's life in reaching her "enlightenment". As said by Di Yanni above, the characters are not only divided into major and minor, but also static and dynamic. Esther is not only as a major character, but also as the dynamic character. This is because the attitude

and behavior of Esther are unstable. According to Kennedy (1995), characters may seem flat or round. Esther also includes in round character because he has random attitude.

The character also has characterization. Characterizations are the means by which writer presents and reveals character (Di Yanni, 2002). The characteristic of Esther is described below:

– *Soft-hearted*

Esther is soft-hearted since the beginning of the story. For example, she can't stand at the sight of blood. Even after reading about people getting electrocuted in a newspaper is enough to made her uneasy.

“The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers -- goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.” (Plath, 1963: 1)

Not only towards physical things, Esther is also soft emotionally. When her friend in New York, Doreen, passed out from being so drunk, she left her at the carpet in front of her room. Esther almost lock her door, but her worries toward her friend prevent her from doing that.

“Quietly, I stepped back into my room and shut the door. On second thoughts, I didn't lock it. I couldn't quite bring myself to do that.” (Plath, 1963: 14)

When Esther was asked by Jay Cee, her boss in New York, to take another language classes in her college, she didn't tell her the truth that she cannot take another class.

“I hadn't the heart to tell Jay Cee there wasn't one scrap of space on my senior year schedule to learn languages in.” (Plath, 1963: 21)

It is already clear that Esther has a soft-heart that do not want people to suffer. Even an imagination of it or a telling the truth that will hurt others is enough to scare her.

– *Hard Worker*

Esther Greenwood was a dedicated woman who pursue her dream to be a writer and answering the questions in her head about the “meaning” her life. Esther made it to the college based on her hard work alone by telling herself that she wanted that and she made it real.

“All my life I'd told myself studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true, I did everything well enough and got all A's, and by the time I made it to college nobody could stop me.” (Plath, 1963: 19)

Esther also had a dream to be a professor and seems ready to work as hard as it needs to make it real.

“What I always thought I had in mind was getting some big scholarship to graduate school or a grant to study all over Europe, and then I thought I'd be a professor and write books of poems or write books of poems and be an editor of some sort. Usually I had these plans on the tip of my tongue.” (Plath, 1963: 20)

Esther proved to the people around her including the readers that she is basically able to achieve most of her achievements by her hardwork. She is already a smart woman, but she did not rely only on her brain to achieve things that she wants.

– *Imaginative*

Another trait of Esther Greenwood is that she is an imaginative person. She has a pretty vivid image of things, even those that she has never seen before. One is when she imagined about her being the wife of Constantine.

“It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curlers after he'd left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he'd expect a big dinner, and I'd spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted.” (Plath, 1963: 52)

Another example is when she imagined about *harakiri*, a traditional suicide act in Japan. She could make a very detail pictures and the

whole process in her head. She imagined the vividly despite she hates blood so much.

“I tried to imagine how they would go about it. They must have an extremely sharp knife. No, probably two extremely sharp knives. Then they would sit down, cross-legged, a knife in either hand. Then they would cross their hands and point a knife at each side of their stomach. They would have to be naked, or the knife would get stuck in their clothes. Then in one quick flash, before they had time to think twice, they would jab the knives in and zip them round, one on the upper crescent and one on the lower crescent, making a full circle. Then their stomach skin would come loose, like a plate, and their insides would fall out, and they would die.” (Plath, 1963: 93)

Based on the quotations above, it is clear that Esther possess an imaginative trait. Her ability to pictures events in her head so vividly is the proof of that.

– *Realistic*

Another characterization of Esther Greenwood is realistic. Esther often sees that world as it is. Her life which sometimes filled with sweet lies made her become a realist. One example is when she learned that “purity” is not valued that highly in the real life.

“Finally I decided that if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn't pure either. Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well.” (Plath, 1963: 51)

Another example is when she imagined being Constantine's wife. She thought it would be wasteful to just be a housewife while she was a bright student. This way of thinking is based from her seeing Mrs. Willard's daily life as a housewife.

“This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's, but I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school

teacher herself.” (Plath, 1963: 52)

Esther Greenwood sees the world as the way it is. She often judges things realistically based on her knowledge or experiences, thus make her a realistic person.

– *Smart*

Esther Greenwood is a bright woman. She often observe her surroundings to learn new things beside learning in the formal way. She often get A's in her test in school. Her observing skill can be seen when she learn about another side of “manner” when she was in *Ladies' Day* Banquet. she learned that mistakes will be seen as something eccentric or new if the person act with certain arrogance.

“I'd discovered, after a lot of extreme apprehension about what spoons to use, that if you do something incorrect at table with a certain arrogance, as if you knew perfectly well you were doing it properly, you can get away with it and nobody will think you are bad-mannered or poorly brought up. They will think you are original and very witty..” (Plath, 1963: 17)

Another is when she was asked by Jay Cee about her ability in speaking other languages. It turned out that she can speak several languages and even seems eager to learn another.

“Oh, I can read a bit of French, I guess, and I've always wanted to learn German. I'd been telling people I'd always wanted to learn German for about five years.” (Plath, 1963: 20)

When Esther attended the Chemistry class in her college, she showed another sign of her smartness. She got a straight A while most of the students failed the subject. She does not even seemed attracted to learn Chemistry in the first place.

“Well, I studied those formulas, I went to class and watched balls roll down slides and listened to bells ring and by the end of the semester most of the other girls had failed and I had a straight A.” (Plath, 1963: 21)

Although Esther is just a country-side girl, that does not make her stupid. She proved it by getting a scholarship to a college and even

won a chance to work in New York for a month after defeating many other competitors.

- **Self-Actualization of Esther Greenwood**

*The Bell Jar* tells about a woman who has had experience in the past. Esther must deal with her “madness” caused from the huge gap between the reality of a life in a city which is very different from her imagination. In her hometown, she was considered as a little “abnormal” because of her dreams and goals as a woman in that era. Esther wanted to be a writer and refused to be just a housewife and serve a man until the day she died. The madness is consuming her little by little and Esther must find a way to overcome this madness.

Therefore, this study uses Hierarchy of Human Needs of Abraham H. Maslow to analyze self-actualization need of Esther. As it has been explained previously, Hierarchy of Human Needs Theory is divided into five clusters of needs. From the lowest physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, esteem needs and the highest self-actualization needs.

If physiological needs are satisfied, it will make people motivation to fulfill the next needs that is safety needs. If safety needs are satisfied, people will do the next needs, and so on.

- **Physiological Needs**

The first level of hierarchy needs consists of physiological needs. The basic and strongest needs in human hierarchy needs to save their life in the physical side, needs of food, drink, house, sex, and oxygen (Sobur, 2003). If human couldn't fulfill this need, it would affect their behavior. They possibly will get sad, mad, and anxious. A person who gets hungry will think about getting food to eat instead of getting things to wear.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther has most of her basic needs fulfilled. Especially, when she was in New York. She got many things as present including foods, drinks, and many more. There are some quotation that the writer provides as

proves that implies that her basic needs are always fulfilled in the novel.

“I'm not sure why it is, but I love food more than just about anything else. No matter how much I eat, I never put on weight. With one exception I've been the same weight for ten years.” (Plath, 1963: 15)

Even sometimes, Esther does not need to spend anything to get her basic needs such as foods and drinks.

“We were always taken out on expense accounts, so I never felt guilty. I made a point of eating so fast I never kept the other people waiting who generally ordered only chef's salad and grapefruit juice because they were trying to reduce. Almost everybody I met in New York was trying to reduce.” (Plath, 1963: 15)

She even got make-ups, jobs, and many other things. Although, she seemed to take them for granted.

“We had all won a fashion magazine contest, by writing essays and stories and poems and fashion blurbs, and as prizes they gave us jobs in New York for a month, expenses paid, and piles and piles of free bonuses, like ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon and chances to meet successful people in the field of our desire and advice about what to do with our particular complexions.” (Plath, 1963: 2)

Not only in New York, Esther was still able fulfill her basic physiological needs back when she was in her hometown.

“The sight of all the food stacked in those kitchens made me dizzy. It's not that we hadn't enough to eat at home, it's just that my grandmother always cooked economy joints and economy meat-loafs and had the habit of saying, the minute you lifted the first forkful to your mouth, 'I hope you enjoy that, it cost forty-one cents a pound,' which always made me feel I was somehow eating pennies instead of Sunday roast.” (Plath, 1963: 15)

It has been clear that Esther is already completing the first step to be self-actualized. Most of the basic needs are fulfilled with ease. Therefore, physiological needs of Esther are fulfilled.

- **Safety Needs**

When all physiological needs are satisfied and are no longer controlling thoughts and behaviors, the needs for security can become active (Boeree qtd. in Muthmainnah I 1). Abraham Maslow in his book *Motivation and Personality* said that he may categorize roughly as the safety needs: security, stability, dependency, protection, freedom from fear, from anxiety and chaos and so on (Maslow, 1970). These needs represent a need for safety or security in our environment.

Esther always lived in a place where her safety is guaranteed. In her home, in New York, or even in the asylum, she never had to deal with physical security problems. The only security problems she faced are herself and her trust issue. Since her dealing with Doctor Gordon, she found it hard to trust people, especially a psychiatrist, but with Doctor Nolan, Esther feels safe to tell her anything.

“I curled up in the far corner of the alcove with the blanket over my head. It wasn't the shock treatment that struck me, so much as the bare-faced treachery of Doctor Nolan. I liked Doctor Nolan, I loved her, I had given her my trust on a platter and told her everything, and she had promised, faithfully, to warn me ahead of time if ever I had to have another shock treatment” (Plath, 1963: 146)

Esther felt safe around Doctor Nolan. Since Esther never had a problem in her physical security needs nor she ever felt threatened physically by others, it is safe to assume that this kind of safety is all that Esther actually needs, thus completing her safety need.

– *Love and Belongingness Needs*

If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, there will emerge the love and affection and belonging needs, and the whole cycle already described will repeat itself with this new center (Boeree quoted in Muthmainnah, 2009). These needs can be expressed in a variety of ways. It can be expressed through a close relationship with a friend, lover, or mate, or through social

relationship formed within a group (Schultz, 2005).

Esther's love need was once fulfilled by Buddy Willard, but since she knows that Buddy had an affair with another woman for multiple times behind her back and made her sick by making her feel special even after having an affair, she lost that feeling to Buddy.

After losing Buddy, Esther changed her view about her purity. She was a virgin at that time and one of her goals was to lose her virginity to someone other than Buddy to make it even with him. She did not just randomly choose her partner. She finally decided to lose her virginity with Irwin, a mathematics professor she met on the steps of the Widener Library.

“I felt the first man I slept with must be intelligent, so I would respect him. Irwin was a full professor at twenty-six and had the pale, hairless skin of a boy genius. I also needed somebody quite experienced to make up for my lack of it, and Irwin's ladies reassured me on this head. Then, to be on the safe side, I wanted somebody I didn't know and wouldn't go on knowing—a kind of impersonal, priest-like official, as in the tales of tribal rites. By the end of the evening I had no doubts about Irwin whatsoever.” (Plath, 1963: 157)

The belongingness part is fulfilled when Esther finally lost her virginity to Irwin the very same night she met him. Esther, who first valued her purity, felt relieved that she is no longer pure which she thought as common in the society.

“It occurred to me that the blood was my answer. I couldn't possibly be a virgin any more. I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition.” (Plath, 1963: 158)

Here we can see that Esther, by no longer being a virgin, felt that she became the part of the what she called tradition. She felt that she had become one of the rest of the people. People who do not value their purity which she thought was most of the people in the world. By losing her virginity, Esther felt accepted to the society and rightfully belong to them.

– *Esteem Needs*

After all mentioned needs above have already fulfilled, everyone has a strong desire for a stable, firmly based, usually high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others (Maslow, 1970). Maslow said that these needs may therefore be classified into two sets. The first is self-respect. It is desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for mastery and competence, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom. Self-respect is the appreciation of them, creates confidence and understanding ability. Second is self-esteem. It includes desire for reputation or prestige (defining it as respect or esteem from other people), status, fame and glory, dominance, recognition, attention, importance, dignity, or appreciation. Satisfaction of the self-esteem or self-respect need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy, of being useful and necessary in the world. When these needs are not satisfied, individual has feelings of inferiority, of weakness, and of helplessness.

As human, Esther has esteem needs not only from her own self, but also from others. If she is unable to satisfy these needs, then she will feel inferiority, of weakness, and of helplessness. Analysis of esteem needs that exist within Esther will be divided into two branches as below.

First is self-respect. In this case, the major character wants to be free. Free to be what she wants, free to do what she wants to do, free to be a "normal" woman again. Esther is living in an asylum which make her seen as "crazy" person, but we can see that at the end, she is getting better that even she herself is confident that she will be allowed to leave the asylum soon.

"In front of Caplan I said good-bye to Valerie's calm, snow-maiden face behind which so little, bad or good, could happen, and walked on alone, my breath coming in white puffs even in that sun-filled air. Valerie's last, cheerful cry had been 'So long! Be seeing you.' 'Not if I know it,' I thought." (Plath, 1963: 167)

The second is the recognition from others. Esther is said to have her "interview" that will decide her freedom the day after. Although she is scared she is pretty confident that she will be free. Doctor Nolan, her psychiatrist, also encouraged her moments before her interview.

"Don't be scared,' Doctor Nolan had said. 'I'll be there, and the rest of the doctors you know, and some visitors, and Doctor Vining, the head of all the doctors, will ask you a few questions, and then you can go.'" (Plath, 1963: 169)

Judging by the way Doctor Nolan said it, it is safe to assume that she and the other doctors believed that Esther is already "cured" and ready for her freedom. She is recognized once again as a normal people. Therefore, Esther already fulfilled her Esteem needs which is consisted of her own self-respect and other's recognition

#### – *Self-Actualization Needs*

When someone is satisfied four level of needs, the final level of development, which Maslow termed self-actualization, can be reached. Even if all these needs are satisfied, people may still often (if not always) expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop unless the individual is doing what he, individually; is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. Maslow says it as "what a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature." This need we may call self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). It refers to human needs to increase their potential. Each people satisfy this need to increase their potential in different ways.

After fulfilling four previous requirements; psychological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, and esteem needs, then as a human being, Esther requires the fulfillment of higher needs, self-actualization needs. It happened when Esther managed to "overcome" her madness and felt "reborn" as she approached her freedom from the asylum.

"But I wasn't getting married. There ought,

I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice -  
- patched, retreaded and approved for the  
road, I was trying to think of an appropriate  
one when Doctor Nolan appeared from  
nowhere and touched me on the shoulder.”  
(Plath, 1963: 169)

That is Esther's peak experience. The  
moment when she felt anew. It can be said that  
Esther, after all of her experiences, felt relieved  
as if she was being reborn.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the writer concluded that  
self-actualization is a natural process that could  
occur to everybody. One simply needs to fulfill  
the other needs to achieve self-actualization, but  
since most people did not know what it is or  
how to achieve it, they simply cannot become  
self-actualizer. Become a self-actualizer is  
important in order to understand and enjoy our  
life to the fullest, but it is indeed still a very hard  
things to do even to the people who studied and  
understand it.

In addition, some parts of *The Bell Jar*  
story was written according to the Sylvia Plath's  
experiences since this work is a semi-  
autobiographical novel. Some phenomena  
which happened at that time were shown  
consciously and unconsciously. Some of the  
phenomena are the amount of stress and  
pressure that the women get at that time, the  
way of the world view woman, the way mental  
illness was seen, and how women who were  
willing to break out of those rules are viewed.  
Plath wrote his memories according to the  
situation at that time and added her imagination  
to make the story more interesting.

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