Paper 2 (HL) M2013 Exam Response Question 5

*Context – ‘historical, cultural, or social – can have an influence on the way literary works are written or received. Discuss with reference to at least two of the works you have studied.*

In the1950s, in the aftermath of WWII, the emerging Cold War fostered paranoia for ‘Anti-American’ non-conformism. Society promoted a ‘traditional’ family structure, involving adherence to so-called traditional gender roles, and a suppression of individualism. In this regard, mental illness was a form of non-conformism, stigmatized by society, and treated by new medical and technological developments. Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar and Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest are both situated in this time and place. The former is a semi-autobiographical novel, narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, who struggles with depression as she seeks to express her ‘authentic’ identity. The latter is a novel, narrated by Chief Bromden, about a ward in a mental institution in Oregon, controlled by the tyrannical Nurse Ratched whose control is challenged by the arrival of Randle P. McMurphy. Both literary texts are influenced by the socio-cultural context in which they are set – 1950s America – and may be regarded as the authors’ personal response to the circumstances of their context, revealing an understanding of gender roles and mental illness in particular.

Gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles are represented and challenged in both novels. In The Bell Jar, Esther’s defiance of societal expectations of gender roles is a major thematic concern. Esther is critical of the other girls living in Manhattan’s Amazon Hotel who are just ‘hanging around to get married’. Esther ‘never intend[s] to get married’, regarding married life as dreary and ‘wasted’, while ‘children make [her] sick’. This perspective is unconventional in a society that expects all women to aspire to become wives and mothers. Esther ‘hated the thought of serving a man’ and does not want to be ‘under a man’s thumb’. Esther’s rejection of this hegemonic outlook is expressed by her rebellion against the sexual double standard regarding ‘purity’ (i.e. virginity). ‘In Defence of Chastity’ is an article that her mother, who endorses societal expectations, sends Esther. It highlights the importance of women abstaining from sex until marriage because men ‘wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex’; however, Esther notes that the one thing the article does not consider is ‘what a woman wanted’. Whilst other women simply accept the patriarchal double-standard, Esther begins to hate Buddy Willard, her then boyfriend, after he admits that he had an affair with a waitress, whilst expecting Esther to remain a virgin until marriage. Esther resolves to lose her virginity to make her ‘equal’ to Buddy. Nevertheless, Esther is concerned by the prospect of becoming pregnant, where pregnancy is a mechanism to ‘keep women in line’. Her abhorrence of childbirth is evident when she describes a woman giving birth in horrific terms of ‘a windowless, doorless corridor of pain’. Esther manages this problem by having a diaphragm fitted, a procedure that she regards as ‘climbing to freedom’.

The sexual prejudice against women translates to societal oppression. Esther’s mother expects her to learn shorthand so that Esther can become a secretary, one of the few jobs androcentric society makes available to women. In fact, when Esther meets Dr. Nolan, she is surprised, as she had not ‘expected a woman psychiatrist’. In The Bell Jar, Esther eventually breaks free from the oppressive, traditional gender roles, but in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest women are portrayed through negative gender stereotypes. The characters include a number of strong women such as Nurse Ratched, Harding’s wife, and Billy Bibbit’s mother; however, they are all portrayed as cruel emasculators of men. Harding says that the patients of the male-only ward are ‘victims of a matriarchy’. Nurse Ratched is described as a ‘ball-cutter’ as she uses manipulation and insinuation to terrify and control the men, often turning man against man. Harding’s wife is a source of discomfort for him, whilst Billy Bibbit’s mother is so overpowering that when Nurse Ratched threatens to tell her that he has slept with Candy, he cuts his throat. McMurphy’s blatant sexuality (overt sexuality was often celebrated by ‘Beat Generation’ writers like Kesey) – is used by him to remain sane and gain a degree of control over Nurse Ratched. Nurse Ratched’s bosom is a constant target for McMurphy’s jokes. At the climax of the novel, McMurphy attacks Nurse Ratched to reveal her nipples and, after this, Nurse Ratched is no longer able to ‘conceal the fact that she was a woman’. In consequence, she loses the power she previously had over patients. The women in the novel who are characterized positively are Candy and Sandy, two prostitutes who are viewed by the male patients as sexual objects. The ‘Jap nurse’ from another ward is also characterized positively; however, she says that ‘all single nurses over the age of thirty five should be fired’, suggesting that women need men to function in society. Thus, in both novels, The Bell Jar and One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, the portrayal of women reveals the zeitgeist of American society in the period.

Similarly, the portrayal of mental illness – how it is perceived, and the stigma it attracts – is also influenced by socio-cultural context. Esther Greenwood’s descent into madness parallels the author’s own experience of depression and (attempted) suicide, and for the protagonist of The Bell Jar her apparent madness is strongly stigmatized by patriarchal social structures. When Esther refuses to return to Doctor Gordon’s mental hospital, her mother is pleased she is not like those ‘awful dead people’ and believes that Esther can ‘decide to be all right again’, showing that although she loves her daughter, she fails to understand the nature of depression. Esther also mentions a post office box used by patients of the mental institute who do not ‘want to advertise the fact that they live in an asylum’. Buddy asks Esther who she will marry now that she has been institutionalized and Doctor Nolan tells Esther that when she return to college there will be people who will ‘avoid’ her as though she is ‘a leper with a warning bell’. These examples seem to confirm the societal stigma that mental illness invites.

Similarly, in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, one of the nurses believes that she has a birthmark as a consequence of working with the mental patients, suggesting they are sinister or evil. And, when some patients leave on the fishing trip, they must pass off as crew whilst stopping for gas, because the attendant shows signs of nervousness when he recognizes the uniforms of the state mental institution. Later, another character quickly leaves when Harding announces that they are from the mental hospital, leading him to remark upon the ‘power’ that mental illness confers. He wonders if the more insane someone is, the more power he has, and uses Hitler as an example. This is part of Kesey’s attempt to question and challenge the definition of ‘mental illness’. If there are often biological bases for mental illness, it may be argued that mental illness is also a label for societal non-conformism. For example, both Sefelt and Fredrickson suffer from epilepsy, which is hardly a mental illness, but rather a physical condition that hinders their functioning in the ‘outside world’. In fact, most of the patients are in the institution voluntarily because, as Billy Bibbit says, they do not have ‘the guts’ to survive in ‘normal’ society. McMurphy is angered by this, claiming that whilst they ‘may not be the everyday man on the street, they are not ‘nuts’ and thus do not belong in a ‘nuthouse’. This not only suggests that madness is nuanced, but it also questions who defines who is ‘nuts’. Here, it can be claimed that those who have power such as Nurse Ratched can claim to be sane, whilst those who defy her are labeled insane. Similarly, The Bell Jar also challenges the meaning of madness when Buddy considers Esther insane because she does not want children. Moreover, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest is also influenced by Kesey’s own extensive experimentation with LSD, a recreational drug that can induce hallucinations of the type experienced by the narrator, Chief Bromden. The Chief’s insanity is manifested through these hallucinations such as those of ‘the fog’ and machinery inside people; he sees one of the Chronics being cut up, with rust, glass, and wires spilling out instead of body parts. The Chief considers this machinery part of ‘the Combine’ which has taken over the land and whose aim is to ‘adjust’ everyone and everything until they fit. The Chief’s perspective mirrors Kesey’s own rebellion against the American state’s suppression of individuality in 1950s America. Thus, in both novels, The Bell Jar and One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, the societal view of the period and the authors’ own experiences with mental illness inform the portrayal of madness.

The theme of mental illness is expanded in each of the novels as they address the treatment of madness. In The Bell Jar, this, once again, interfaces with gender inequality. Esther’s first doctor, the male Doctor Gordon, is described as ‘conceited’ and inattentive. Esther hates him from their first encounter, and he is ineffective in treating Esther, only making her condition worse. After Esther refuses to speak openly with Doctor Gordon, he sends her for shock therapy, which is extremely unpleasant, and leaves Esther wondering ‘what terrible thing’ she had done to deserve it. Male doctors are again depicted in a negative light Esther emphasizes the high cost Doctor Gordon charges, and Joan discusses ‘the dollar signs [in her male doctor’s) eyes’. This is in direct contrast to the female Doctor Nolan, a literary foil to Doctor Gordon. Esther’s narration is much more positive, describing Doctor Nolan as ‘slim’ and ‘stylish’. Importantly, she is successful in her treatment of Esther. She treats Esther through a combination of talk therapy, insulin, and electroshock therapy, suggesting that Esther is being treated, rather than punished for deviance. Doctor Nolan tells Esther that administered correctly, electroshock therapy should be ‘like falling asleep’. After her initial shock, Esther reveals that the bell jar that symbolizes her depression ‘hung suspended a few feet above [her] head’, whereas earlier she had been ‘stewing in her own sour air’. Thus, in a sense, the novel discusses, in a nuanced way, the treatment of mental illness in 1950s America.

By contrast, the depiction of treatment for mental illness in American society of the period is much is much more negative – indeed horrific – in Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. Electroshock therapy at the (mordantly satirical) ‘Shock Shop’ and lobotomies are routinely administered as instruments of punishment and torture. It is in this way that Nurse Ratched is able to enforce social conformity, discouraging dissent or deviance. ‘Treatment’ often injures the patients, dehumanising them, and turning them into helpless ‘Chronics’. McMurphy is ultimately lobotomized, his punishment for attempting to kill Nurse Ratched. The operation destroys his spirit and he become a ‘vegetable’, leading Chief Bromden to kill McMurphy in an act of mercy as the novel concludes. The ‘therapeutic communities’ that Nurse Ratched and Doctor Spivey promote are also unhelpful. These ‘word meetings’ are apparently intended to help patients heal; however, McMurphy, highlighting their animalistic nature, describes them as ‘pecking parties’. Instead it is rule breaking that empowers the men and eventually helps them regain independence. In this, again, readers are aware of the anti-establishment system of values of the Beat Generation, and it is this that Kesey seems to champion.

And, thus, in both novels – the counter-cultural One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, and the quasi-autobiographical *The Bell Jar*, readers sense something of America in the 1950s – its view of gender and women’s role in society, and, related to this, mental illness and the labelling of madness. If, however, the novels reveal aspects of time and place, they remain relevant today for contemporary readers in America and elsewhere.