

The Gendered Unconscious of Labour: A Psychoanalytic Feminist Reading of  
Professional Women in Modern Literature

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### **Abstract**

The 21st-century woman, after years of struggle, has finally attained the right to work, but her identity and its struggles still keep her behind. This paper examines how modern women's writing represents the conflicts between professional ambition and gendered expectation, focussing on Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). Drawing on psychoanalytic feminist theories of Juliet Mitchell, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, the paper argues that work for women is not merely an economic or intellectual activity but a deeply gendered and unconscious struggle. While Woolf stresses the importance of material needs to achieve intellectual progress, Plath highlights the fragmentation of female subjectivity when professional aspirations collide with cultural stereotypes and expectations. Through these texts and a seminal theoretical framework, the paper emphasises a new gender-sensitive definition of work: a site of negotiation between creativity, identity and cultural expectation.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalytic Feminism, Unconscious, Work, Gender, Modern Literature, Feminism, Identity, Culture

## **The Gendered Unconscious of Labour: A Psychoanalytic Feminist Reading of Professional Women in Modern Literature**

### **Introduction**

The word 'work' is understood in the simple context of doing/performing a task, deed, process, etc. But the word entails layers of hidden meanings when it comes to viewing and understanding it from a gendered perspective. Moreover, with the influx of artificial intelligence (AI), the concept of work has undergone a complete transformation. With more and more tasks being automated and manual labour being eliminated, the 21st century calls for a new understanding of work. However, with or without AI, work has never been a gender-neutral concept and means different things for different genders. To understand work, we need to understand it in dialogue with cultural, social and traditional forces, which play a huge role in deciding what it means to different sects of society.

Gender in the purview of work has been much more important with the growing global technological and economic restructuring. It plays a crucial role in determining a man's and a woman's position in society, affecting everything from wealth and power to social security and health. Furthermore, work is also segregated in society with culturally accepted norms of what constitutes a 'man's work' (earning money, providing) and a 'woman's work' (childbearing, rearing, looking after the family). Women's work often remains unrecognised due to its unpaid and informal nature, cloaked under the manipulation of 'labour of love' ('Gender and Work' n.d.: 82). The ideological framing of domestic work as a 'labour of love' effectively naturalises women's unpaid contribution, rendering it invisible in economic and social accounting (Boserup 1970; Waring 1988). This invisibility is a

structural mechanism that ensures women's continued subordination, as their primary identity remains tethered to the domestic sphere regardless of their professional achievements.

On the other hand, working women are met with the 'double burden' of performing at work and looking after their families to satisfy the image of the 'ideal feminine' (Boserup 1970). On the work front, they have less say in their work environment and lower decision-making powers. Women represent, on average, under 10 per cent of parliament members and 20 per cent of middle-level managers. On top of all that, women are also frequent survivors of sexual harassment at the workplace, which affects their employment, promotions, performance reports, and general work environment. Gender discrimination at the workplace is understood as a complex issue connected to gender stereotypes, institutional policies and the composition of the workforce (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011: 765). Discrimination often results from the subtle, interactive dynamics of arbitrary policy rules and their usages. Combined with deep-seated gender stereotypes, it reveals the structural and cultural underpinnings of gender inequality at the workplace (ibid.).

All these factors work together to affect women's mental health greatly. They find themselves with a split self of identity wherein they have to juggle between professional aspirations and the traditional expectations of society. Moreover, even today, women are employed for less skilled jobs due to both stereotypical and cultural reasons. 'Work-related upper extremity disorders (WRUEDs) are frequent in jobs characterised by static load and monotonous and repetitive tasks, such as traditional assembly line work, data entry at computer input devices, as well as among cashiers working at post offices, banks, and supermarkets. These occupations are often held by women' (Lundberg 2002: 383).

The stress associated with these jobs is compounded by the gendered division of unpaid labour. Additionally, women experience elevated levels of stress when they come back home from work because they have the added responsibilities of cooking food, looking after their children, ageing parents, etc. 'No significant differences were found during work, but women had significantly elevated norepinephrine levels after work. The elevated stress levels of women after work were found to be associated with the presence of children at home, whereas men's stress levels were unrelated to having children at home' (ibid.: 386).

This conflict between work and home has been dealt with by some of the leading philosophers of psychoanalytic feminism. The paper will now analyse two seminal feminist texts, *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath as an attempt to contextualise the relationship between work and gender, and its profound psychological undercurrents. The central argument is that the gendered unconscious dictates the terms of engagement for women within the professional setup, turning the act of working into a site of perpetual psychic negotiation.

### **Literature Review**

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is psychoanalytic feminism, a school of thought that seeks to integrate the insights of psychoanalysis, particularly the structures of the unconscious, desire and language, with feminist critiques of patriarchy. This approach moves beyond sociological or economic explanations of gender inequality to explore how patriarchal ideology is internalised and, in turn, shapes female subjectivity.

### **The symbolic, the imaginary and the gendered subject**

The work of Juliet Mitchell is foundational in our study, as she sought to retrieve Freud and Lacan for feminism, arguing that psychoanalysis is a description of the patriarchal system, not a prescription for it (Mitchell 1974). Mitchell's focus on the Oedipus complex and the Law of the Father demonstrates how women are positioned as the 'other' within the system that structures language and society. For a woman, entering the professional world of work is an attempt to occupy a position defined and regulated by this male-centric order. The unconscious resistance to this order, or the failure to fully integrate into it, becomes the source of internal conflict, which is what Woolf and Plath both capture. The professional woman is thus engaged in an unconscious struggle to find a space for herself within a structure that fundamentally excludes her.

### **Language, the body and the semiotic**

Julia Kristeva's work further illuminates the psychological mechanisms of this conflict, especially through her distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic (Kristeva 1984). The symbolic order is the realm of social conventions, grammar and law: the very structures required to participate in the formal world of work. The semiotic, conversely, is the pre-Oedipal, rhythmic, instinctual drive associated with the maternal body and the unconscious. Kristeva argues that the revolutionary potential of women's language and creativity lies in the irruption of the semiotic into the symbolic.

In the context of a professional woman, the act of working often necessitates the repression of the body and of the desires associated with the maternal or the non-linear self. The psychic distress experienced by professional women, as seen in Plath, is the consequence of society's failure to make space for the unexpressed anxieties arising from the body and the unconscious. This can be seen in the form of physical and mental breakdowns that force

women to drop out of the rigid social expectations of work. Marilyn Boyer, for instance, links Plath's depiction of the disabled female body in *The Bell Jar* to the ineffectuality of language and a mind/body disconnection, directly echoing Kristevan and Lacanian concepts (Boyer 2004: 200). The disabled body becomes an analogue for the silenced self that cannot articulate its desire for work and professional autonomy within the established, male-centric linguistic framework.

### **The other and the unconscious economy**

Luce Irigaray offers a powerful critique of the symbolic economy by arguing that women exist only as a 'mirror' for the male subject, as the 'other' (Irigaray 1985). In the workplace, this manifests as women being valued not for their autonomous intellectual output, but for how they *support* or *reflect* the male-defined professional ideal. Irigaray calls for a discovery of a distinct female imaginary and a new language that is not based on the phallus (ibid.). This theoretical imperative suggests that a truly gender-sensitive definition of work must move beyond the current economic system, which is structured entirely on masculine values of competition, hierarchy and singular achievement.

The psychoanalytic feminist lens, therefore, allows this paper to view the professional woman's struggles, such as the double burden and segregated and unrecognised work, not merely as external barriers but as evidence of an unconscious conflict.

### **The sociological and psychological context**

Sociological studies confirm the pervasive reality of gender discrimination, which is maintained not just by explicit bias but by the subtle, yet powerful, influence of gender stereotypes that define certain jobs or behaviours as male or female (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011:

765). Furthermore, studies by Ulf Lundberg reveal the direct, biological cost of the gendered division of labour, showing women's elevated stress hormones (norepinephrine) *after* work due to the presence of children at home (Lundberg 2002: 386). This demonstrates that the 'private' sphere of the home imposes a physical and mental burden that actively undermines women's professional sustainability.

### **Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own***

Woolf's 1929 essay is a foundational text in feminist materialist criticism (Zimmerman 2018: 35). Her demand for 'a woman must have money and a room of her own' is often taken as a straightforward economic and spatial argument. However, when read through a psychoanalytic feminist lens, the 'room' becomes much more than a physical space; it is a necessary material condition for the creation of a space of autonomy, a space where the female unconscious can begin to disentangle itself from patriarchal demands.

### **The material foundation of intellectual work**

Woolf's insistence on 500 pounds a year, and a lockable room speaks directly to the patriarchal economic structure that historically denied women access to wealth and, consequently, access to the public sphere of intellectual work. Without financial independence, a woman's mental energy is entirely consumed by the need to secure basic subsistence, a psychological state antithetical to creative thought (Woolf 2000: 55). She famously illustrates the male access to education and resources versus the female's exclusion, noting how male students enjoy lavish university libraries while the female narrator is barred from entering the grass plots of the college lawn. The material reality of exclusion is not just a barrier to knowledge, it is a constant, subtle reminder of the female subject's position as the 'other' within the intellectual order.

The 'room' is the precondition for self-possession. In the absence of a private space, the female mind is always available, always interrupted and always subject to the demands of the home and the family. The lack of a room means the constant merging of the private and public, ensuring that the unconscious self is always tethered to its gendered role, unable to achieve the necessary distance for creative, professional work. The room is the geographical analogue of the psychological boundary that the female subject must establish to protect her professional aspirations from societal expectations (Zimmerman 2018: 38).

### **Judith Shakespeare and the unconscious block**

Woolf's invention of 'Judith Shakespeare' is perhaps her most potent psychoanalytic one. Judith is William Shakespeare's equally gifted sister, who, because she lacks 'the five hundred a year' and 'the room of her own', is denied education, forced into an unwanted marriage and ultimately driven to suicide and buried 'at some cross-roads' (Woolf 2000: 67). Judith's tragic fate highlights the unconscious block imposed by patriarchy. Her creative drive cannot find a form of expression within a patriarchal order that only accepts male genius. The conflict between her inherent talent and the crushing social reality results in her death.

Judith is not merely a historical example; she is the unconscious repressed: the potential, autonomous female writer that the patriarchal system sacrifices. Her story serves as a warning and a template for the trauma inflicted upon any woman who attempts to reconcile her intellectual ambition with her gendered expectations. She is a figure of the deep alienation that results when the desire to work is deemed socially illegitimate (ibid.: 68).

### **The androgynous mind as synthesis**

Woolf concludes by suggesting that a great writer must possess an androgynous mind, a state where 'the two sexes in the mind' cooperate 'in perfect harmony' (ibid.: 147). This is a call for a synthesis that transcends the binary of male/female. For the professional woman, the androgynous mind represents the ultimate liberation from the gendered unconscious. It is a mental state where creative work can proceed without the constant, draining internal negotiation between the professional and the relational self. The ideal work, for Woolf, is only possible when the female psyche itself is free from the constraints of rigid, patriarchal gender roles, a process that can come about through the material security of the room and the money.

### **Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar***

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) moves beyond Woolf's materialist demands to explore the acute mental crisis that occurs when a gifted young woman attempts to navigate the gendered expectations of the mid-20th century. While Woolf suggests the path to creative work, Plath presents the catastrophic failure of the psychic structure when it is crushed between professional ambition and the rigid, suffocating social norms of ideal femininity (Konain 2025: 35).

### **The bell jar as a psychological entrapment**

The central metaphor of the bell jar is a perfect analogue for the gendered unconscious in crisis. As Esther Greenwood descends into mental illness, she feels 'trapped' by an invisible, suffocating pressure (Plath 1963). The bell jar represents patriarchy made internal and absolute. It isolates the subject, distorts her perception of the world and prevents authentic communication or connection (Urbanová 2021: 45). The glass acts as a psychic membrane between Esther and the 'real' world, a world where the paths for men (doctors,

writers, professionals) are clear, but the paths for women are only narrow, mutually exclusive options: the virtuous wife, the perfect mother or the sexually promiscuous 'other' (Konain 2025: 36).

Esther's work, which begins with the prestige of a summer internship in New York, quickly devolves into disillusionment as she realises the professional world only views her through the lens of her gender. She does not desire the marriage plot or the domesticity that society is relentlessly pushing her towards, but she cannot conceive of an alternative identity that a patriarchal setup will validate. Her breakdown is not a simple personal failing but a radical response to the impossibility of her position. It is a refusal to be reduced to the gendered categories available to her (Dhobi 2024: 5).

### **The fragmentation of subjectivity**

Plath's novel vividly portrays the fragmentation of female subjectivity (Urbanová 2021: 47). Esther's identity crisis, or 'the self's lack of self', is directly triggered by her inability to reconcile her intellect and professional desires with the prescribed social role (Arslan n.d.: 12). She sees her life as a fig tree, where each fig represents a different, desirable future — a professor, a traveller, a mother — but 'starved half to death' because she cannot choose one and is terrified of choosing the wrong one, which would mean sacrificing all the others to the rigid demands of a singular, gendered path (Plath 1963: 77). This inability to choose is the unconscious paralysis resulting from the double bind. The prevalent understanding of work demands a singular, linear professional trajectory, but the female subject is simultaneously pulled by the powerful, yet unrecognised, demands of the domestic and relational self.

The novel is rich with images of self-division and alienation, from Esther's confusion about her reflection to her attempts to write. The breakdown of her professional life in New York, the place where she hoped to launch her career, directly precipitates her mental collapse and her suicidal attempts (Dhobi 2024: 6). Suicide, in this context, is an act of ultimate self-negation and a desperate, though tragic, attempt to escape a world controlled and defined by male expectations.

### **The body, language and madness**

Esther's mental breakdown and subsequent institutionalisation can be read as a violent irruption of the semiotic into the symbolic. Her madness is her body's rejection of the restrictive language and social system that cannot accommodate her desire. Her struggle with writing and the sense of isolation from the very words she uses highlight the ineffectuality of a gendered language to express her trauma (Boyer 2004: 205).

The disabled body (through shock therapy and the literal physical manifestation of her psychological pain) serves as a metaphor for the silencing of the authentic female voice (Boyer 2004: 210). Esther's hospitalisation and electroshock treatments are, in a perverse way, the patriarchy's attempt to force itself back onto the errant female body and mind. Her eventual, fragile emergence from the bell jar signifies a temporary re-entry into that, but the novel leaves the reader uncertain of her long-term stability, suggesting that the underlying conflict between professional ambition and gendered expectation remains unresolved, and her mental illness might return anytime again (Plath 1963: 258).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the struggle of the professional woman is not merely a matter of economic or social inequality, but a deep, ongoing, and often unconscious negotiation with patriarchal structures embedded within the female psyche. Through the lens of psychoanalytic feminism, the texts of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath reveal the profound cost of a gendered world of work.

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* establishes the material conditions required to even begin the process of professional self-actualisation. The demand for money and a private room is the necessary material barrier against constant interruption (both literal and metaphorical). Her metaphor of Judith Shakespeare tragically embodies the creative potential sacrificed for the patriarchal order, revealing the political reality of the 'othered' female artist.

Plath's *The Bell Jar* provides a chilling case study of the subsequent psychological collapse when these material conditions, even if partially met, fail to withstand the weight of contradictory social expectations. Esther Greenwood's fragmentation of identity and descent under the bell jar is a vivid demonstration of the consequences of the constant dilemma women have to face between the professional and the domestic world.

Ultimately, the paper emphasises a new, gender-sensitive definition of work: Work is a site of negotiated tension between creativity, identity and cultural expectation, where the professional aspiration is constantly struggling against the pressures of the gendered unconscious. The texts of Woolf and Plath, separated by over three decades, demonstrate that while the material conditions of women's work may have changed, the fundamental, internalised psychic conflict remains.

Future research could explore how these psychoanalytic tensions manifest in contemporary digital economies, where the boundaries between professional and domestic

spaces, the very room of one's own, have become blurred. The continued relevance of Plath's bell jar metaphor in the 21st century suggests that until the current patriarchal setup of the professional world and society in general is restructured to accommodate a non-binary, autonomous female, the psychological toll of work on women will continue to be a site of crisis.

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