

**In the complete novel(s) you have read, identify and explain two or more characteristics of modern fiction outlined and elaborated by Suzanne Ferguson’s article.**

Ferguson’s seven characteristics of modern fiction, influenced by the dominance of impressionism within the genre, lead to a representation of “experience as experienced by individuals” (300). In *The Bell Jar*, Plath uses characteristics like the rejection of chronological time ordering (RCTO), the limitation and foregrounding of point of view (LFPV), and the emphasis on presentation of sensation and inner experience (EPSIE) to personalise the otherwise binding principles of storytelling such as plot structure and teleological time. She does this for two reasons: [1] to try to simulate what it is like to be human, and [2] to express the difficulty of achieving point 1.

“A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life.” (James 15)

RCTO mimics the structure and recall of human memory, permitting odd segues and divergences, for example, in *The Bell Jar* Esther’s memories of her college days and her relationship with Buddy punctuate the central story which spans from her internship in New York to her convalescence in the private mental hospital. I call this the Hierarchy of Memory (see figure 1) where memory is, in various levels, privileged over the present. By ‘privileged’ I mean that some memories are guaranteed a place in the **narrative**, regardless of what is occurring in the **plot**—for example, Esther’s time with Constantin (a Main Plot memory) is interrupted three times by lengthy digressions in to Flashing Further Back memories of her relationship with Buddy.

**Narrative ‘n’ Plot, also—Fabula ‘n’ Syuzhet:**  
 Fabula means plot, and syuzhet means narrative—so: plot/fabula is the stuff that happens, and narrative/syuzhet is how those things are organised and explained. In *The Bell Jar*, syuzhet has a distinctly hegemonic relationship with fabula because chronology is abandoned and the Hierarchy of Memory is indulged.

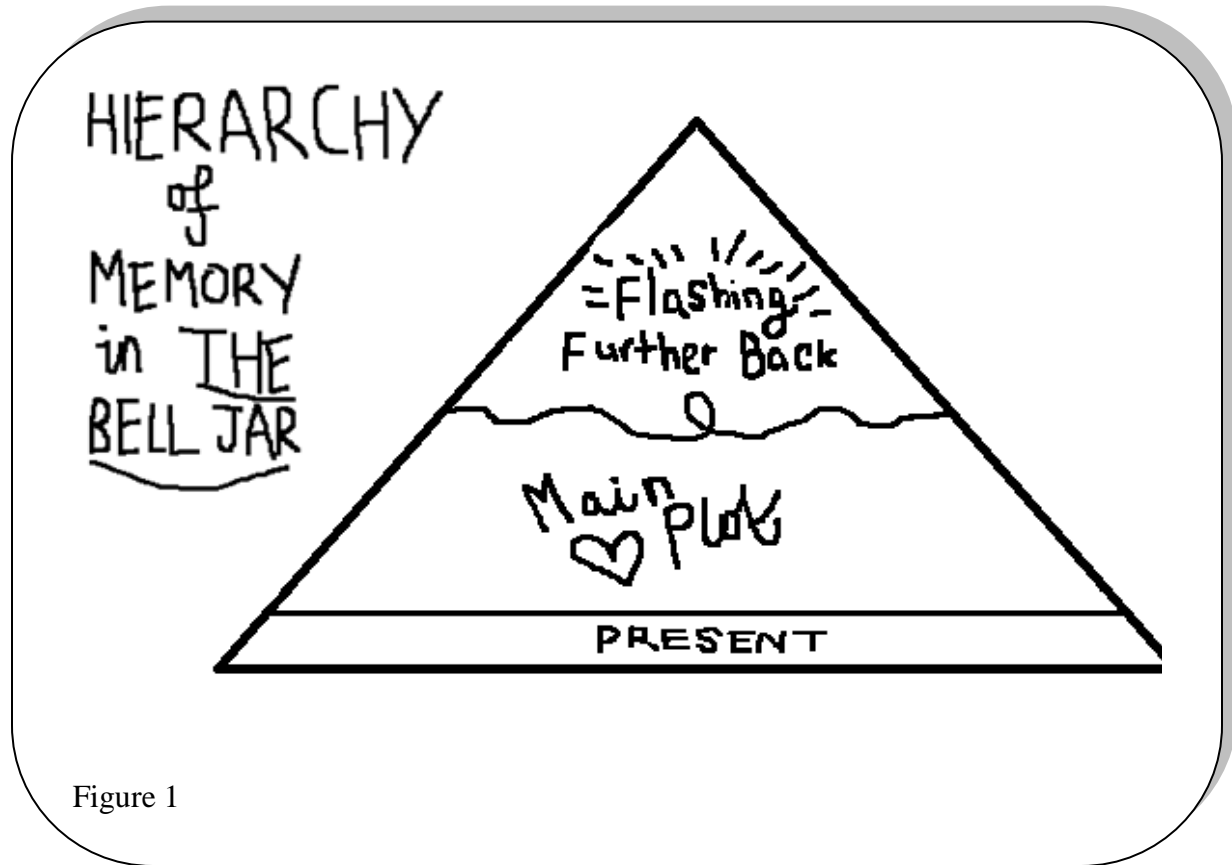


Figure 1

As figure 1 suggests, the lowliest citizen in the Hierarchy of Memory is the present. The reality of Esther's present is referred to once: the reader knows that Esther the storyteller is deliberately withholding information, otherwise she would describe her current situation in greater detail than "all right" (3). In the end, "all right" is not encouraging—it is the same phrase she uses when she reveals that her suicide attempts have been in vain (153). Esther's central anxiety throughout the novel is her future, so the fact that the storyteller Esther is focused on her past and restricting information about her present means that the present must be relegated to the bottom of the pyramid. The middle-class of memories is the Main Plot memory (as outlined above: NY—> mental hospital), this is the stuff which constitutes the central plot, it is the story of the bell jar in *The Bell Jar*. Flashing Further Back memories are the most privileged, they are to do with Esther's memories of college and her relationship with Buddy. An example of the hierarchy in action: when Esther abandons the Main Plot memory where she was reading that short story about a fig tree, she spends the next chapter and a half doling out Flashing Further Back memories of her meeting, admiration for, and eventual disillusionment with Buddy before

returning to the Main Plot memory (52-70). The Hierarchy of Memory interacts with **fabula** and **syuzhet** so that the teleological story of Esther's life is fragmented, organised according to memory and memorableness, and accessed through a single point of view—the Hierarchy of Memory allows Plath to personalise plot structure and time. The non-linear structure and the Hierarchy of Memory in *The Bell Jar* serve four major purposes [1] to lock the reader into Esther's point-of-view, [2] to represent how human memory and recall functions, creating an authentic experience of storytelling, [3] in conjunction with point number 2, to reiterate the difficulty of trying to explain what it feels like to be human, and [4] to help Plath present her text as a spatially (as opposed to temporally) organised form. To elaborate on point 4: when Esther meets Constantin at the UN she notices a “girl” in a suit, getting stuff done (71), her mind deserts New York, the UN and Constantin and she slips off to the fig tree (73). Plath personalises time and space to represent the Esther's uncertainty and fragility: a rupture in temporal organization occurs because Esther is confronted with an example of female success which is becoming increasingly unattainable for her. RCTO and the Hierarchy of Memory help Plath present Esther as being crippled by such serious unhappiness that she cannot bear to remain present in her own memory. In this way, Plath personalises time and its organization as a means of imitating how it feels to be human.

Ferguson's first two characteristics—LFPV and EPSIE—are coupled: trying to devise discreet definitions of these points is nigh on impossible, even Ferguson describes the pair as “inextricably related,” (300). They are very alike in their concerns: both seize on the subjective experience of events, the exploration of themes such as alienation and the quest for identity, both privilege and seize on the presentation of sensation and impression, the inner-self, and the power of narrative above action. With that in mind, I will be referring to LFPV and EPSIE as a single characteristic, EPILEPSIE, because [1] that is easier to read than “the limitation and foregrounding of point of view and the emphasis on presentation of sensation and inner experience”, [2] I used the word “seize” above twice, and I feel in some way that the effort I put into the set-up justifies its continuation, and [3] EPILEPSIE and **epiphany** (see the next page!) sound really cute together.

Ferguson categorised epiphany as a feature of RCTO (304), but it should be aligned with EPILEPSIE as epiphany is not about time, but rather, about *experience*, which can, as Henry James says, last only a moment, but in that moment, be experience (17). Certainly epiphany can facilitate RCTO, but if there is one characteristic in Ferguson's list which truly relates to experience (/epiphany), it is EPILEPSIE, and this is because the experience itself is more important than the time spent experiencing it.

**About Epiphany:** "The notion of single "moments" of experience as determiners of the quality of a whole life...has become characteristic of modern fiction both as an item of belief and a structural principle." (Ferguson 304)

EPILEPSIE manifests in ways besides epiphany, in *The Bell Jar* other tricks for conveying personal experience and limiting point of view can be identified in the proliferation of similes (145, 146, 147, 149, 150, 151, 152, 154—to name just a few), overt and recurring symbols (that fig tree, the cadaver, the bell jar itself), the first person narrative, and the focus on Esther's inner life. While these features can create a sense of isolation and alienation from the world at large, they also make for funny anecdotes, for example, Esther recounts her thought process when asked by a guy at the library where she is going:

I was about to say, 'Back to the asylum', but the man looked promising, so I changed my mind. 'Home.' (216)

Being a boxed canyon mystery to every other person on the planet turns out to have its perks. This same encounter also makes a nice example of epiphany in EPILEPSIE: Esther forewords her memory of Irwin with a snippet of dialogue:

'It hurts,' I said. 'Is it supposed to hurt?' Irwin didn't say anything. Then he said, 'Sometimes it hurts,' (215)

This exchange is expanded on 3 pages later (215 + 3 = 218) and is revealed to be shared by Esther and Irwin while they are having sex. This incarnation of epiphany (a flash of memory recalled out of sequence and then elaborated on) has the effect of drawing attention to Esther's experience and perspective, effectively personalizing her story not just through its focus on her, but through its very structure. Throughout *The Bell Jar*, the reader is guided through

chronologically disturbed, wildly subjective memories which allow Plath/the storyteller Esther to recount her experience in a spotless, personal way— both the content and the structure address the difficulty of communicating how things feel.

Modern fiction is an attempt to explain and realize the impenetrable, unknowable parts of people and the world. Artistically, writers might successfully achieve these endeavours— *The Bell Jar* is a representation

of sickness and getting better, and not fitting in and not knowing why: through literary tricks, Plath presents an imitation of how those things might feel, but *The Bell Jar* cannot be those things or make you feel those things.

EPILEPSIE and RCTO can work

to present experience, and the struggle of expressing how you thought, what you saw or how you felt (if you have not looked yet, check out figure 2) but reality will always be removed by a degree: a feeling of a feeling— that is as close as it gets. Reading *The Bell Jar* is not perfectly knowing someone (Forster 44) but, rather, a successful artistic representation of interiority.



Figure 2: McCloud 67

**Works Cited:**

Ferguson, Suzanne C. "Defining The Short Story (Impressionism and Form)." *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. Ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. Durham, N.C. & London: Duke University Press, 1988. 299-307.

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NOTE: just in case there was any doubt, I drew figure 1 myself in MS Paint. That's why it looks so bad.