Fetishizing Innocence, Performing Sickness, and Achieving Wholeness: The Body as Weapon in *The Bell Jar*

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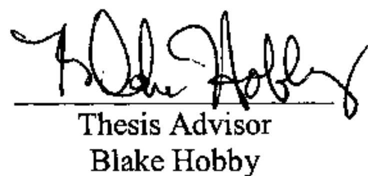

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Fetishizing Innocence, Performing Sickness, and Achieving Wholeness:

The Body as Weapon in *The Bell Jar*

In Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel, *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, the novel's protagonist, tries to create a new identity by writing a novel about herself. As she sets out to write, she ponders, "How could I write about life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or even seen anybody die? A girl I knew had just won a prize for the short story about her adventures among the pygmies in Africa. How could I compete with that sort of thing?" (121). She has lived thus far as an innocent who has lived to please others, living without an autonomous sense of self. Although she needs a new identity before she can act, she can't create a new identity until she destroys her old one. As she wanders forlornly around her home town in a state of stagnation, Esther becomes obsessed with tabloid stories which fetishize the suicides of innocent young women, and in essence, she researches her new role. By becoming one of the characters she has read about, Esther enters a transitional phase, one in which she plays the invalid. While to stay stuck with the "invalid" identity would mean also playing a role that is dependent on others, this temporary role, described in the novel as gestation, enables her to move outside the realm of normalcy, live by outsiders' rules, and eventually take a active role, transforming herself into a fully autonomous, functional person with the ability to function in society even as she remains critical of it.

Because of the parallels between Esther Greenwood's story and Sylvia Plath's life, traditional biographical interpretations of *The Bell Jar* have ignored the themes of agency and creation of the self, preferring instead to treat the novel as a simple "depression memoir." In the "Foreword" to *The Bell Jar*, Frances McCullough describes

Esther Greenwood's madness as "descending like a tornado into a typical bright young woman's life out of nowhere" (xiv), which evokes the current "epidemic" (xv) of clinical depression. But I'm not sure that this is an accurate portrayal of the novel. Plath sets us up for the protagonist's downward spiral into madness from the first chapter, which begins by talking about the execution of the Rosenbergs, on trial at that time for charges of communism and espionage: "I couldn't help wondering what it was like, being burned alive all along your nerves. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world" (1). Esther's depressive episode and suicide attempt is correctly thought to be central to the novel, but because it has been thoroughly explored and anticipated long before it happens, some ulterior meaning must be behind it.

Early reviewers of *The Bell Jar* read it as a first-hand, nonfiction account of madness. After the novel's publication in the United States in 1973, it was common knowledge that it was based on real events; critics were therefore primarily interested in Esther Greenwood—and Sylvia Plath by association, given the autobiographical nature of the work—as psychoanalytical subjects. One such critic, Mason Harris, explored themes of regression and Oedipal conflict in the novel; he assumed that Esther's struggle for sexual liberation is a symptom of psychosis rather than a cure for it. Although he noted, "[I]t is true that all the men she has known manifest variations on a consistently sick attitude towards women and marriage" (110), and declared, "Nowhere have I found so forceful a description of what with was like to be an adolescent in the stifling, hermetically-sealed world of the Eisenhower Fifties" (108), Harris did not see Esther's problems as a result of a flawed society. Instead, he concluded that Esther's "regression"

was due to a lack of an acceptable relationship with a man and ultimately regarded *The Bell Jar* as a fascinating case study on a single, isolated individual.

Because psychoanalytical theory was prominent in mid-twentieth-century culture, and because there is evidence that Plath deliberately addressed psychoanalytical ideas in her work, it is fair to look at *The Bell Jar* from such a perspective, claims Lydia Buntzen in her essay "Plath and Psychoanalysis: Uncertain Truths." However, she argues, it is important to avoid reducing "[Plath's] life and work to a case study" as the early critics did—often, the temptation is too strong to read one's own agenda into the text (45). Plath constructed her "sick" voice on purpose, so psychoanalytical approaches to Plath must address how she interpreted Freud's ideas, responded to them, and made them her own (47-48). Armed with a keen awareness of the difference between the author and the narrative voice of a work, critics began to shift away from using *The Bell Jar* as a means to psychoanalyze Plath.

In her essay "The Problem of Biography," Susan Van Dyne further explores the major fallacies that have come from looking at Plath's work through a biographical lens-- in particular, the idea that Plath's eventual suicide makes her work more valid, related to the idea that true creativity can only come from suffering and that suffering is something externally imposed on the author. In fact, Van Dyne argues, self-identity is a construct, and Plath's letters and journals strongly suggest that Plath knew this. "At moments of crisis, throughout her life, she imagines that she can erase the inscription of lived experience and earlier textual selves and be reborn, unmarked as an infant and inviolate as a virgin" (5-6). Hence, even autobiographical works are interpretive. (17). Van Dyne believes that an optimal approach towards Sylvia Plath is one that acknowledges her

place within a larger context of the author's conversation with history, society, and other texts (18).

One of the first critics to take a non-biographical approach to *The Bell Jar* was Teresa DeLaurentis, who commented extensively about the re-creation of self in Plath's novel. Her essay "Rebirth in the Bell Jar," originally published in 1976, represents a key critical approach to *The Bell Jar* from a feminist perspective. The author calls the novel a "feminist manifesto"(124) and believes, as later critics would argue, that Esther's illness is not meant to be read as a random event but as a result of an oppressive society. DeLaurentis believes that biographical and psychoanalytic interpretations were based on a misreading of the novel, noting, "Whereas in [psychoanalytic novels and case histories] the main interest lies in the psychological processes described rather than the cultural and existential ones, Esther's story is totally entwined with a specific and fully detailed culture[. . .]" (125). DeLaurentis chooses instead to read *The Bell Jar* as a "quest novel," "built on the mythical descent-ascent pattern," with heavy autobiographical content, meant to reform the male-centered culture that influenced it. She adds that the broad cultural significance of the novel's content places it in the tradition of myths and folktales about rebirth (133).

Deborah Nelson agrees that, although Plath's work was very personal and although the "myth of the tragic poet" has caused critics to overlook its deeper themes, *The Bell Jar* is a successful novel because of the way it speaks to a wide readership. She claims that Plath wrote about her personal experiences because she thought they had general importance, and notes, "Plath's severest critics simply did not (or could not) see her 'problems' as universal, in part because she was a woman, and women's experience is

seldom seen as universal. Without universality, Plath's work appeared narcissistic and indulgent" (22). One way Plath tried to give her personal experiences greater significance in her prose and her poetry was to couch them in strong cultural imagery, as in her controversial use of Holocaust images in her poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus."

When *The Bell Jar* is placed in a historical context rather than a biographical one, Nelson points out, a disconnect between Plath the author and Esther Greenwood the protagonist becomes apparent. There's an obvious parallel being drawn between Esther and the Rosenbergs, because when Esther has her first shock treatment, she describes it like a execution: "I wondered what a terrible thing it was that I had done" (Plath, 143). Esther is not receiving proper treatment-- the doctor shows very little interest in her-- she is being punished for not conforming, like communists were during the McCarthy era. Nelson adds that there are obvious and deliberate similarities between Ethel Rosenberg's full name, "Esther Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg" and the main character's name, "Esther Greenwood" (25). Esther believes in the Rosenbergs' innocence or at least doubts their guilt, and by comparing herself to them, she implies that she has been held up as an example to other women who might be tempted to reject traditional gender roles.

However, Esther the narrative voice insists that the Rosenberg trial "had nothing to do with me" even as Plath the author "casts Esther's rebellion against 1950s codes of femininity in Cold War terms" (Nelson 25). The important distinction between the author and the narrative voice of a work is one that biographical interpretations of Plath have habitually ignored, but it opens up the novel for deeper interpretations of its themes.

In her essay "The Bell Jar and Other Prose," Janet Badia also agrees that Plath's presumed readership of "sick girls" has caused critics to dismiss her as a serious author,

but she objects to critics like Van Dyne who attempt to steer Plath criticism away from biography. She sees it as an effort to "rescue" Plath from her primary audience of young women and control both the author's critical reputation and the cult of "sick girls" who supposedly like her work. "Such critics seem reluctant to consider the alternative; namely that the very fact that the novel has remained so valued by young women readers could actually be read as a sign of the novel's strengths" (131). She adds that *The Bell Jar* continues to be relevant largely because it "has become a teenage rite of passage, one frequently initiated by other adolescents and, increasingly today, by mothers and teachers eager to share the novel that had been influential in their own adolescences" (132).

Given that critics are so obsessed with controlling Plath's authorial voice and primary readership, Badia says, it is ironic that all narrative episodes in *The Bell Jar* center on the protagonist's struggle for control and self-determination. The novel opens with Esther's frustration at her inability to make choices about her life; even though she has more choices than most women in the 1950s, the expectation of conformity creates unintended, uncontrollable consequences for her choices. Esther cannot control her future path because society dictates that she choose to have either a family or a career; she cannot control her sexuality because of the double-standard; and when she tries to gain control over her sexuality by losing her virginity, she is stymied by the possibility of pregnancy and is even threatened with rape. Her search for a diaphragm, which was illegal at that time, illustrates how the state further controls female sexuality by denying access to contraception (132-135).

But a non-biographical approach to The Bell Jar does not have to remove Plath's work from its iconic place in culture. Nelson illustrates how placing *The Bell Jar's*

biographical content in a historical context might give its biographical origins the proper consideration while avoiding the cult of personality that surrounds Plath. She points out that the confessional genre was part of a post- World War II move towards plurality, a way to dignify the experiences of previously ignored elements of society-- those who are not "white and male" (23). Because of the Cold War obsession with privacy, she says, confessional writing was somewhat subversive and "freighted with social meaning" in Plath's time. Nelson states, "Madness and rage were reactions to the internalization of external social codes, that is, the colonization of the private self by the state. The willingness to violate these codes liberated the authentic self, which would necessarily be wounded since the organized society demanded the renunciation of individuality" (32).

In "The Big Strip Tease," Kathleen Lant notes that the traditional female lack of autonomy over the body poses a problem for female confessional writers: male confessionals have typically used nakedness in their poetry to assert self-identity, but because the female body is constructed in our culture as an emblem of male pleasure (ie, an object rather than a subject), female confessionals can not use nakedness in their poetry to the same effect. Through a careful reading of Plath's poetry, Lant observes this conflict at work: when revealing herself, Plath seems unable to decide whether to do so in a submissive, seductive way or in a violently aggressive way, using the body as a weapon; nowhere is this conflict more apparent than in the poem "Lady Lazarus": "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air." The phrase "red hair" connotes seduction even as the poem ends with a violent proclamation-- however, Lant concludes that this poem is ultimately a submissive one-- "She does not convince the audience that she is, in fact, dangerous, for she must offer the female body as an *object* rather than a

weapon" (652-654). However, offering the body as a weapon to reassert agency over it is, I think, one of the most important central themes in *The Bell Jar*.

Female protagonists have gained agency through illness in a number of different novels, including Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Charlotte Bronte's coming of age novel *Jane Eyre*. Barbara Hochman argues that the key driving factor in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the main character's act of "reading" the wallpaper like a text and constructing in it an image of herself, through which she can gain some insight into and power over her situation as a prisoner (136-137). This is similar to Esther's solution in *The Bell Jar*-- Van Dyne says of Plath that "she regarded her life as if it were a text she could invent and write" (5), and by constructing herself through the acts of "reading" the world around her and writing about it, Esther is able to invent a new identity-- and that identity is also that of a madwoman, the sick, passive self turned into a weapon.

In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Jane escapes from her abusive family only after suffering a nervous breakdown. Madness and illness, in fact, enable the protagonist's every autonomous action. Antonia Losano observes that the character Jane Eyre is presented early in the novel as a reader and viewer, which at once provides her with empowerment and, as a result, imprisonment and isolation (30). Jane consistently escapes this imprisonment and isolation by becoming ill, either physically or mentally, just like Esther does. It is ultimately a more successful strategy in a culture that demands innocence and passivity of women.

For Esther, it begins with a crisis of identity. She has come to New York on a scholarship, the very picture of the American dream of social mobility, but once there,

she can't find an appropriate model for the successful person she is supposed to become. The girls born into the upper class make her "sick," she says: "I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in airplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with the men in Brazil" (4). But she finds out that she can't be like them anyway; unlike them, she has to work hard to keep her place, and she doesn't speak their cultural language: using a finger bowl, ordering drinks, buying the right clothes, feigning lack of interest to attract attention, dieting, tipping.

Esther is given two choices: she can follow the rules and become a "good girl," like Betsy, or break them and become a "bad girl," like Doreen. This sounds almost too simple to be true, but the virgin/whore dichotomy is well established throughout the book-- according to the men Esther encounters, a woman has to be one or the other. Esther briefly considers sleeping with Eric, a male friend, but he has so completely compartmentalized the women in his life into these two categories that he "said [having sex with a lover] would be spoiled by thinking this woman was just an animal like all the rest, so if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business" (79) Even Marco, a "woman hater" whom Esther encounters at a party, declares that women are "sluts, all sluts. . . . Yes or no, it is all the same" (109); he tells Esther that he is in love with his own untouchable virgin: a first cousin who plans to become a nun. This is an example of how innocence is fetishized in women, often to the woman's detriment-- what Esther wants, or needs, is something outside of the rigid categories of "virgin" and "whore."

For neither choice is appealing to Esther. At first she is drawn to Doreen because "everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out my own bones" (7).

Doreen seems able to teach Esther everything she needs to know to join the upper ranks of society and gives Esther the opportunity to see things her chaperones would rather guard her from-- and Esther's favorite thing to do is to observe things (13). Esther tells us, "being with Doreen made me forget my worries. I felt wise and cynical as all hell" (8). But ultimately, even though being the "slut" breaks all the rules, Doreen is still playing the same game as everyone else, and Esther's gaze becomes more and more critical as her adventures with Doreen continue. In the presence of an attractive man, everything Esther likes about her-- her sarcasm, her wit, her independence-- all dry up: "suddenly dumb as a post and was fiddling in a blasé way with her white lace pocketbook cover" (8) and " wasn't saying a word, she only toyed with her cork placemat and eventually lit a cigarette, but the man didn't seem to mind. He kept staring at her the way people stare at the great white macaw in the zoo, waiting for it to say something human" (10). Esther rejects Doreen as a possible model for her identity, in part because even the "bad girl" must take a passive role.

"I made a decision about Doreen that night. . . . Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends," Esther says. "It was Betsy I resembled most at heart" (22). Betsy is a corn-fed midwestern girl who wants to be a cover girl and a farmer's wife. She's the ideal "good girl" because, although she is smart and talented enough to get an internship at a magazine, she intends to use her talents to serve other people, as a wife and mother. This, Esther tells us, is what good women are expected to do: "Once when I visited Buddy I found Mrs. Willard braiding a rug out of strips of wool from Mr. Willard's old suits. She'd spent weeks on that rug, and I had admired the tweedy browns and and greens and blues patterning the braid, but after Mrs. Willard was through, instead

of hanging the rug on the wall the way I would have done, she put it in place of her kitchen mat, and in a few days it was soiled and dull and indistinguishable from any mat you could buy for under a dollar in the five and ten" (85). Esther knows that the talents of clever women like her are wasted in marriage-- or, as Buddy tells her, she will be expected to abandon her ambitions when she becomes a mother.

Esther becomes physically ill after attending a luncheon with Betsy, when it first becomes clear to her that she doesn't want to be like Doreen. She attends an after-lunch movie which plays out the "virgin/whore" conflict in oversaturated colors and rank clichés: "I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along . . . At this point I began to feel peculiar" (42). She rushes back to her hotel room and becomes violently ill. She finds out later that she has food poisoning from the luncheon, but Esther suggests that it's her toxic culture that has poisoned her: "I saw the celestially white kitchens of *Ladies' Day* stretching into infinity . . . . Poison." The pattern has been established. Esther's mental illness later in the book is like the food poisoning in the beginning, and resolves in the same way: "I felt purged and holy and ready for a new life"(48).

"If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell" (94), says Esther. She has one third option, to become like the magazine editor Jay Cee, which Esther has always intended to do, because studying hard and winning prizes is the only thing she's good at-- but this, too, is just another way of using her talents to please other people, and she discovers that she will still have to stroke egos when she's an editor like Jay Cee: "Jay Cee was going to lunch that noon with two

famous authors, a man and a lady. The man had just sold six short stories to the New Yorker and six to Jay Cee. . . . Jay Cee said she had to be very careful at this lunch, because the lady writer wrote stories too, but she had never had any in *The New Yorker* and Jay Cee had only taken one from her in five years. Jay Cee had to flatter the more famous man at the same time as she was careful not to hurt the less famous lady." Every path Esther has taken up till now has led her to a life of service to others. She has to invent a new identity for herself, but first she has to shed the old one, and she illustrates this by throwing all of her clothes off the top of a building on the night before she leaves for home. Esther describes it to the reader: "I felt limp and betrayed, like the skin shed by a terrible animal. It was a relief to be free of the animal, but it seemed to have taken my spirit with it, and everything else it could lay its paws on." (102)

Esther first discovers how weakness can give her agency when she goes on a skiing trip with her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, in Chapter 8. Men have made decisions for her during the entire visit: Mr. Willard drives her up and drops her off. "I was tempted to tell Mr. Willard to go ahead alone, I would hitchhike home," says Esther. "But one glance at Mr. Willard's face [. . .] and I knew I couldn't do it. I'd have to see the visit through to the end" (88). Once there, Mr. Willard hands Buddy some train ticket money, saying, "See that Esther gets a comfortable seat on the train. She'll stay a day or so, maybe" (91). Esther is now forced to stay with Buddy for as long as Buddy wants her to, but she can't object, because Buddy is ill and "[Mrs. Willard] and Buddy couldn't understand" why Esther doesn't want to be by his side every moment (19). Once Buddy and Esther are alone, Buddy asks, "How would you like to be Mrs. Buddy Willard?" illustrating the

complete loss of identity that marriage represents to Esther (92). Then Buddy forces Esther to go skiing with him.

"Buddy had never skied before either," Esther tells us, "but he said that the elementary principles were quite simple, and as he'd often watched the ski instructors and their pupils he could teach me all I'd need to know" (95). For Buddy, forcing Esther to ski is about proving a point, about winning, about showing off how clever he is, and so after a short lesson, he decides that it is time for Esther to try the expert slope. If it occurs to him that he is putting Esther in danger for the sake of his own ego, he doesn't seem to care, and Esther doesn't object: "It never occurred to me to say no" (96). This scene illustrates an essential problem with patriarchal paternalism: if being male is all it takes to have the right to control the situation, what happens to women who are in the care of selfish, immature men? They are used to serve selfish, immature interests. "I didn't want to make trouble," Esther tells us (96).

Poised at the summit of the expert slope, Esther faces a choice: she can turn around and leave, or she can go down. It's not clear exactly why she decides to go down; Buddy is trying to pantomime instructions to her from the bottom of the slope, but he looks very small to her in comparison to "all the white and silent distances that poured from every point of the compass, hill after pale hill [. . .]" Suddenly she can see the possibility of freedom. Here, for the very first time, "The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind as coolly as a tree or flower" (97). Perhaps at first she thinks of it as a way to punish Buddy for forcing her into danger, but after she starts down, "I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of [the tunnel], the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly" (97). She has discovered a beginning at

the end, a way to free herself from everyone's stifling expectations and create herself as a new person. Death is her only claim to autonomy, and she knows that: when she falls, Buddy comes forward to check for a broken bone "as if feeling for a concealed weapon" (98). This is the first turning point in the novel. Now that Esther has discovered her body's potential as a weapon, she can begin to work on her new transitional identity as an invalid.

The skiing incident happens in flashback, not in real time, but after Esther describes it, we first begin to see signs of the illness that will dominate the rest the story. She describes herself as "yellow" in complexion (105), a "sick Indian" (112). She has to borrow an outfit from Betsy after throwing away her own clothes, and as she wears it for weeks it gives off a "sour and friendly smell" (127). This illustrates her stagnant identity: after she returns home from New York, Esther meets her first failure—a rejection letter from a writing course—which sweeps away the last and most vital part of her identity: academic success. But she can't drop the Honors Program or transfer to a less prominent school, because "There were lots of requirements, and I didn't have half of them. [. . .] I had always looked down on my mother's college, as it was coed, and filled with people who couldn't get scholarships to the big eastern colleges. Now I saw that the stupidest person at my mother's college knew more than I did" (124-125).

Esther's first shock treatment with Dr. Gordon anticipates and mirrors her impending suicide attempt. She is conscious and in pain through the treatment, but as Dr. Nolan will tell her later, "If it's done properly, it's like going to sleep" (189). However, although her first shock treatment is certainly a failure, her suicide attempt isn't necessarily a failure just because it fails to kill her bodily: "What I wanted to kill wasn't

in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb," Esther tells us, "but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at" (147).

And the scene in which Esther regains consciousness in the hospital after her suicide is full of birth imagery: "Then the chisel struck again, and the light leapt into my head, and through the thick, warm, furry dark, a voice cried. 'Mother!'" (171). We can assume that this is the birth of her new self. It first becomes apparent when people ask her how she's feeling-- instead of saying "Fine" like she had said after the shock treatment, she tells the truth: "The same" (172) and "I feel lousy" (177). She feels no shame about herself when people come to visit: "I had meant to cover my legs if anybody came in, but now I saw it was too late, so I let them stick out, just as they were, disgusting and ugly. 'That's me,' I thought. 'That's what I am'" (173). She is highly aware of how doctors and visitors look at her now she is "a girl who was crazy enough to kill herself" (173), but she finds that the role gives her the freedom to be honest and spontaneous. Her friends and family no longer know what to expect from her once she has placed herself outside of the norm, so she will have the opportunity to direct their expectations as soon as she figures out what she wants for herself. This is her next task.

Esther discovers the extent of the freedom in her new role by watching the other patients on the psychiatric ward, who get away with things that polite society would never allow. After Esther watches a redheaded woman dump food all over herself at the table (181), she kicks a nurse and then knocks over a tray full of thermometers, prompting no more punishment than "a baleful eye." Esther waits until the nurse leaves the room for a cleanup crew, and then scoops up a ball of mercury. "I opened my fingers a crack, like a child with a secret, and smiled at the silver globe cupped in my palm. If I

dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself, and if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again" (183). Esther has learned that her self is like a secret ball of mercury that she can make and unmake as many times as she likes without harming its integrity. This is the second turning point in the novel: after the incident with the mercury, Esther begins her recovery in a private psychiatric hospital.

Esther's new identity as a "crazy girl" is not a mature one; this is a gestational period, and she describes her insulin treatments like a pregnancy—waiting for something to happen while she grows bigger and bigger: "Already I filled the new, too-big clothes my mother had bought, and when I peered down at my plump stomach and my broad hips I thought [. . .] I looked just as if I were going to have a baby" (192). She is convinced that she is much sicker than anyone realizes and keeps waiting to be moved to Wymark, the wing for degenerate cases, even as the nurses tell her she is "moving up" (193). This is when she reads the sensational newspaper articles about her suicide, and they are remarkably like the tabloids she read before she was admitted to the hospital (198).

When Esther finally goes into insulin shock, the nurse on duty treats her to a cup of hot milk, and "I fanned the hot milk out on my tongue as it went down, tasting it luxuriously, the way a baby tastes its mother" (200). Shortly afterward, Esther's female psychiatrist Dr. Nolan tells Esther that she will not be allowed to have visitors anymore, and Esther says, "'Why that's wonderful.' 'I thought you'd be pleased.' [Dr. Nolan] smiled" (201). Unlike Dr. Gordon, Dr. Nolan understands that what Esther really needs is freedom from outside expectations in a safe environment. "I kept feeling the visitors measuring my fat and stringy hair against what I had been and what they wanted me to

be, and I knew they were utterly confounded" (202). Esther is the only person who can decide what she is going to be next if she can ever expect to recover, but she is still preoccupied with her old identity, which she encounters one afternoon in the lounge when her fellow patients find an old picture of her in a magazine. She says, "No, it's not me. Joan's quite mistaken. It's somebody else" (207).

Esther's final shock treatment, which "wiped me out like chalk on a blackboard" (214), is the final, successful death that sends Esther has sought since the beginning of the novel. It is the final obliteration of both her old identity and the "crazy girl" identity that connected her to it, leaving her free to enter her final role-- a new, mature self.

Dr. Nolan does everything she can to support Esther's efforts to gain autonomy, and she is the woman in Esther's life who can do this successfully. "There was the famous poet, and Philomena Guinea, and Jay Cee, and the Christian Scientist lady and lord knows who, and they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them" (220). When Esther is finally able to identify the central problem that holds her back from enjoying her life ("A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line" (221).), Dr. Nolan gives her a name and address where she can be fitted for a diaphragm. Esther comments on "all the little tricky things it takes to grow up, step by step" (222) and tells herself, "I am climbing to freedom" (223).

"The next step was to find the proper sort of man" (223) to "practice my new, normal personality on" (226), says Esther, and sets up a one-night stand with a professor, "a kind of impersonal, priestlike official, as in the tales of tribal rites" (228). When

breaking her hymen causes her to hemorrhage, Esther shows her first signs of self-preservation, telling her girl friend Joan, "You better get a doctor" (231).

Esther is at last ready to return to college in the spring, and she feels ambivalent about "playing bridge and gossiping" with normal women again: "Those girls, too sat under a bell jar of a sort" (238). But she is a more able and functional person than she ever was before: she manages Buddy with a sense of humor and doesn't seem to care much when he comments, "I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther." She is assertive enough to make Irving pay the hospital bill from the night she lost her virginity. She doesn't feel like she's being watched anymore. "I was perfectly free" (242).

Rather than a novel about illness or a kind of memoir that documents Plath's imminent demise, *The Bell Jar* deals primarily with the formation of identity, a carefully-crafted self. In this sense, the novel is about growth, both Esther's and Plath's. Both begin as innocents cast into a world that robs them of the ability to grow up. When you fetishsize the innocence of little girls so much that you deny them experience at the appropriate time, the only access they have to experience is through passive means—like illness. It's perfectly acceptable for women to get ill—it fits into the "frail and passive" standard—and illness is the only acceptable way for women to have people pay attention to their needs. "Agency" can mean "power," but more specifically it's about your ability to be an "actor," the one doing things rather than the one to whom things are done. When little girls get sick, they're suddenly the actors in their own stories and suddenly given a lot more freedom to do what they like. Of course, they can die from their illnesses. This is a hazard of the experiment. But if the little girl lives, she can become whole. From this perspective, *The Bell Jar* celebrates the individuation of a mid-century woman and the

emergence of an artist, whose bodily sacrifices and mental struggles ultimately lead to a transfigured self, one that stands apart from the world yet who is also able to act in the world. Moving beyond the fetishization of innocence through an inward-turned period of gestation during which she undergoes psychiatric treatment, Esther exclaims, "I am. I am. I am."

The Bell Jar serves as a model for other women who want to escape the rigid roles prescribed for them. As Badia pointed out, Plath figures prominently in our construct of "outsider" women and provides them a kind of road map: here is how you leave the suffocating gender role for women; here is how you come back to function in society after you have built an autonomous identity. Plath was not the first person to invent the idea that women can gain agency by performing illness, but she speaks to the part of young women who already understand this. Furthermore, *The Bell Jar* describes what anyone must go through in order to move beyond infancy to a realm of higher functioning-- first a deathlike state in which the former self is destroyed, then a re-integration into the world of the living.

So, Plath takes the well-established model of death as transformation and extends it to the plight of women in modern society. She seems to be saying, if women want to progress beyond the infantile role they are supposed to play, they might begin by finding power in their victimhood-- and she said this long before "little girl diseases" garnered media attention in our culture.

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