

the. limitations of language in sylvia plath's the bell jar

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when *The Bell Jar* was published in January 1963, Sylvia Plath had less than a month to live. The struggle of those last few weeks has been immortalized and perpetuated in biographies, literary criticism, and the 2001 film *Sylvia*. The harsh winter that shut down London, the struggle of caring for two young children, concerns for money, estrangement from Ted Hughes, her suicide—all of these images color our perceptions of *The Bell Jar*. Some would even argue that this story has eclipsed the plot of *The Bell Jar*. The French literary theorist Gerard Genette contends narrators are frames for larger cultural contexts, and it seems the ultimate narrator of *The Bell Jar* could be the legend of the last few weeks of a desperate and depressed Plath. Therefore, it is naïve to think we can discuss Sylvia Plath without referencing her biography. Yet, it is unreasonable to imagine there is nothing else to say without this context. *The Bell Jar* is rich with social commentary, particularly in its discussion of the roles of language and identity formation. This is obscured when we do not consider the larger implications of Plath's work. Biography is a piece of the puzzle, but it is by no means the ultimate piece or perhaps even the largest. *The Bell Jar* can be read as a cautionary tale for women. After all, if every little boy can grow up to be president, what can every little girl be? How does she reconcile this conversation in modern culture? How does this discourse relate to the choices available to her? One particular reason Plath's protagonist struggles with this dynamic is her choice to see identity as being defined through language. A wife, a professional, an artist—all are exclusive tasks to Esther Greenwood. She sees these words as tightly contained nouns with strict denotations. There seems to be no conversation for reconciling multiple options. Language, therefore, becomes an instrument of constriction, translating the limitations of expressing and understanding our own experiences.

Psychotherapist and author Mary Pipher explores these connections in *Reviving Ophelia*. Pipher notes the difficulty of creating a forum for stable identities by first describing American culture as one that demands girls either risk being isolated for nurturing their inner selves or limiting themselves according to a strict interpretation of what it means to be female. She contends "girls become 'female impersonators' who fit their whole selves into small, crowded spaces" and that it is a "problem with no name" (11). Without a way of successfully expressing this experience or even signifying it with a name, girls are left frustrated, victims of America's "girl-poisoning" culture (12). The result is that "[m]ost girls choose to be socially accepted and split into two selves, one that is authentic and one that is culturally scripted" (26). In public they become who they are supposed to be (27). It is compelling that Pipher chooses the term "script" since Esther's predicament centers on the inability to reconcile the role that has been written for her with the inner thoughts that desperately want to edit this script. When identity is tangled in language and expressions of language, a troubling tension builds between desire and expectation.

Herein lies the struggle of Esther Greenwood. She appears to be the girl who has it all—she is seen as intelligent, enviable, and successful—all neatly defined terms. However, it is only Esther's perception that these terms are exclusive, and this limitation of language destabilizes the scripts she speaks and performs. This slipperiness is reinforced since "[w]e face problems of recognition because socially sustained discourses about who it is possible or appropriate or valuable to be inevitably shape the way we look at and constitute ourselves, with varying degrees of agonism and tension" (Calhoun 24). In Esther's 1950s culture, there is no discourse on how women can be multiply defined, and, therefore, no language to describe it. So when Esther does try to verbalize the feelings of inadequacy rising out of her, she is either silenced by another character or in her own self-rapprochement for thinking outside of what she believes to be the norm. Storytelling is a way for individuals to guide their social performances. Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson contend: "stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories" (37). Esther perpetually faces individuals and groups who impose their narratives on her psyche, and this indicates how Esther is co-opted as a means of completing a narrative arc. Since "experience is constituted through narratives . . . people are guided to act in certain ways and not others, on the basis of projections, expectations, and memories derived from a . . . limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives" (Somers and Gibson 38-39). Esther's inability to conform to these scripts is seen as failure. As Somers and Gibson note, stories prompt action, but if Esther cannot keep up, her in-action signifies the threat of altering, even failing, the story. Plath's decision to use a first-person narrator indicates how invested she is in cultural storytelling. This diegesis indicates Plath's imperative in having Esther tell her story instead of delivering it through a third-person, heterodiegetic narrative system. Working on an extra-diegetic level that is not based in a private forum like letters or diaries expresses Esther's desire to make sense of the world through language. Building on Gerard Genette's work in narratology, Susan S. Lanser says heterodiegetic narration "can be equated with a public readership" (621). Plath indicates Esther's discomfort at expressing a story that has not already been written

for her. Indeed, the first line of *The Bell Jar*, "I didn't know what I was doing in New York," is not coincidental (1). Without a narrator to tell Esther what to say or how to act, she is adrift, not able to "do." To further indicate Esther's misplaced compass, Kate Baldwin contends that Plath's decision to use a first-person narrator "is also present as a warning" (24). The vastness of the city foreshadows the deconstruction of formerly clear signals and constructs. Plath carefully notes how the city mirrors this eventuality with "fake, country-wet freshness that . . . evaporated . . . [m]irage-gray . . . the hot streets waver[ing]" (1); it cannot be pinned down to a certainty, which is also supported by Esther's effusiveness. Choosing the right words is a struggle, and when Esther begins to buckle under this tension, she notes "something was wrong with me that summer . . . all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue" (2). Language, the mode that has defined every inch of her identity, has begun to fail her.

To compound this void, New York City serves as a microcosm of America's confusing and competing identities. In her 2006 study of Plath's relationship to the Cold War, Sally Bayley sees America as "a culture that defamiliarizes and depersonalizes, a culture in which the protective boundaries of the private realm are persistently opened up to a direct encounter with the rhetoric of nation" (158). As Bayley supports, America's national rhetoric defines how language molds and changes our perceptions of reality, both in theory and in practice. In the novel's 1953 setting, the impending execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg dominates the news; this exposure represents the danger inherent in unclear identity boundaries, and Plath reinforces how this is expressed in language. Plath consciously chooses to focus on the many newspaper articles covering the event to emphasize the relationship between storytelling and identity. Actual newspapers from that time painstakingly mythologized "Ethel Rosenberg's status as a bad mother" (Baldwin 25). The reworking of a public, maternal identity is compelling because it indicates culture mandating the exposure and persecution of those who fall out of traditional storylines. Additionally, the Rosenbergs' execution represents the sense of public theatre that drives identity performance. The couple appeared as a "normal" American family, but they were revealed to be spies who were hemorrhaging security secrets. This haunts Esther as it represents how her identity's thin veneer is peeling away and the horrible truths that can be exposed through language. Just as she is working to perform the role of perfect daughter, perfect student, perfect worker, the Rosenbergs point to the danger of such connotations. The dread of their execution rests on Esther's conscience as a reminder of this.

Likewise, work is a profound example of how public and private rhetoric shape identity. Esther is a scholarship winner, a successful writer, an excellent student and conforming to the expectations of these terms is painfully rewarding. Esther and her fellow guest editors all won a contest for their positions, and they are compensated not only socially, but monetarily. Plath writes that the girls are rewarded for their manipulation of language since "writing essays and stories and poems and fashion blurbs" gave birth to jobs (3). The terms "gave" and "job" reveal how truly disparate Esther's language is. This rhetoric indicates that she expresses herself in an oxymoron by implying she was rewarded for her hard work with more work. It may be more accurate than she realizes because allowing others to determine

the context of language is equivalent to more work. Esther must constantly negotiate definitions of perceived and implied identities. Plath chooses this moment to tell the reader that Esther is "all right again" though we are left to question fully just what this means at the end of the novel (3).

Plath continues the discussion of slippery language by contrasting conversations between Esther's friend, Doreen, and her boss, Jay Cee. Doreen speaks the language of Southern aristocratic debauchery. This is in direct contrast to Esther's puritanical attitudes toward work and sexuality. While Esther toils over an article, Doreen lazily files her nails as she lounges in a flimsy negligee and questions why Esther is "sweating" over her work. Esther is torn between the unfamiliar language of pleasure and the definition of herself as a good worker. Doreen's choice of "sweating," surely something an aristocrat would not do literally or figuratively, indicates disapproval. While Doreen dismisses Jay Cee's authority, Esther keeps silent though she thinks Doreen's assessment is not completely accurate. A challenge would risk Doreen's using similar language against her. Esther puts more value in Doreen's language than her own and dares not contradict Doreen's dominant discourse for fear of persecution. Ultimately, language fails Esther because she cannot accept its nuances, just as she cannot reconcile multiple identities constituting a single subject. Esther's interactions with Jay Cee draw upon this idea by confirming her stubborn resistance to interpret language flexibly. When Jay Cee tells Esther she needs to think of the future, Esther is unable to rattle off her usual list of pre-scripted goals. Powerless to express her true thoughts accurately, she realizes the words are meaningless and that maybe she is even meaningless. Esther risks exposure by admitting she does not really know what she wants to do, but she quickly retreats since this language is unacceptable to Jay Cee. She tries to take back her words and abandons her language in an effort to protect her fragile identity, nearly shouting that her work interests her: "It does, it does . . . It interests me very much," may convince Jay Cee, but it cannot do the same for her (31). Esther speaks to this again when she notes "it seemed to be true" (31). As disparate terms, "seeming" and "being" indicate Esther's choice to perpetuate Jay Cee's discourse is synonymous to a repression of the self. This is the story that has been created for her, and one she had been willing to invest in. Her prizes, awards, and reputation should secure this identity, but now she feels paralyzed, unable to access language as she is able to only "balk and balk like a dull cart horse" (32).

Esther's backtracking leads her to translate her thoughts into metaphor, thereby distancing her genuine admission of uncertainty through figurative experience:

"I don't really know," I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true. It sounded true, and I recognized it, the way you recognized some nondescript person that's been hanging around your door for ages and then suddenly comes up and introduces himself as your real father and looks exactly like you, so you know he really is your father, and the person you thought all your life was your father is a sham (32).

Plath indicates metaphor is a simultaneous distance from precision and a desire to personalize the language of experience. Esther's moment of honesty is dismissed by Jay Cee who pounces to proclaim, "You'll never get anywhere like that. What languages do you have?" (32).

Here, Plath points out how dissimilar Esther and Jay Cee's languages are. Notably, Plath chose for Jay Cee to demand Esther learn more languages, but Esther fails to interpret multiple languages as possibilities for communication. Plath further supports this assertion with Esther's admission that German seemed like "dense, black, barbed-wire letters [that] made my mind shut like a clam" (33). Esther's dead father, her grandmother, and mother all speak German. Her brother speaks German so well that he can be mistaken for a native; he is able to assimilate in a way Esther cannot. Plath's choice of "native" indicates her awareness of a multiplicity Esther cannot recognize. Being a native implies Esther's brother's ability is to be completely proficient. As he can be mistaken for a native speaker, he must also navigate the nuances of the language that may not be taught through the structure of formal German. His ability to express himself in multiple ways is a foil to Esther's search for an impossibly singular language.

Not recognizing nuance results in Esther's strict, even pessimistic, interpretation of language. Esther considers Jay Cee's suggestion ruthless. She translates "You need to offer more than the run of the mill person" as an authoritative judgment of her inadequacies (33). While one can be open to whether this is Jay Cee's lack of sisterhood, it could equally represent an honest nurturing. In fact, Esther's linguistic development, metaphorically and literally, will allow her to better understand herself and others. Instead of understanding Jay Cee's suggestion as constructive, she takes it as a condemnation of her own lacking. She cannot access the plurality of meanings available to her.

Perhaps Plath illustrates this best through the fig tree presented in Esther's copy of *The Thirty Best Short Stories of the Year*. In this story, a Jewish man and a nun are unable to reconcile a relationship because of their obvious cultural differences. The fig tree is a prominent symbol of an inability to overcome differences and abandon strict interpretations of behavior. The tree image is central to Esther's struggle because it is a literal fusion of diverse meanings in one vital form. The green branches represent multiple possibilities, and yet, they are simultaneously connected by a healthy trunk, a center that can bear the weight of these directions and their fruitfulness. Esther cannot accept such multiplicity; the story must represent a single idea. Though Janet Badia also sees the fig tree as representative of possibility, she ultimately confirms that "Esther's own fear of inadequacy constantly overwhelms her, she cannot see the fig tree . . . in a positive light . . . Esther's damaged self-image turns the once-green branches into rotten, dreadful choices that fall, spoilt, to her feet" (133). What Esther does not see is that the story's characters suffer a loss because they are unable to communicate their feelings, and, again, a narrative reaffirms separation from identity and its possibilities.

Throughout the novel, Plath focuses on the idea of the self as scripted theatre. It seems that Esther has spent the majority of her years quietly accepting what words and actions are socially prescribed. Esther is created by other people, a literal production of their figurative hopes. In fact, Esther's life can be seen as a metaphor for the wishes of her mother. Mrs. Greenwood has sacrificed her interests to participate vicariously in her children's successes. From her labors, she has produced the "right" kind of children, children who can compete and succeed in upper class worlds as noted through Esther's much-praised writing

and her brother's mastery of German. This creates a constant conversation around Esther since she has become a cash cow—a way to purchase respect, scholarship money, and social status. Linda Wagner-Martin points to this sense of theatre when she writes, "The Bell Jar shows the ways in which Esther Greenwood is the unquestionable product of her ambitious mother and family, and the ways in which she must deny the influence of those elements before she can come into her own fully defined birth" (34). Esther takes her mother's sacrifices seriously and fears she is an inferior version of the self described in the stories told about her. This has enslaved Esther's sense of self to her mother's perceptions and reflections. According to Nancy Chodorow, "the girl's difficulty in life will be the formation and maintenance of an identity separate from her mother" (43). Compounding this connection is Chodorow's claim that "feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than the masculine personality" (44). How can Esther ever define herself when she cannot access a language that allows such expression?

Similarly, the context of childbirth and motherhood is a significant comment on language and is further developed through Esther's relationship with quasi-boyfriend, Buddy Willard. When Esther visits Buddy's hospital and sees a woman giving birth, she is horrified, though she will not admit it to Buddy. Esther's romantic view of labor is shattered by this experience. She has fantasized that her own labor will be similar to a movie production with her "dead white" face "smiling and radiant with hair down to her waist" (67). This fairy tale image of labor is fractured by Mrs. Tomolillo's tortuous experience and Esther's repulsion of the mucous covered infant. Here, the definition of childbirth changes from myth to horror. Furthermore, Mrs. Tomolillo's inability to communicate her experience beyond an "inhuman whooping noise" signifies the juncture between speech and experience (66). Mrs. Tomolillo is distanced from her labor because she cannot express it verbally. In fact, Buddy explains that she will not even remember the pain or the birth of her child since she has been given twilight gas. Esther sees this as a violation of the sanctity between language and experience and is angry it has been so easily dismissed by the mostly male hospital staff. She predicts the new mother will be haunted by the pain which will rest "in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless, and windowless corridor . . . waiting to open up and shut her in again" (66). Like her, Mrs. Tomolillo will be disturbed by an inability to describe and define her own experiences. Additionally, this fear confirms how language provides shape to experience, and thereby, supports how unexpressed experiences equate monstrous, amorphous unknowns. Esther only expresses this to her reader, however. She tells Buddy that witnessing childbirth was "[w]onderful" and she "could see something like that every day" (67). Again, Esther rejects speech as a means of faithfully communicating experience.

Motherhood is one role Esther seems otherwise content to reject. However, the political language of virginity is another matter. Prior to her New York summer, Mrs. Greenwood sent Esther an article titled "In Defense of Chastity." The article reinforces gendered sexual norms stating that a "man's world is different from a woman's world and a man's emotions are different from a woman's emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds and the two different sets of emotions together properly" (81). The vague language mirrors the distance between rules for women and rules for men. The article explains that the best people

save their virginity for marriage, men included. It also reinforces the concept of containing complex ideas in a definite format/language. It is of course inaccurate since it creates a glorified definition of morality that Esther knows she and Buddy cannot live up to. She knows Buddy is not a virgin and is frustrated that men are not stigmatized by sex. Men are allowed to step out of these definitions while women risk being exposed as fallen either through reputation or pregnancy. Again, Esther cannot see possibility because her culture does not make room in its language for an even sexual playing field. Furthermore, Buddy has intimated that Esther is more experienced, and this falseness causes her to end the relationship since "he didn't have the honest guts to admit it straight off to everybody and face up to it as part of his character" (72). Now that Buddy has acted outside of his projected identity, Esther is unsettled again. Citing Virginia Woolf's discussion in "Women in Fiction," Cora Kaplan notes that since "[o]ur identities are . . . constructed through social hierarchy and cultural differentiation, as well as through those processes of division and fragmentation, our identities arrived at through these structures will always be precarious and unstable" (875). Esther's experiences mirror this idea since she has invested in what her culture has told her to be. Consequently, these competing pressures and the ineffectuality of language make Esther's breakdown inevitable.

Plath presents Buddy's mother as another representation of strict gender definition. Diane Bonds contends that "Esther is haunted by images suggesting the self-mutilations of marriage and motherhood" (101). Esther recalls the way in which Buddy Willard's mother weaves a beautiful rug only to destroy its beauty in a matter of days by using it as a kitchen mat. The message is clear to Esther who says, "I knew that in spite of all the roses and the kisses . . . what [a man] secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for [the wife] to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (102). However, what this excludes is how work can tell a story. Mrs. Willard's rug is a representation of female material culture and intense labor to create something beautiful, yet useful. The ultimate fate of its withering beauty is a direct comment on personal interpretation and not just the mutilations and sacrifices of marriage. Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat is often mentioned in Plath criticism as an example of neglecting the contributions of women's work. Esther mentions she would not have made such a beautiful rug and then ruined it by using it. Her choice would have been to display it on the wall. Critics overlook an important point when they reduce the rug to such a literal example. In actuality, the rug says more about Esther than it does Mrs. Willard. To Esther, the rug tells a story of denigration, but her desire to see the rug displayed is counterproductive. In a literal sense, hanging a rug on a wall is absurd. From a figurative point of view, Plath takes this symbol a step further. Since Esther wants to see the rug displayed, the reader is again confronted by Esther's desire for external praise with its positive reinforcement through language. Esther's desires for these outward confirmations hinder her development as a young woman. Here, Plath clearly signals that reducing meaning is about a denial of oneself.

Esther feels isolated from society because she feels she must recognize the sum of herself within it to feel whole. She wishes she could be one thing or another since this is how she interprets others—Jay Cee is the career woman, Doreen is the sexually assured modern

woman, Mrs. Willard and Mrs. Greenwood both represent sacrificial motherhood. Esther sees these categorizations as separate and exclusive. Note that Esther never relates an event that contradicts how a character has first been described. These static characters support how her point of view does not allow for multiplicity. Reflexively, this demonstrates how she cannot tolerate multiplicity for herself either. Esther sees herself as a blank slate that has been written on, but she has not thought about what is beneath that surface. She has not allowed herself to create a self-concept, nor does she see that identity is a project and unstable in nature. It seems Plath is correct about this unsteadiness since Esther cannot stabilize language in a healthful way.

All of Esther's work is entrenched in language, and mental rehabilitation is no different. Her recovery centers on verbalizing personal experience and how that experience is translated by others. Her first psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon, unsettles her by asking what is wrong. Asking Esther to negotiate her experience verbally and her inability to do so accurately is the center of the problem. Esther's reaction is to "control the picture he had of me by hiding this and revealing that" (130). She also tries to remove herself by being noncommittal. However, Esther's treatment is predicated upon the expert interpretation of her feelings and ideas, whether negotiated verbally or nonverbally. Susan Boyer contends that when Esther begins treatment she "is already emptied of words or reactions that can be interpreted or understood" (214). However, this is inaccurate since no matter how verbal or evasive Esther is, she is still at the mercy of outside judgment. Esther consistently responds that she feels only the same, and by not elaborating, she makes an attempt to retreat from the burdens of language. However, Esther also indicates she wants Dr. Gordon to intuit her needs. After being asked once again if she is the same, Esther notes, "So, I told him again, in the same dull, flat voice, only it was angrier this time, because he seemed so slow to understand, how I hadn't slept for fourteen nights and how I couldn't read or write or swallow very well" (135). While repeating the same words, Esther wants Dr. Gordon to decode her secrets; she wants to be understood but cannot find suitable language for this purpose.

In the same session, Esther shows him a letter she wrote and then destroyed. Playing upon the idea of intuition, Esther hopes Dr. Gordon will see this as a metaphor for the unreliability of language, since her message is forever obscured. However, Esther is not successful in this respect as she notes, "Doctor Gordon seemed unimpressed" (35). Compounding Esther's failure to have this symbol of abandoned language read according to her specifications is the reality of Dr. Gordon's authority. In this context, it is clear Esther's understanding of the letter is dominated by her psychiatrist's judgment. Though literally reading the letter is impossible, Esther cannot keep Dr. Gordon from interpreting what it may signify. None of Esther's attempts to withdraw from language provide relief; in fact, they lead to an unexpected consequence. Dr. Gordon prescribes shock treatments, so once again Esther is punished for not finding the right words to convey her innermost thoughts.

Waiting for her first shock treatment, Esther sees several silent patients, and she is unable to share her fear and questions with Dr. Gordon. After treatment, Plath returns to metaphor to express Esther's tenuous hold on language. Asked how she feels, Esther recalls the horror of being shocked by a lamp in her father's study. She remembers screaming and

not recognizing her own voice just as she does not recognize herself by finally claiming she feels "all right" (144). Dr. Gordon accepts this empty language and further validates the disparity of language and experience when he recounts a story he told previously as if it were for the first time. Subsequent treatments make her feel blind and helpless. Plath describes it as "being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel into the earth" until "the voices stopped" (170). Esther cries for her mother as the darkness turns to black, but there is no response. She says that she cannot see and she hears a voice explain, "[t]here are lots of blind people in the world. You'll marry a nice blind man some day" (171). Albeit for a short while, Esther is an equivocal sightless mute. Her senses abandon her until she finally confirms she feels the same as before.

As Esther is institutionalized, Plath continues discussing the trouble of language. Esther feels a certain sense of peace in the sanitarium, even more so when she is transferred to an upscale mental hospital. Some critics contend this isolation is a positive step since it allows Esther to concentrate on her problems without the anxiety of external pressures. However, Esther finds many directions for her attention. Esther takes comfort in Miss Norris, an aphasic patient, since she does not need to depend on language to negotiate their relationship. Uncompelled to explain her experience or listen to Miss Norris explain her own, Esther is free from the burden of narrative; they are left to sit in a "close, sisterly silence" (191). Scholars interpret Esther's relationship with her new psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan, as a positive sisterhood. Yet, it is actually another example of performance distorting Esther's identity. After all, Dr. Nolan's identity as a healer depends on her ability to process the experiences of others and decode the secrets that will unlock Esther's inner self through verbal therapy sessions. In actuality, Dr. Nolan does not help facilitate a stable identity for Esther. What she does do is provide ways for Esther to act out, which feign the symptoms of a recovery. When Esther tells Dr. Nolan that she hates her mother, she tests Dr. Nolan's reaction, hoping to peer at her reflection in her psychiatrist's eyes. It has been said that Dr. Nolan gives Esther the ability to make her own decisions, and, as a result, Esther "feels independent, in control" (Wagner-Martin 43). However, this is illusory and best evidenced through Dr. Nolan's decision to use shock therapy in Esther's treatment.

Her first treatments with Dr. Gordon made Esther forget herself. Though only temporary, erasing experience is a disturbing means of recovery as it takes away Esther's ability to define her experiences. Dr. Nolan's treatments are better administered, but their result is to make Esther feel erased "like chalk on a blackboard" though she feels "surprisingly at peace" (214-215). Since Esther's memory and relationship to her world have been momentarily altered, Esther is free from its burdens, but she is also further distanced from herself and vulnerable once again to the inscriptions of others. Susan Coyle recognizes this disparity by examining Plath's description of a "recovered" Esther as a retread tire. Coyle says the analogy "seems to be accurate, since the reader does not have a sense of [Esther] as a brand-new, unblemished tire but of one that has been painstakingly reworked, remade" (qtd. in Bonds 54). Being molded according to expectations of others is the real meaning of Esther's rehabilitation. Like Mrs. Willard's kitchen rug, Esther is flattening out moment by moment. Just as a tire carries the weight of an entire car, Esther carries the expectations of the perfor-

mance she is supposed to deliver. And, as the retread tire image asserts, it cannot last forever. It will only bear up for so long. Plath continues to approach narration by including articles detailing Esther's disappearance and suicide attempt. Her experience has been encapsulated and distributed to a mass audience; the headlines themselves offer a short but complete narrative arc—"Scholarship Girl Missing. Mother Worried" provides the exposition; "Sleeping Pills Feared Missing With Girl" indicates the conflict; "Girl Found Alive!" announces the conclusion (198-99). Neatly identified in large capital letters, it is a relief to relinquish control of telling her own story. Esther's recovery story can never belong to her, just as her sense of self cannot be self-defined. Critic Marjorie Perloff reads *The Bell Jar* "as the attempt to heal the fracture between inner self and false-self systems so that a real and viable identity can come into existence" and Plath's characterization of Joan Gilling is a prime example of this fusion (12). She is someone Esther took for a straightforward, privileged ivy-leaguer. It turns out that Joan's identity is not stable either since she too is a patient at the asylum. When Esther asks, "How did you get here?" Joan's response is "I read about you, and I ran away" (195). Plath indicates how society's construction of Esther will never provide a sense of self. This is evidenced by how Joan co-opts Esther's own story for her own actions and experiences. Esther's concept of self is further distressed when she discovers Joan is a lesbian. This word connotes extreme deviancy from cultural expectations and her reaction is to reject and chastise Joan. Highlighting Esther's struggle is the "tension within us which can be both the locus of personal struggle and the source of an identity politics that aims not simply at the legitimation of falsely essential categorical identities but at living up to deeper social and moral values" (Calhoun 29).

The irony is that Esther has again failed to see multiplicity in another and ultimately in herself. Esther cannot allow Joan to be two things—her own self-concept and social representation—just as she cannot allow this for herself. Joan's eventual suicide is a rejection of this idea entirely and an argument against acting outside cultural expectations. Esther feels no guilt about this because her words have reinforced the definition of a proper young woman who is appalled by such deviancy. At Joan's funeral, Esther admits she "didn't know what she was burying" but the scene ends with Esther asserting "I am, I am, I am" (242-43). Plath chooses to omit a predicate noun or adjective because no such term exists for Esther. Lesbianism is not the real issue of Esther's disgust. Instead, it is Joan's honest attempt at verbal expression that horrifies Esther; Esther is not able to define herself, as Joan has at least attempted, and her only recourse is to castigate Joan.

Though the ending of the novel suggests Esther may or may not be released from the sanitarium, this part of the ending is not truly in question. The reader knows that Esther leaves the sanitarium and goes on to have a child. This signifies Esther's inevitable fate—to give up her quest for meaningful identity for the comfort and conformity of an expectation created by others. Motherhood need not be defined as oppression if it is an independent choice. Yet, the reader is already aware that Esther defines motherhood as horrible and limiting.

Though a healthy self-concept allows for our desires to change, there is no textual evidence that Esther has had a change of heart. Esther has spent her whole life succeeding ac-

cording to the neatly ascribed values of her culture, and in the end, this does not change. This is the real question of the novel. Does Plath's story support a sense of wholeness for Esther, a unification of the many designations that comprise individuals? Esther invests in the mutual exclusivity of language, and her inability to appreciate unification of the many designations that comprise individuals? Esther invests in the mutual exclusivity of language, and her inability to appreciate language's vast nuances causes her to compartmentalize meaning at horrible costs. For instance, shouldn't Esther take comfort that her benefactress, Mrs. Guinea, succeeded despite her mental illness? Instead, the focus is on the money she made writing cheap, trashy novels. Therefore, Mrs. Guinea's story/stories are illegitimate. Esther cannot grasp the grey areas in life and does not recognize the:

[t]ension between identity—putatively singular, unitary and integral—and identities—plural, cross-cutting and divided—is inescapable at both individual and collective levels. As lived, identity is always project, not settled accomplishment; though various external ascriptions or recognitions may be fixed and timeless (Calhoun 27).

We never see if Esther can live with piecing these ideas together. When Plath earlier comments that Esther was "all right" again, the inadequateness of language rears its head. Containing Esther's experience in two brief words sounds as ridiculous as it actually is. Additionally, it is crucial that Plath ends the novel without an afterword from Esther. Plath leaves Esther "on the threshold" of entering her release hearing (244). The reader never knows what was said at the hearing; Plath closes the scene before the meeting begins. It seems both scripts have already been written, and the performers will act as expected. The refusal to use language allows Esther, like the silent Miss Norris, to free herself from determining who she is. Resigned to the judgments of others, Esther walks onstage as an actress would. She remembers how "[t]he eyes and faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room" (244). The novel does not end neatly with a climactic assertion of self; rather, Esther allows cultural perceptions to have the final word.

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