

Forget the Dreamer and Remember the Dream: A Study of Sylvia Plath's Fiction

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in English

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Approved by

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Introduction

Sylvia Plath's life and writing has generated endless amounts of controversy since her suicide in 1963. A common tendency among critics is to read her life and writing as parallels to each other, because of this prominent controversy. This reductive reading is problematic for many reasons. Critic Kate Baldwin argues that "If we insist on prioritizing the morbid Plathian prism as the primary means of investigating the novel, then we miss what I term its radical imaginary" (Baldwin, 22). While Baldwin's article is more about *The Bell Jar* being a commentary on the Cold War dichotomies Esther encounters in her transition into adulthood, she uses aspects of life in the 1950s as a background for reading the novel instead of only Plath's personal experiences. This parallels what I argue is Plath's reason behind her writing what the masses refer to as semi-autobiographical fiction. In addition to the gender anxieties she writes about at length in her journals, Plath also writes about her lack of experience hindering her writing, and ways to combat her lack of novel topics to write about: "Should I sublimate (my, how we throw words around!) my selfishness in serving other people—through social or other such work? Would I then become more sensitive to other people and their problems? Would I be able to write honestly, then, of other beings beside a tall, introspective adolescent girl?" (Journals, 99) Her utmost desire is the ability to inhabit a male space and gain the freedoms it would afford, which would then allow her to access more than the life she was given: that of another gender, which would enrich her writing. Plath wants to use events and aspects of her life to strengthen the stories she writes, instead of simply turning said events into the story as they happened. Plath uses her writing to explore the themes and anxieties that plague her daily life, and though her

writing does not offer answers to the inner turmoil that ultimately led to her demise, it demonstrates her burgeoning skill in her ability to craft a narrative, and her desire to make it more than semi-autobiographical fiction.

Beginning this in-depth analysis of Plath's fiction, I had hoped to discover a way to separate her life from her fiction, and to appreciate the fiction for the work of art she had intended it to be. After an extensive analysis of her fiction, and the unearthing of themes that thread themselves through this fiction, in addition to an already vast knowledge of Plath's life, I have generated a compromise of sorts for reading Plath's fiction as separate from her life: rather than using Plath's writing as an answer to the questions posed by her brief and tumultuous life, I look at the events of her life as tools she used to inform her fiction, to write complexly about the anxieties that plagued her, and give voice to the woman inside of her that wanted to break free from the restrictions imposed on her gender and exist in not only a woman's world, but a man's as well.

The first chapter explores at length six of Plath's short stories, followed by a chapter that explores *The Bell Jar*. An analysis of these specific stories shows an independent apprenticeship Plath was working through to make her breakthrough in the form of a full-length novel. The stories display themes that she comes back to through her writing, and they show her progression in working through these themes and turning them into an exploration of female anxieties and the existential crises that grow from them. Women in the 1950s, as Sylvia Plath well knew, did not have many options when it came to future after their academic life came to an end: they could get married and have children, or they could have a career, but not both. The women in Plath's stories wrestle with these choices and their desire to not have to make one exclusive decision, but to

have it all. This indecision leads to breakdowns of different varieties, and difficulty coming to terms with their inability to reconcile all of their desires. The discussion of these anxieties explored in Plath's short stories culminates in her writing of *The Bell Jar*, in which the protagonist faces the same anxieties and indecisions, but it is a successful completion of her apprenticeship because the protagonist comes through the other side hopeful that she will have a future that she can decide for herself.

One of the most prominent problems in Sylvia Plath's life was her desire to be a woman who could occupy the space of a man. In her journals, she often expressed this desire for a sort of reconciliation:

Yes, my consuming desire is to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, barroom regulars—to be a part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording—all this is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always supposedly in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yes, God, I want to talk to everybody as deeply as I can. I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night. (Journals, 77)

She is eager to be able to take on certain abilities that are afforded to men, such as simply being able to walk around without the fear of attack. This desire for masculine traits goes beyond a desire for safety (though one could argue that that in itself is sufficient); Plath wants to be able to talk to a variety of people deeply in order to be able to write about complex ideas to which she is not fully privileged in her state as a woman. This desire manifests itself in many forms, one of which is her short stories, which focus on women in varying states of gender and existential crises. Sylvia Plath manages to voice this issue in a time when it was unusual for a woman to do so. Masculinity is seen as a sign of ultimate power and privilege, and it affords freedoms that Plath is denied in her existence

as a woman. Before Plath, however, there were other women with the audacity to voice outrage at this idea of gendered writing and seeing women as inherently inferior regardless of her writing savvy. Virginia Woolf wrote about this issue at length in *A Room of One's Own*, in which she explores why women who write literature are seen as inferior, or even lacking the opportunity to write. In one of her chapters Woolf discusses the idea of the androgynous mind: "If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her" (102). When a fusion between these two genders takes place within the mind is when "the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties" (102). Plath struggled with this in her life and in her writing: how to utilize the sex she was born with (woman) in conjunction with the male parts of her brain to work at full capacity. This is where many themes present in her fiction begin to manifest themselves.

Chapter 1: Sylvia Plath's Short Stories

The stories discussed in this chapter are the ones that most exemplify the themes that were most prevalent in Plath's life. These stories were written throughout her life, the earliest when she was still a teenager and the latest the year before she died. The first stories I will discuss, "Among the Bumblebees" and "Stone Boy with Dolphin," examine the desire for the ability to occupy a male space as a female. "Stone Boy with Dolphin" was written about 8 years after "Among the Bumblebees," when Plath was 26, so it also includes the internal struggle for a woman who wants to be sexually experienced but also faces the stigma of possibly being seen as a "slut." The next stories, "Tongues of Stone," "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," and "Mothers," and "Initiation," examine the

issues of female “otherness” (as Wagner-Martin refers to it in “Sylvia Plath’s Specialness”). This otherness, or isolation or distinct difference, comes as a result of either a kind of spiritual ambivalence, feelings of inadequacy, a desire to fit in with the elite, or, most interestingly, a desire to fit with not only other females but to be able to transcend her femininity to encompass maleness as well.

All of these stories contain themes that will culminate in Plath’s writing of her only novel, *The Bell Jar*. According to Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes, “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” proved to be the “divining work that located and opened the blocked spring” (Hughes). By writing this story, Plath was able to get down on paper an experience that has stuck with her since it happened: her experience with electroshock therapy. Perhaps finally purging this from her system made it possible for her to write the novel she had been trying to write her whole life. *The Bell Jar* was Plath’s first and only novel; her life was cut short before she could write any other novels that may have been brewing inside of her. This chapter examines the themes in her short stories, and the subsequent chapter explores how these themes and stories culminate in *The Bell Jar*.

Part I- Inhabiting the Male Space

“Among the Bumblebees”

Sylvia Plath’s earliest-written story published in a widely-available collection (as opposed to the Plath Archives located in the Lilly Library at Indiana University) is “Among the Bumblebees,” which presents themes that will become common in Plath’s fiction. This is a story about a young girl, Alice Denway, and her relationship with her father, whom the narrator describes as having been “a giant of a man,” which could possibly be first inklings of the image of the Colossus that will appear across Plath’s

oeuvre. Alice Denway has a very close relationship with her father, unlike her younger brother Warren who aligns more with their mother. There is a great divide between father/daughter and mother/son: “Alice Denway was her father’s pet,” while her brother “favored their mother’s side of the family” (320), both in looks and temperament. Alice likes to tease Warren, “because it made her feel strong and superior when he began to fuss and cry” (320). Later in the story it is revealed that her father “did not like anyone to cry” (326). Alice’s strong desire to be her father’s favorite and not her mother’s shows a confusion in her gender identity—not in the sense that Alice identifies as male though she was born female, but rather she realizes from a young age the shortcomings of being female in a male dominated society. If she is able to prove herself to her father, the ultimate man in her life, maybe she will become that much closer to being able to occupy male spaces while still remaining female.

While this story seems to simply be about a young girl whose father is the most important person in her life, which is a fantastic story for Plath to have written while still in high school, more dwells beneath the surface. After the extensive imagery within a scene of Alice and her father at the beach, there is a paragraph dedicated to Alice sitting on her father’s lap. Just as it did on the beach, Alice feels completely safe in this moment: “But with her father’s strong arms around her and the steady reassuring beat of his heart in her ears, Alice believed that she was somehow connected with the miracle of fury beyond the windows, and that through him, she could face the doomsday of the world in perfect safety” (325). For perhaps the first time, Plath uses the image of a heartbeat in a significant moment for a protagonist of a story.

The story takes a turn when the reader, as well as Alice, learns that her father is dying. Plath spent the majority of the story building the relationship between Alice and her father, and the adoration she had for him and her desire to emulate him and how he even gave her hope for her future, not simply that she may one day be happy and successful, but that she will grow up at all: “Then it seemed to Alice, as she felt the growing strength and sureness of her young limbs, that some day she, too, would be able to ride the waves in safe dominion, and that the sunlight would always bend deferentially to her, docile and generous with its creative warmth” (324). Alice wants affection from her father so badly, but in this moment it is revealed, at the very least to the reader, that this desire for affection is also a desire for a future, that someday she will feel as safe and as free as she does in this moment on the beach with her father. Because the beach with her father was the place she felt safest, and because her desire was for “safe dominion,” the notion that Alice hopes to someday be able to occupy a space where she can be in charge is further emphasized. For her, maleness does not only mean reverence and intelligence, it also means safety. Alice’s desire for a future becomes even more prominent at the end of the story, when Alice’s father dies and she is left alone to fight back her tears because her father “did not like anyone to cry.” Even after he is dead, Alice lives with her father’s approval being her ultimate goal, and it has been ingrained in her that, no matter how tough or emotional a situation is, she must remain strong and stoic, like a man, and fulfill the promise for a successful future that her father saw in her.

“Stone Boy with Dolphin”

At first reading, “Stone Boy with Dolphin” does not appear to be anything special or indicative of Plath furthering her apprenticeship, and seems simply to be about a girl who gets drunk, goes to a party, bites a poet’s cheek, and ends with a different character’s perspective, with occasional mentions of a statue of a boy holding a dolphin. Deeper analysis lends itself to insight into themes to which Plath frequently returns and wrestles with, including issues of inadequacy (both in terms of gender and intelligence), otherness, and living in a state of numbness or semi-consciousness. Four female characters have a role in this story, not limited to Dody Ventura and Mrs. Guinea who begin and end the story, respectively. Dody’s “friend” (though not part of the lexicon during Plath’s day, “frenemy” might be a more accurate term for their relationship) Adele and Miss Minchell also play roles that may not be apparent upon an initial and superficial reading. What this story comes down to is, similar to “Among the Bumblebees,” an examination of a woman’s desire to be able to occupy a space other than the one she is forced into as a woman, in addition to struggling with the different possible paths a woman can take, and Dody’s attempt to either make sense of or choose one of these paths.

There are a few choices Dody either must or does make throughout this story. From the start, she must decide whether or not to go to a party Bamber invited her to, and she ultimately decides to go upon learning that a few poets that she admires from afar will be there. Immediately, Dody’s admiration of males and distaste for females is apparent, in her admiration of fellow male students and animosity toward fellow female students. This is not necessarily a flaw in Dody’s personality but is a reflection on society’s tendency to make masculinity the ultimate goal and to pit women against each

other to win a man's attention. Dody has read and knows by heart Leonard's poetry, but has never met him. Adele, on the other hand, has not only met Leonard but has had lunch with him. After Dody learns of this, she says to Adele that there is "not room for the two of us..." (180). The typical male/female binary presents itself not as the plot of the story, but as an early indicator of confusion on the part of Dody, confusion that will make more sense to the reader later, though possibly not to Dody as she becomes progressively inebriated throughout the evening in which this story takes place.

There is also the matter of the subject of the title of the story, a stone statue of a boy with a dolphin. This statue becomes a recurrent image for Dody during her drunken evening; she constantly remembers its existence and her odd desire to break it. At the same as her desire to break it, she also wants to guard it and keep it safe: "Nightly after snows, with bare fingers, Dody scraped the caked snow from his stone-lidded eyes, and from his plump stone cherub foot" (181). This suggests an affection for this statue and her need to keep it safe. Because Dody is so obsessed with both the innocence of this statue and with smashing it, it would not be a stretch to suggest that the stone boy with dolphin is a metaphor for Dody's chastity. This also aligns with Dody's struggle to find a place in both the masculine and feminine realms: on the one hand, she wants to embrace herself as a woman and keep intact the one thing that signals a woman's worth in this time period. On the other hand, she wants to destroy this idea of an ideal image of femininity and purity and find a way to occupy the male realm while still being female, thus destroying the patriarchal views of womanhood and its restrictions.

As soon as Dody and her date for the evening, Hamish, enter the party, the narrative breaks up the plot's timeline to discuss the very essence of choice: "In the

middle of the doorway Dody poised. Life is a tree with many limbs. Choosing this limb, I crawl out for my bunch of apples. I gather unto me my Winesaps, my Coxes, my Bramleys, my Jonathans. Such as I choose. Or do I choose?" (187) Dody's subconscious lists the choices of apples front of her, and this listing can be interpreted multiple ways. One interpretation is that Dody is scanning this party for possible boys to destroy the stone boy statue [not sure where to put the analysis of this statue...before the choices, after? Before the discussion of different types of females being discussed?] or for the one man on whom she had already set her sights: Leonard. On the other hand, this passage can be interpreted in terms of Dody's existential crisis: she finds herself fighting between wanting the attention of these poets whom she loves and who, to top it off, are her age, and wanting to be the perfect image of a femininity, perhaps like Adele. Which apple, or type of person, does Dody want to be? And if she picks one, does this mean she cannot pick another as well? These questions are posed explicitly in this passage, but they are not spoken aloud by Dody or even acknowledged by the narrator. It is unclear even at the end of the story if Dody manages to pick an apple, but therein lies the crux of her dilemma: the nebulae of choices. If one is made, one is foregone. When one is made, more present themselves. On and on and on.

After some time at the party, Dody finally meets Leonard. She introduces herself not by saying hello or telling him her name, but by quoting lines of Leonard's poetry at him. After they sufficiently make it known that they wish to speak to each other one on one ("Leonard pushed back the wall with his left arm and set her in the space between his left arm and his face" (191).), Dody brings up the statue of the boy with the dolphin and

mentions how badly she wants to break it, and finally asks him if he can do it. Somehow, without Leonard and Dody ever leaving the party, the stone boy is destroyed:

For answer, Leonard stamped. Stamped out the floor. Stamp, the walls went. Stamp, the ceiling flew to kingdom come. Stripping her red hairband off, he put it in his pocket. Green shadow, moss shadow, raked her mouth. And in the center of the maze, in the sanctum of the garden, a stone boy cracked, splintered, million pieced. (191)

Dody has possibly found the right person to destroy this stone statue; someone to aid her in her quest to destroy the image of female purity. If she has, in fact, succeeded in destroying the image of the stone boy statue, she manages to do so without actually sacrificing her so-called purity. And although she does not go home with Leonard at the end of the evening, she has physically marked him, by biting his cheek, and he takes Dody's red hairband, implying that there will be a continuance to their tempestuous relationship. However, there is more to Dody's biting Leonard's cheek than simply a continuation of their relationship: When Dody asks Leonard if he can break the statue, Leonard responds by stamping on the floor. In doing so, Leonard proves that he has more to offer her than being a contender for taking her virginity: he asserts his male power by doing what Dody could not do (break the statue), and Dody sees this as an invitation for the type of adventure being a male affords. But when Dody responds to his male abrasiveness by biting his cheek, Leonard is threatened by her ability to respond to male power with equal power, and he abandons her at the party, with no indication that he has any desire to see her again. Leonard disappoints Dody because she thought that he would be the one to invite adventure into her life and be willing to accept female adventurousness, but this proves false, and Dody is back where she started, not knowing what to do in her quest for male power.

After the altercation between Dody and Leonard, Dody asks Hamish to escort her from the party. On their way out, Hamish gives Dody her coat, but before they can leave she must look in a mirror. The only mirror available is a “blurred, cracked oblong of glass hung over the once-white sink that was yellowed with a hundred years of vomit and liquor stains” (193). As Dody looks into this damaged mirror, she discovers that she is in a similar state, although her damage manifests itself in her face appearing bland and featureless: “There was no mouth on the face: the mouth place was the same sallow color as the rest of the skin, defining its shape as a badly botched piece of sculpture defines its shape, by shadows under the raised and swollen parts” (193). This one sentence contains the two major recurrent motifs in this story: statues and faces that appear featureless. Sylvia Plath manages to combine two different metaphors in one sentence to describe Dody’s drunken perception of her appearance: on the one hand Dody’s face is still a face but without a mouth, it is just a skin area under her nose, which then transforms into a “badly botched piece of sculpture,” only distinguishable by the shadows cast by the various “raised and swollen parts.” By combining these two metaphors into the moment when Dody sees her imperfect face in the broken mirror, Dody’s dilemma reaches its zenith, whether or not the reader or Dody realizes it at that moment. Based on these metaphors coming at a place in Dody’s life in which she is in between spaces (the party/her bedroom, not knowing Leonard/having met Leonard, inebriation/sobriety), we can surmise that her dilemma centers around her identity and how she appears not only to herself (in the mirror) but to others as well.

On the way back to her room, however, they take a detour to stop by Hamish’s room. Along this treacherous path they must be careful to stay quiet in order to avoid

proctors on the lookout for errant students, as well as other boys wandering the streets after hours. While Hamish leaves Dody in a corner while he finds a good place for them to hop the fence, five boys approach and surround Dody: “They had no features at all, only pale, translucent moons for face shapes, so she would never know them again. And her face, too, felt to be a featureless moon. They could never recognize her in the light of day” (195). These looming young men do not intimidate Dody, rather the opposite based on the language used to describe their verbal advances: “Their voices, gentle and light as paper streamers, fell, gentle, touching her, like leaves, like wings. Voices web-winged” (195). She neither succumbs to these boys’ advances nor fights back against them, she simply “stood her ground” (196) until Hamish returns to her, causing the boys to back off. This moment demonstrates Dody’s ambivalence for her safety, either because of her inebriation or because of the previously realized crisis. Is Dody not worried about these boys because she does not see them as a threat? Or is this lack of worry a result of not caring about her own well-being? This brings us back to the previous discussion of Dody’s reflection in the broken mirror. Dody has been wrestling with the choices she, as a young woman, can make and which one she will end up making. When she sees her reflection, specific parts of her face come “swimming at her through the mist” (193), as though a clear image of her fractured self is finally appearing to her in her altered state. At this moment of clarity (to some extent), Dody sees how difficult and scattered she is because she is unable to occupy both female and male spaces, and because she is unable to make any choices (just like with the choices of apple she could not pick), and therefore develops an ambivalence toward her future, including whether or not she will even have one.

After the run-in with the boys, Dody and Hamish make it safely to his room. They lay on the floor and suddenly, without really knowing why, Dody tells Hamish to scold her for her displaying negative feminine characteristics, such as those of a “bitch” or “slut.” It starts when Hamish kisses her, but “nothing stirred” (198); once again she feels nothing. Then they lay there and Dody asks Hamish to scold her, and when he asks why, she says “‘I am a bitch,’ Dody heard her voice announce from out of the doll-box in her chest, and she listened to it, wondering what absurd thing it would say next. ‘I am a slut,’ it said with no conviction” (198). Dody no longer even feels as if she is making the choices she is making; she feels that it is a “doll-box in her chest” making her decisions for her. Not only does this further emphasize the ambivalence she has developed for her choices and her future, but it also reaffirms the notion that the feminine ideal is not one that Dody personally believes, but expresses because it is what has been ingrained in her and is what she feels she is supposed to believe. Instead of responding to Hamish’s advances, either positively or negatively, she lays there and asks (even says “please”) him to scold her because she is a bitch and a slut—not because she truly believes these descriptors fit her, but because she feels she is supposed to be scolded for her actions.

When Dody finally makes it back to her room, she grabs a bottle of milk, warms it by the fire, takes off all of her clothes, and stands in front of her open window drinking her milk. As she looks out the window into the back garden, she sees the stone statue that has been on her mind all evening:

Only the lone, lame gesture for the unbreakable stone boy in the garden, ironic, with Leonard’s look, poised on that sculpted foot, holding fast to his dolphin, stone-lidded eyes fixed on a world beyond the clipped privet hedge, beyond the box borders and the raked gravel of the cramped and formal garden paths. (204)

The statue now has “Leonard’s look,” implying that, for Dody, this statue now has Leonard’s face permanently attached to it, since he is the one to have broken it, whether that means he is a serious candidate for providing the sexual experience she so desperately desires, or if that means he is the one that Dody feels she must look after. These two interpretations represent the choices Dody faces: give up striving to embody the image of perfect femininity in favor of sexual experience or, more long-term, a career, which then encompasses the second choice: forsaken domesticity and motherhood. The reality of the time in which Dody lives is these two choices; the ideal was a family life, and if a woman chose a career instead, she was looked down upon, and that is why this is so hard for Dody. She desperately wants to have it all.

After the descriptions of Dody standing by the window, we have an ending that does not seem to follow the structure of the plot up to this point, and which ends with a different character than it began. It seems poised to end with Dody, because she has finally made it home and is able to enjoy a glass of warm milk, and the narrative verges on closure: Dody finally goes to sleep, and she “slept the sleep of the drowned” (204). But it does not end here. The paragraph after Dody gets to sleep starts, “Nor saw yet, or fathomed how now, downstairs in the back kitchen, Mrs. Guinea began another day” (204). This in itself sounds like the beginning of another story, but Mrs. Guinea’s day begins and ends in the two final paragraphs of what was supposed to be Dody’s story. The beginning of Mrs. Guinea’s day is filled with optimism: “Sun bloomed virginal in the steel-rimmed rounds of her eye-glasses and clear light fountained from her widowed bosom, giving back the day its purity” (204). This sentence is riddled with descriptors that recall the first description of Mrs. Guinea, in which she “bloomed scentless, virgin

again after all these years, resurrected somehow in miraculous maidenhood” (182). The words “bloom” and “virgin” are used in both cases, emphasizing Mrs. Guinea having achieved ultimate femininity: she retains her husband’s name after he has died, and she has not been with anyone since the death of her husband, therefore she has returned to purity. If the feminine ideal requires that a woman find a husband and to remain pure, Mrs. Guinea has achieved this ideal. Because “Stone Boy with Dolphin” ends with Mrs. Guinea as opposed to Dody, the narrative emphasizes the binary of femininity, and the struggle that Dody faces on the verge of becoming an adult.

Part II- Institutionalized Othering

“Tongues of Stone”

“Tongues of Stone” was written after Plath had her first encounter with electroshock therapy and institutionalization. This translates into an exploration of themes associated with women who identify as “others” or outsiders and their punishment for their mental illness or unusual mode of thought. This story, both in terms of narrative structure and plot, is quite different from the previous two stories in this analysis, because it deals with more metaphysical and psychological experiences and themes, and borders on surrealism. Critic Melody Zajdel explores at length the similarities between “Tongues of Stone” and *The Bell Jar*, and reinforces the notion that Plath’s short stories are practice for a more complex and successful work of fiction: “Although her prose works span over ten years, much of that time seems spent in writing and rewriting the same story, the story which reaches its fruition in *The Bell Jar* (Zajdel, 182). She points to majority similarities between specifically “Tongues of Stone” and *The*

Bell Jar, and hopefully after this analysis and the subsequent *Bell Jar* analysis, the reader will be able to recognize these similarities as well.

This story is about a woman, who remains nameless and is only referred to as “the girl,” who has been institutionalized and is undergoing insulin injections to help her out of her depression. The beginning of the story cleverly conceals this fact by withholding information: “The simple morning sun shone through the green leaves of the plants in the little sunroom, making a clean look, and the patterned flowers on the chintz-covered couch were naïve and pink in the early light” (273). The morning sun is described as “simple,” which will later prove to be a stark contrast for the events in the story and in the girl’s current situation, which are anything but simple. The sun and the green lives in the little sunroom give the room a “clean look,” which do indicate that the room is sanitary without actually implying that the sunroom is, in fact, in a sanatorium. The end of the sentence describes a the flowers on a couch as “naïve and pink,” which would not typically fit with a description of a flower pattern, and therefore contains more foreshadowing that perhaps not only the flowers but the women on the couch are “naïve and pink,” as if they are brand new human beings or unaware of life outside of their current location. The rest of the paragraph also does nothing to indicate that the women in the room are being treated for a psychiatric illness, and the second sentence, which is the first in which the girl is mentioned, simply describes her as sitting on the sofa, “with the ragged red square of knitting in her hands and began to cry because the knitting was all wrong” (273). This does come off as a bit of an overreaction, but the narrative sets it up so that the girl’s crying is not an immediate indicator of a mental illness. The next sentence hints at the type of place in which the story is set, describing a woman in a

“silky white uniform.” This does imply that the woman is a nurse of some kind, but it still does not explicitly denote any sign of mental illness in the women in the room.

However, signs that something is amiss begin to show when the girl gets up from her seat to talk to Mrs. Sneider, who is sitting by the window making a woman out of clay. The girl tells Mrs. Sneider that she makes “very nice clay things,” but Mrs. Sneider does not react positively: “Mrs. Sneider sneered and began to take the woman apart, tearing off the arms and head and hiding the pieces under the newspaper she was working on” (273). It seems that a verbal altercation is about to ensue when the woman in silky white comes over to mediate, asking the girl to show her the knitting she has been working on. The girl tries to get back to work, but “[h]er hands felt like clay, and she let the knitting fall in her lap and began to cry again. Once she began to cry there was no stopping” (274). Since this crying episode comes immediately after the destruction of the clay woman, and the description of the girl’s hands as feeling like clay, it suggests that the girl sees the clay woman as herself. Perhaps the girl gets up to tell Mrs. Sneider that the clay woman is very good because she *wants* her to be good, so that she can hope that she, too, will be good again someday. Instead of inspiring any hope in the girl, Mrs. Sneider tears the woman apart, and the girl sees this as Mrs. Sneider tearing her apart, and when she sits back down to try knitting again, any hope she had is now hidden underneath Mrs. Sneider’s newspaper, and she cannot help but cry.

The next paragraph begins to reveal the true identity of the girl and the reason for her inhabiting this mysterious location: “It was sometime in October; she had long ago lost track of all the days and it really didn’t matter because one was like another and there were no nights to separate them because she never slept anymore” (274). In addition to

this sentence describing what seems to be a symptom of the girl's illness, the syntax also hints at the experience of this girl, having to sit in this place day after day. It starts with "It was sometime in October" followed by a semicolon, so the flow is immediately interrupted, just as the girl's life must have been from the time she began struggling with her illness. There is no more punctuation after this semicolon until the sentence ends, as sentences usually do, with a period. The girl has lost track of the days, but it does not matter to her because they are all the same anyway, and "there were no nights to separate them," just as there is no punctuation to separate any other parts of this sentence. The next two paragraphs are riddled with metaphors about the girl's situation, further emphasizing not only how the girl feels being mentally ill and committed to a mental institution, but also displaying Plath's ability to craft a narrative. It is well-known that Plath was able to write a complex poem with emotional as well as structural depth, but this small section of a short story that she wrote when she was 23-years-old exemplifies Plath's ability to do so in her prose as well.

While this story is by and large about a young woman's mental illness, nervous breakdown, and time spent in a mental institution, themes that recur in Plath's fiction are also make an appearance. The girl's days blend together, and one does not matter versus another, so she finds herself in an inconstant state, numb to any feeling, emotional or physical. At the end of the story, when it is time for the girl's daily insulin shot to help with her recovery, the nurse asks which side of her backside she would prefer the nurse administer the shot. The girl replies: "It doesn't matter....I can't feel them any more" (279). The girl is institutionalized in the first place because of a nervous breakdown resulting from insomnia and depression, during which she was unable to differentiate

between days, in a constant state of semi-consciousness. Now that she is in this place, she does not feel that there is anything more to her but her body, described as “a dull puppet of skin and bone that had to be washed day after day after day” (274). She no longer connects her body to her mind; they are separate from one another, do not interact, and therefore neither matters and she does not see a point in continuing on as an empty shell. After the description of her empty body, it continues that “her body would live on for sixty-odd years or more” (274). The narrative does not describe the girl as living for sixty more years, only her body, suggesting that her mind is already gone. This indicates not only the metaphysical emptiness with which the protagonist of the story is struggling, but the narrative’s emptiness for the character as well. Not once does the narrative mention the girl’s name, only the names of other patients and nurses. The girl’s lack of identity in the story reflects her feeling that she lacks an identity, or even anything more than a body, outside of the story.

In crafting the narrative this way, the ending of the story reflects the protagonist’s narrative ending. For the first time, the insulin shots have an effect, and the girl wakes up calling for Mrs. Patterson, but at first the girl does not realize that she is the one saying it. The narrative includes her shouting, but indicates that it is “the voice” saying it “more and more loudly, rising, shouting” (280). Then, when Mrs. Patterson comes in, the girl says her name again, but this time it is described as: “the girl heard herself say” (280), showing that the girl becomes slowly more aware of herself and her surroundings, and most importantly that she is using her own voice. Mrs. Patterson suggests that the girl have another glass of juice, but “[t]he girl remembered nothing of the first cup of juice. The dark air had thinned and now it lived. There had been the knocking at the gate, the

banging on the bed, and now she was saying to Mrs. Patterson words that could begin a world: 'I feel different. I feel quite different'" (280). Finally, her world, her new world after she lost herself in her breakdown, is beginning, and she is able to hope that she will actually get better this time. The last sentence of the story reunites the girl's mind and body, therefore rendering the narrative, which in itself is a reflection of the division between the two, unnecessary: "And in the dark the girl lay listening to the voice of dawn and felt flare through every fiber of her mind and body the everlasting rising sun" (280). The voice of dawn flares through both her body and mind simultaneously, reuniting them on this new day, with a sun that will be everlasting instead of cut short. In this sentence, the structure of the story as a whole is turned around, indicating that the nameless protagonist's life is turning around as well. Before, her days and mind and body went on and on the same every day, with no desire to continue. Now, with the treatment beginning to take effect, her mind and body have come back together, and the "everlasting rising of the sun" is an optimistic turn of events, and not a death sentence.

"Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams"

The title story of Sylvia Plath's only short fiction collection, "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," is what Ted Hughes considered to be her breakthrough, in terms of both her fiction and her poetry. He referred to "Johnny Panic" as "the divining work that located and opened the blocked spring" (Hughes). There is certainly a distinct voice present in this story, different from the stories that came before, but still unmistakably Plath. Once again, this story presents similar themes to earlier stories, namely "Tongues of Stone," which is clearly about institutionalization. In the case of "Johnny Panic,"

however, the protagonist and narrator works as a bookkeeper in a clinic, as opposed to being a patient. The narrator appears to be normal, and the story seems to have the potential for the development of a mentally stable character, but the end of the second paragraph, in a similar vein as “Tongues of Stone,” begins to clue the reader in that there is more to the narrator than bookkeeping.

As the narrator sits in her office day after day, she witnesses the patients who come in sharing their dreams with doctors, hoping that indulging their unconscious thoughts will solve their conscious problems and illnesses. This prompts her to think about who is really in charge, like a mouse “gets to thinking pretty early on how the whole world is run by these enormous feet” (156). What enormous feet run the world she lives in? Fortunately, this story is not about the narrator trying to figure out who that may be; she already has an answer, and that answer is Johnny Panic: “Panic with a dog-face, devil-face, hag-face, whore-face, panic in capital letters with no face at all—it’s the same Johnny Panic, awake or asleep” (156). Johnny Panic is the answer for all—he not only has every face imaginable to conform to any dream and therefore any person’s anxieties. He is also “panic in capital letters with no face at all,” suggesting that he is not a being at all but simply a manifestation of anxiety. The fact that Johnny Panic has no face parallels Plath’s previous stories, namely “Stone Boy with Dolphin,” in which the narrator is riddled with anxiety, suggesting that a major image for Plath to reflect feelings of anxiety is facelessness or featurelessness. He is also the same “awake or asleep,” which brings the description back to the narrator’s job: the patients come in (awake) to share their dreams (asleep), because they believe that their conscious lives affect their dreams, or vice versa. The narrator has taken an immense interest in Johnny Panic in order to

become a “dream connoisseur,” not for any reason that would be deemed “practical” per se, but “an unsordid collector of dreams for themselves alone” (156). She does not collect and memorize dreams because she is interested in the dreamer, she is interested in the dream in order to honor Johnny Panic, whom she refers to as “the Maker of them all” (157). Her one motivator in life is to be the ultimate collector of dreams, to live for and by Johnny Panic and his bible of dreams.

The narrator’s obsession with dreams suggests that she finds the most comfort in an unconscious state; not simply that she is happiest and most comfortable when she is unconscious, though that may be true as well, but that her waking hours are most fulfilling when she focuses on the unconscious lives of others. This theme is reminiscent of “Tongues of Stone,” in which the protagonist experiences a disconnect between the body and mind. In the case of “Johnny Panic,” as opposed to “Tongues of Stone,” the protagonist’s affinity for the unconscious is voluntary. The girl in “Tongues of Stone” is institutionalized and cannot stop crying because of her unhealthy relationship with her unconscious state, which concordantly suggests that she falls into the category of “other.” The narrator of “Johnny Panic” is the opposite, though she remains an outsider just as the girl does: she thrives not only on her own unconsciousness, but on the unconsciousness of others. She feels that there is “a certain spiritual purity” (159) to the work that her office does. In constructing two narratives with a positive and negative view on the desire to live in an unconscious or semi-conscious state, Sylvia Plath’s demonstrates her attempt to reconcile these sides through her writing. The difference in tone between these two stories, written three years apart, also shows Plath’s growth in her ability to construct a narrative about these themes. The characters in these stories have something lacking from

their waking life, and it manifests itself in their unconscious. For the protagonist of “Johnny Panic,” that unconscious is her savior *because* of that lacking: “Johnny Panic injects a poetic element in this business you don’t often find elsewhere. And for that he has my eternal gratitude” (161). The narrator’s waking life lacks a poetic element that only Johnny Panic provides, meaning that only her dreams supply her with the poetry she desires. If the mind is responsible for dreams and the body is responsible for the waking life, the narrator aligns herself with the mind and finds her body a nuisance, which is unlike any normative behavior, and therefore must be corrected.

The story ends with the narrator receiving electroshock treatment after being caught reading and memorizing dream records after hours. It seems that the story has taken a drastic turn from simply being about a woman’s obsession with dreams to being about a mentally ill woman skillfully disguising her illness until the very end. Because it is told from the narrator’s perspective, the reader does not see anything wrong with the narrator’s interest in dreams, either because it does not seem to affect her waking life or because the narrative is crafted in a way that makes the reader sympathize. The narrator’s actual job does not seem to be fulfilling, and even she admits this, explaining that all she really does is “mainly type up records” (156). This is not a job that someone would aspire to, and though it sounds like it could be a good transition job for someone wanting to enter into a career in psychoanalysis, it is not a career that one would expect a thirty-three year-old to want to hold on to. Therefore, the reader is inclined to understand the narrator’s need to build more around this dreary desk job, and it makes sense that she would find solace in dreams since she works in a Psychoanalytic Institute. She is already surrounded by dreams, and it is not clear just how long she has been working here or

even why she works here. Maybe the dreams have slowly been working their way into her brain and she cannot help but dwell on them at all hours of the day. Dreams become more than something to be experienced while sleeping; they are the reason she wakes up at all. The story ends with the narrator being punished for pursuing her interest in other people's dreams: the Clinic Director et al administer Electro Shock Treatment, the process of which is described as "the air crackl[ing] with his blue-tongued lightning-haloed angels" (172). The angels are described as "his," that is Johnny Panic, and even through the pain of being electrocuted in order to be made "well" again, the narrator's devotion to Johnny Panic does not waver: "His love is the twenty-story leap, the rope at the throat, the knife at the heart" (172). Johnny Panic's love is that inch before death, that semi-consciousness that the girl of "Tongues of Stone" fights so hard against, but that the narrator of "Johnny Panic" feels is necessary for transcendence.

This possibility of transcendence after being within an inch of death parallels Plath's own writing history. Through different moments of her life as a writer, she has experienced the hurdles that her characters have felt and attempt to work through. If "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" is Plath's discussion of one work being the saving grace and reason to continue, perhaps Plath's body of work is her Bible of Dreams, and the "twenty-story leap, the rope at the throat, the knife at the heart" are all there to help her get to what Ted Hughes referred to as her breakthrough.

Part III- Finding a Place

“Initiation”

In 1952, Sylvia Plath wrote “Initiation,” a tale about a sorority in Millicent Arnold’s high school and her desire to be a part of it. The story details the steps and procedures and careful selection process for becoming a part of this sorority, and it seems that Millicent just might become a member after all. There is a turning point toward the end, however, that makes this story something special, and which contains elements that will once again come up in *The Bell Jar*. The root of this story is about a girl and her friend, typically outsiders but one more so than the other, and their desire at the beginning to fit in. Once Millicent finds that the sorority actually wants her as a member, she realizes that she is perfectly happy being an outsider and does not need to be a part of what everyone else considers the elite.

The story opens with, “The basement room was dark and warm, like the inside of a sealed jar, Millicent thought, her eyes getting used to the strange dimness” (298). Sitting in this basement, with raw egg in her hair, is all part of the initiation ceremony for the sorority that Millicent believes she so desperately wants to be a part of. After the initial introduction to Millicent in the basement, the story jumps back to before the actual initiation, to her thoughts about the likeliness of her getting in and how her case would be different, and how she would still remain friends with Tracy, despite Tracy not getting anywhere near the sorority like Millicent has. Millicent muses that “her case would be quite different. She would see to that. She could not exactly say what had decided her revolt, but it definitely had something to do with Tracy and something to do with the heather birds” (298). The narrative leaves the reader hanging immediately, making us

wonder about Millicent's relationship with Tracy and why said relationship could be seen as a revolt, and what about these heather birds? Just as Millicent is fairly lost and confused, sitting in the dark basement with egg in her hair, the reader is also left in the dark for the majority of the story, for the sake of exposition leading up to what the narrator refers to as Millicent's revolt.

The story goes on to describe all of the humiliating things the girls in charge make Millicent, and the rest of the "gophers," the descriptor given to the girls chosen to undergo the initiation process, do in order to prove themselves worthy. Millicent constantly tells herself that this will all be worth it, and how great it will be to be a part of such an elite and close-knit group. As part of this initiation process, each girl is assigned a big sister, who has the power to tell their gopher to do any number of humiliating acts, including doing the Charleston all the way to school and asking strangers on the bus what they ate for breakfast. This latter activity turns out to have the opposite intended effect on Millicent: instead of being humiliated by the prospect of asking strange questions to strangers on a bus, she meets a man that will inspire her ultimate decision to not join the sorority. The inclinations of rebellion had already been brewing in Millicent, from the moment Bev, her big sister, began bossing her around:

There was something about her tone that annoyed Millicent. It was almost malicious. And there was an unpleasant anonymity about the label 'gopher,' even if that was what they always called the girls being initiated. It was degrading, like being given a number. It was a denial of individuality. (302)

Then, instead of immediately doing what Bev tells her to do, "Rebellion flooded through her" (302). At this point in the story, however, Millicent does not give in to these rebellious thoughts, and sticks it out to the very end of initiation week.

During her task of asking strangers on a bus what they eat for breakfast, Millicent meets a “small and jolly” man at the back of the bus, who tells Millicent that he likes to eat “Heather birds’ eyebrows on toast” for breakfast (305). Millicent is taken aback but intrigued, and the man follows up: “Heather birds live on the mythological moors and fly about all day long, singing wild and sweet in the sun. They’re bright purple and have *very* tasty eyebrows” (305). Millicent laughs out loud and hates to have to get off of the bus because she wants to ask the man more about the birds, and from that moment on, “initiations didn’t bother Millicent at all” (305). Based on the tasks Bev had assigned Millicent, and her interactions with one of the boys at their school, it is assumed that Bev had not intended for Millicent to have a positive experience with talking to strangers on the bus. Before she became her big sister, Bev and Millicent had never interacted with one another, so Millicent’s only idea of Bev is within the context of the initiation, when those already in the sorority are *supposed* to treat the gophers like dirt. Because of this, the type of person Bev might actually be is skewed by Millicent’s knowledge of her and therefore the narrative is skewed as well. However, the fact that there is an elite sorority at Lansing High with a grueling initiation week implies that there is, indeed, a certain type of malicious, elitist, young girl, such as Bev, that would have no qualms making Millicent do things that humiliate her. Without completely realizing it, even at the end of the story, Millicent has a problem with this type of girl and the innate desire that has been instilled in her to be a part of an elite group. It inspires the notion that there is a disconnect between the girl who wants to be herself no matter how “different” she is (like Millicent’s friend Tracy, who was eliminated from the selection process because she was “just a bit *too* different” (301).) and the girl who wants to be a part of something that is

seen as upper class (at least within the world of High School) and therefore be a part of something that will make her feel that she matters. Her conversation with the man on the bus is the catalyst for the realization of this disconnect, and from then on she is not self-conscious and therefore does not mind the remainder of the humiliating tasks put upon her during the initiation process, because she truly does not mind being an “other.” This is then a reminder of the beginning of the story: “She could not exactly say what had decided her revolt, but it definitely had something to do with Tracy and something to do with the heather birds.” Both of these instances are ones in which Millicent realizes that the “different” people are the ones she more aligns herself with, rather than the idea of the girls in the sorority.

Millicent’s anxieties about joining the sorority have nothing to do with actually being in the sorority with the girls that she will come to see as her sisters, but instead with the possibility of no longer being friends with Tracy. Millicent muses that “If there is such a thing as a best friend, Tracy has been just that this last year.” (301) Tracy is the one that was the sorority girls did not want to join because she is “a bit *too* different,” which not only implies that Tracy is an outsider within their high school, but also that Millicent must be “different” as well, since when discussing Tracy, Louise describes her as *too* different, suggesting that Millicent is “different” as well, but not to the extent that she cannot be invited to join the sorority. By the end of the story, while Millicent sits in the basement with egg in her hair, she realizes that Tracy is the one she has been most worried about losing in her process of joining forces with the elite. Tracy has been her best friend this last year, and if she is *too* different, then so is Millicent, and there is nothing wrong with that.

As Millicent sits in the basement waiting for the girls to call her out for the last stage in her initiation, she realizes that she knows that “she had come triumphant through the trial of fire, the searing period of the ego which could end in two kinds of victory for her. The easiest of which would be her coronation as a princess, labeling her conclusively as one of the select flock” (306-307). The other victory “would be much harder,” but Millicent knew that this was what she wants. This victory would be a personal one, and as the girls call her to come out of the cellar, a “melody soared” within her, because she is so sure of the decision she has made, and as she steps out, she “knew that her own private initiation had just begun” (307). Of Plath’s story, this is one of the most optimistic, because it is about a girl’s transition to loving herself, which means realizing that becoming a member of a group just because they are prestigious will not necessarily be beneficial to her growth, and sticking to her decision to not join because she knows that that is what is truly right for her. By going through the stages of an initiation into an elite society, Millicent ultimately ends up wanting to join a different group, one that requires no humiliation or that has no official following, but one that includes herself, her best friend, and the man on the bus with the heather birds. It is a group for outsiders, for those who love themselves the way they are, and have no desire to be associated with a certain group simply because of their higher social standing. If they are seen as less cool, then so be it. That is who they are.

“Mothers”

Written in 1962, “Mothers” is Sylvia Plath’s last completed and published story before she died in 1963. If “Johnny Panic” was the breakthrough that led her to write *The Bell Jar*, then “Mothers” is Plath further establishing her narrative voice. At this point,

Plath has grown as a woman and as a writer, now having two children and a fairly successful career. Having found and grounded her narrative voice, it has reached a level of maturity that was not necessarily present before. The story's title is "Mothers," but it is not about what it is like to be a mother and the struggles of raising young children. The main character, Esther (no relation to Esther Greenwood, since the story also shares the name "Nolan" for a completely different character than the one in *The Bell Jar*, though I would be willing to listen to an opposing argument), lives in England with her husband, their baby, and another child on the way. Ever since moving to her new home in Devon, England, within hearing-range of the church bells, Esther has felt an obligation to attend church, despite identifying as an atheist. It seems necessary in this community to keep up appearances, including those of being an upright Christian citizen who regularly attends church, and if Esther wants to be a part of this community she must also attend Church. She sends a note to the rector of the church, and after admitting to being brought up Unitarian and the rector assuring her that all Christians are welcome, Esther has to swallow "an impulse to blurt out that she was an atheist and end it there" (14). Fitting in with this new community is so important to her that she foregoes being honest about herself in order to be accepted into the church.

On the particular day in which this story takes place, Esther, as well as another woman in the community, Mrs. Nolan, head down to church with Esther's neighbor Rose. Esther inquires whether Mrs. Nolan is new in town too, since tonight's service is to welcome new mothers into the church's Mothers' Union. Mrs. Nolan informs her that she has actually lived in town for six years, and Esther worries that "if Mrs. Nolan, an Englishwoman by her looks and accent, and a pub-keeper's wife as well, felt herself a

stranger in Devon after six years, what hope had Esther, an American, of infiltrating that rooted society after all?" (12) Similar to "Initiation," the protagonist worries about fitting in with a close-knit group, not necessarily because of a genuine interest in the group itself, but so that she can feel that sense of belonging that she deems vital for her existence as a successful woman, which is also reminiscent of "Stone Boy with Dolphin." In the case of "Initiation," the image of successful womanhood means being a member of the elite sorority in her high school. For Esther in "Mothers," being a successful woman means being an active member of the community, including the church, and being a part of the esteemed Mothers' Union. By being a part of this Union, Esther will have established herself as an upstanding Wife and Mother, and will be a part of a reputable community. Further in the story, however, this desire for establishment becomes less vital to her well-being than previously thought.

When Rose, Mrs. Nolan, and Esther make it to the church, Rose leads them to a pew where she kneels. Esther and Mrs. Nolan do not join in this practice, but Esther does bow her head. However, while Esther bows her head, "her mind remained blank; she just felt hypocritical. So she opened her eyes and looked about" (13). Esther sees that Mrs. Nolan also has her eyes open, and to Esther's relief, confides that "I never come here much" (13). Esther mouths back that she does not come here much either. While this is not strictly true, this may be the moment that Esther was looking for in going to the church in the first place: a moment of feeling like she belongs somewhere. The paragraph then goes on to describe how the church bells have taunted Esther, and how they made her "feel left out, as if from some fine local feast" (13). Though she does finally end up going to church, the sense of belonging she begins to feel is not because of the church

itself like she had been expecting, but because she finds herself in the company of someone in her same situation, Mrs. Nolan, for whom there is surely a reason she has not joined this group despite having lived there for six years. After the service, when all the ladies have sat down for tea, and after Esther and Mrs. Nolan have been welcomed as new members, it is revealed why Mrs. Nolan has not attempted to join until now. The rector sits next to Mrs. Nolan and Esther cannot help but overhear (though admittedly she does not try very hard) when “[t]he rector made some odd, jocular reference to never finding Mrs. Nolan in—at which her clear, blonde’s skin turned a bright shade of pink, then said ‘I’m sorry, but the reason I’ve not called is because I thought you were a divorcee. I usually make it a point not to bother them’” (19). This comment and information appalls Esther, and the narrative describes her as being “confused and outraged...by Mrs. Nolan’s predicament” (19). This wording does at first make it appear as though Esther is outraged by the fact that Mrs. Nolan is divorced, but Esther’s next reaction to Mrs. Nolan deciding to leave suggests otherwise:

“I shouldn’t have come,” Mrs. Nolan whispered to Esther. “Divorced women aren’t supposed to come.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Esther said. “I’m going. Let’s go now.” (19)

The moment previously when Esther and Mrs. Nolan had been the only women not kneeling for prayer showed the possibility of kinship between these two outsiders, and this moment solidifies their inclination to stand together.

After this turn of events, Esther and Mrs. Nolan leave, surprisingly accompanied by Rose. No further conversation is included in the narrative, until after “Mrs. Nolan said goodbye to Rose and Esther at the Town Hall and started off down the hill to her

husband's pub" (19), and Rose and Esther continue to walk home together. Esther mentions to Rose that she did not know that they did not allow divorcees, and Rose replies that "they don't like 'em" (20). It could be Rose's use of "they" instead of "we," therefore excluding Rose from the group that does not like divorcees, or the fact that Rose got up and left with them, that made Esther, "without hesitation," take Rose's arm when she offered it to her (20). Esther had originally intended to form bonds with the other members of the church in her neighborhood, but by actually attending a church service, she realizes her real allies were those who also do not fit in with the elite. This story, written the year before Plath's death, displays a maturation in her writing while exploring a theme that has come up in her writing since she was a teenager.

In Sylvia Plath's short stories leading up to her writing of *The Bell Jar*, there are recurring themes relating to a woman's desire to transcend the gender binaries inherent in society and ingrained in her view of the world, and her position as an outsider for attempting this transcendence. In Plath's stories, these female outsiders exist in different environments, affecting how they are seen by the communities around them. There were the women who felt that, in order to embrace their femininity while simultaneously occupying the male real, they must be a part of a well-established and highly-esteemed group. In a patriarchal society (which, let's be honest, are most societies), the ultimate goal for any person, regardless of gender, is to Be A Man. This is usually only explicated demanded of males, but misogyny is so ingrained in everyone that, without having to say it, it is implied that a woman's ultimate goal should also be to Be A Man, because Men are the leaders, the elite, those treated with the utmost respect and admiration. Therefore, since Plath's female protagonists are unable to be a part of the patriarchal elite, she must

occupy a space in which she is allowed. If she belongs in a group of those who are revered and respected, she will successfully occupy two spaces at once: male-type power obtained by a female.

Another way in which the anxieties of Plath's protagonists present themselves is through institutionalization. On one hand, there is the protagonist and narrator of "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," who is institutionalized and administered electroshock therapy at the very end of the story. On the other hand, there is the protagonist of "Tongues of Stone," who does not even have a name and is simply referred to as "the girl," and receives insulin shots to combat her mental illness. It appears that these girls are being punished for their position as outsiders, since neither the narrator of "Johnny Panic" nor the protagonist of "Tongues of Stone" have names. All of these anxieties about or as a result of being an outsider are caused by identity crises. These women are not simply unsure of who they are, they are struggling to find a way to be all of the different selves they want to be.

Chapter 2: *The Bell Jar*

The Bell Jar is Plath's only novel, and at its center it is a story about rebirth, but it is more than simply an Everyman story: it is specifically about a woman's rebirth, as a result of having to come of age in the 1950s, an era in which a woman had to choose between the domestic sphere and having a career. The novel's protagonist and narrator, Esther Greenwood, is a bright young woman with a promising future. She has established herself as intelligent, receiving A's in her college courses and landing an internship in New York City on a prominent women's magazine. From the outside it appears as if she

has it all and has every reason to be the happiest girl in the world, but as is so often the case in Plath's stories, there is more to Esther than this. During her time in New York working on *Ladies Day Magazine*, she slowly begins to realize the vapidness of the life that women are expected to lead, and begins to see herself as an outsider because she is torn between the options for an intelligent woman her age, instead of willing to accept one role or the other. Just as the protagonists in the short stories Plath wrote throughout her life, Esther does not want to have to choose between one or the other, and her dilemma surfaces when she finds she wants to inhabit not only the feminine space into which she was born, but she wants to be able to inhabit the male space as well. In her article "Sylvia Plath's Specialness in Her Short Stories," Linda Wagner describes *The Bell Jar* as "a novel filled with fears of finding a suitable lover as well as a challenging career." (Wagner, 5) "Suitable lover" suggests finding a man who is "husband material," but this is an oversimplification of Esther's desire. Just like Dody in "Stone Boy with Dolphin," Esther wants sexual experience, specifically from someone she can learn from but whom she does not have to spend the rest of her life with.

During Esther's internship on the magazine in New York, the Rosenbergs were facing execution for [something], and for some reason, Esther was obsessed with their electrocution. Instead of the narrative beginning with an anecdote about Esther herself, it discusses the Rosenbergs and how Esther is "stupid about executions," then finally mentions something that happened that specifically affected Esther: the time her former boyfriend showed her a cadaver while he was at medical school, and how that cadaver was all she could think about for a long time afterwards. As a parenthetical aside, and older Esther acting as narrator of the story tells the reader:

(I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as a fish in my closet, and how 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)

Similar to "Initiation," *The Bell Jar* begins with a reflection on why the protagonist's life has turned out the way it did, and it makes the reader curious about why the narrator felt that it was stupid of her to buy clothes that summer. One would think that a young woman living in New York for the summer would be excited to buy new clothes, not to mention intern on a magazine! And that is exactly what makes this aside so powerful. Not only is it odd to have a parenthetical thought at the very beginning of a narration, but the anxiety of the subject is so fleeting that it almost fails to sink in what, exactly, Esther is telling. The next sentence after this parenthetical answers at least one question that it asks of the reader: "I was supposed to be having the time of my life" (2). In a way, the narrator is in a similar position as the reader: she knew at the time as well as looking back that she should have been happy, that so many girls dream of being in her position, but because she was not ecstatic, there must have been something wrong with her. This is where Esther's journey begins.

As previously mentioned regarding Plath's fiction, there are recurrent themes of female protagonists experiencing deep-seated anxieties regarding what it means to be a woman, and whether or not to embrace their femininity in terms of what a patriarchal society dictates, or to take the reins and decide for themselves what type of woman they want to be. For Esther, the realization of this anxiety comes to her during her summer in New York, and that is why she is unable to enjoy the fancy clothes she wears and the

expensive dinners and the string of gifts from advertisers: she is experiencing an existential crisis. She begins questioning her entire life up to this point, and wonders why she works so hard for her good grades and her good citizenship if she is going to end up depressed in New York. Esther's first attempt to combat her crisis is through Doreen, another intern on the magazine that summer. From the beginning, Doreen seems able to fill Esther's desire to be a part of an elite group. It is not enough for her to be one of only twelve girls chosen to be in New York that summer; she has to feel superior even among those who already feel superior. Doreen helps Esther in this because she makes her feel that she is "that much sharper than the others" (5), and she tells Esther all about how "fashion conscious" her school is and this completely draws Esther in: "It suggested a whole marvelous, elaborate decadence that attracted me like a magnet" (5). So far, Esther's experience in New York has failed to meet any vague expectations she had, causing her expectations to shift to this decadent world that Doreen inhabits. Unfortunately, this world and Doreen fall short of Esther's expectations, adding to the ever growing list of disappointments.

One day, Doreen and Esther, as well as the rest of the summer interns, are on their way to the theatre for a show, with Doreen and Esther occupying a cab all by themselves. Briefly, Esther worries about her dress and her body, but "being with Doreen made me forget my worries. I felt wise and cynical as all hell" (8). Her anxieties about her identity and her future are momentarily appeased during her time spent with Doreen, but this cab ride turns out to be the catalyst for the decline in their friendship, and Esther's hopes are dashed. While their cab is stuck in traffic, a man in a "blue lumber shirt and black chinos and tooled leather cowboy boots" approaches them and says "Whyn't you both join me

for a couple of drinks in that bar over there? I've some friends waiting as well" (8).

Esther does not hesitate, but, uncharacteristically, Doreen takes some convincing. They ultimately decide to join them, and while the man, Lenny Shepherd, gloms on to Doreen, Esther gets stuck with a short man named Frankie, and sits in the booth in the dark bar feeling herself "melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life" (10). Thus begins Esther's tendency to describe and see herself as unrecognizable, representing her declining desire to be the person she has always been up to this point. When the men ask the girls their names, Esther announces that she is Elly Higginbottom, assuming a false identity, after which she feels safer. The narrative tells the reader that she feels safer because she "didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name" (11), but it also suggests that, because she has become so unrecognizable to herself, an invented name feels more real to her because at least it is something that she came up with herself, as opposed to the person she has been all this time, striving for good grades, despite the inauthenticity she feels in doing so. The very end of this chapter further emphasizes her ability to pretend, as well as her existence as a long-time outsider:

I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I never forgot it.

I certainly learned a lot of things I never would have learned otherwise this way, and even when they surprised me or made me sick I never let on, but pretended that's the way I knew things were all the time.
(13)

This is incredibly telling of Esther's character, but for more reasons than one might think. It reveals the coping mechanism Esther has conceived for dealing with her isolation

among those who have a place, as well as her ability to adroitly convince others that she knows more than she lets on. Based on this, we can assume that Esther has never needed to reveal who she really is because she has always been able to assume a different identity, put on a new mask, for whoever she needed to please at any particular moment. The reader is then forced to question the authenticity of Esther's narration: if she is so skilled in concealing who she is, why should we believe anything she is telling us now? However, the fact that she reveals her ability to pretend and conceal herself is evidence enough that she is telling us the truth; Esther never would have told Doreen such an intimate detail about herself, especially as their relationship becomes more and more strained.

While still at the bar, Lenny convinces Doreen to accompany him back to his place, but she refuses unless "Elly" can come too. Back at Lenny's place, Esther and Doreen are left alone for a second, and Doreen says to Esther: "'Listen, Elly, do me a favor.' She seemed to think Elly was who I really was by now" (15). Whether or not Doreen really thinks so, this indicates Esther's feelings about the people she thought she wanted to be close with. She begins to realize that these people do not really care and this is all a big performance and everyone is just playing along. Esther does not want to play along anymore, and that is why, when Lenny gives her a drink, it is just "wet and depressing" (16), and the excitement of the evening disappears. Lenny and Doreen dance around the room, drinks in hand, while Esther sits on the sidelines and feels like "a hole in the ground" (16). The more Esther's imagined world crashes down around her, the more she feels like a negative space, a hole in the ground or the negative of a person she

does not know, instead of simply a waste of space, she feels that she is a void, that she does not really exist.

Esther manages to escape Lenny's place and his and Doreen's increasingly violent antics, and when she gets back to the Amazon hotel, her depression thickens. She sees her reflection in various mirrors, and her image becomes externally unrecognizable in addition to the strangeness she feels she has become inside. [what...?] She gets into the elevator and in the reflection of the doors she notices "a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used up I looked" (18). On the very next page, when she enters her room, there is another reflection: "The mirror over my bureau seemed slightly warped and much too silver. The face in it looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury" (19). Everything about Esther's existence becomes alien to her. First, she realized that the internship in New York was not all that she had built it up to be. Then, just as she begins feeling like she belongs in Doreen's world, that shatters as well. Both of these lead the way to an internal questioning of her identity, and it becomes so intense that it begins to seep outward onto her appearance. Every time she sees her face, at first glance she fails to recognize herself, and only after staring at it is she able to see herself. This recalls Esther's coping mechanism mentioned earlier, in which she stares at something until it makes enough sense to her that she can pretend to understand. Since we know that she is able to do this, the idea of her having to peer at herself intensely in order to see herself is plausible.

After Esther's subtle crisis about her identity, she decides to take a hot bath because "[t]here must be quite a few things a hot bath won't cure, but I don't know many

of them” (19). A hot bath is the one place Esther’s feels completely herself, and afterwards she feels reborn. This bath is before Esther fully breaks down and loses herself (whoever that may be), so there are still remnants of optimism in her narrative. At the very least, Esther knows of one method to make herself feel whole: a hot bath out of which she emerges “pure and sweet as a new born baby” (20). After emerging from a bath, Esther feels like a new person, which at this point is more than she had to begin with. Her time in New York has brought forth the realization that the person Esther has been her whole life is contingent on the expectations of others. By taking a bath and cleansing herself, she comes out clean and pure and ready to become a person that she wants to be without having to cater to the expectations of others. To further the notion that Esther is a brand new person after taking a bath, she goes to bed but is woken up by someone calling out for Elly: “I didn’t pay attention at first, because the person knocking kept saying ‘Elly, Elly, Elly, let me in,’ and I didn’t know any Elly” (20). The only reason she gets up to let them in is because someone else calls for Miss Greenwood, and then she knew that it must be Doreen. Up until this point, Doreen had been Esther’s hope at a new self, and she thought that the kind of person she was with Doreen was the kind of person she wants to be. After the eventful night with Lenny and now with Doreen sick outside her hotel room door, Esther has had enough of this version of herself, and decides to shift alliances to Betsy: “I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart” (22). However, Esther’s mental state and confusion about her identity leads one to believe that she has no idea who or what she resembles “at heart,” and the

moment she decides to align herself with Betsy shows Esther's needing to shift to different types of girls, to try them on like items of clothing to see which one fits best. So far, Esther has been happiest when she is clean and pure in her bath, and not when she is with any of the other girls in the hotel. Her "deep down" self is most evident while she is naked and free and purely herself, when she does not have to put on airs to keep up pretenses, when she can simply exist independent of others.

The next day, the interns at Ladies' Day Magazine are invited to the magazine's test kitchen and a luncheon afterwards. It is quite the prestigious affair, and Esther is most excited about the caviar, which is quite an expensive taste for a middle class girl. As it turns out, Esther's grandfather used to work at a country club, and every chance he had, he would bring home caviar: "The joke was that at my wedding my grandfather would see I had all the caviar I could eat. It was a joke because I never intended to get married, and even if I did, my grandfather couldn't have afforded enough caviar unless he robbed the country club kitchen and carried it off in a suitcase" (26-27). This anecdote tells more about Esther's insecurities than it does about her taste in fine foods. The notion that a woman her age, living in the 1950's, never intends to get married is incredibly radical and unusual, and shows Esther's lack of desire to fulfill one of the innately feminine duties established by a patriarchal society. If Esther does not get married or have kids, society tells her that she is not good for much else; this is why Esther is struggling with the question of what she wants to do after college. Her whole life she has worked to be the top student, but after college she will not have a good grade to strive for, so she feels lost. This is exacerbated by the fact that she does not want to get married, so her only option is to have a career. But, she also realizes that the type of job she should want—a

position like the one that Jay Cee holds on a prestigious women's magazine—is not the one she does want. Esther's summer in New York has not helped her decide which path is right for her; in fact, it has really only helped her decide what she does *not* want.

While at lunch, Esther muses about how easy it is to get by in a high class society if you simply pretend to know what you are doing: "I'd discovered, after a lot of extreme apprehension about what spoons to use, that if you do something incorrect at a table with a certain arrogance, as if you knew perfectly well you were doing it properly, you can get away with it and nobody will think you are bad-mannered or poorly brought up. They will think you are original and witty" (27). Esther becomes increasingly aware just how much part of elite society is pretending. She has gotten away with pretending up until this point with no problem, but now that she has come to a point in her life where she must make major decision about her future, she realizes that she is sick of pretending in order to fit with an idea that others have of her. All of Esther's realizations during her time in New York stem from feelings of difference and isolation among her peers her whole life. She worked for good grades so that she could get the best accolades and opportunities, and she thought that these opportunities would lead to happiness and inclusion. When she gets her big chance, on a magazine in New York City, she finds that it is not the key to happiness for which she had hoped. Since the magazine in itself turns out to be a disappointment, Esther seeks other young women within the group of interns with whom she can become allies, and finally find inclusion. This, again, fails her, and by the end of her time on the magazine, she is left in a worse state than she began. Not only does she no longer have any desire to continue pretending, she also wants to destroy the person

that she used to be, the kind of person that would go along with what everyone expected of her.

Early that day, Esther had a meeting with Jay Cee that started out as usual but soon turned into a revelatory conversation that would change Esther's life. The language Esther uses in her summary of their conversation indicates its importance, and reveals major themes that Plath explores in her fiction. Esther explains that: "I had been unmasked only that morning by Jay Cee herself and I felt now that all the uncomfortable suspicions I had about myself were coming true, and I couldn't hide the truth much longer. After nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort or another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race" (29). The cause of Esther's unmasking is not the fact that she is "letting up, slowing down," but is because she is finally forced to confront how she has been feeling her whole life without realizing it. Jay Cee asks Esther if her work interests her, and she replies, a bit too enthusiastically, that it does. As she tells Jay Cee that she is interested, she finds that she is unable to convince herself of this any longer, and when Jay Cee asks her what she plans to do after she graduates, she hears herself say "I don't really know" (32). Then, "I felt a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true" (32). It did not happen that Esther realized she felt this way, *then* revealed (or "unmasked") herself to Jay Cee, but rather it was a passive exclamation, and only after Esther says it does she realize that it is true, suggesting that this information has been fighting its way out of Esther, and it needed dire prompting from someone important like Jay Cee. Slowly but surely, through her interactions with important characters in Esther's life, she begins to uncover the truth about herself, and she slips into situations similar to

those of Plath's protagonists in her short stories, but Esther manages to come out the other side a complete person.

Esther's one major boyfriend, Buddy Willard, was a condescending med student, and described by Esther as a hypocrite. Buddy had led Esther to believe that he was as pure and virginal and she is, but one day, Esther asks Buddy if he has ever had an affair, and Esther expects him to say "No, I have been saving myself for when I get married to somebody pure and a virgin like you" (69), but instead he responds "Well, yes, I have" (70). This prompts her to rethink their entire relationship and the way she conducts herself not only with him, but with all men. For the majority of their relationship, Esther's stock response for anything Buddy asked her was "I guess so." Looking back on all of their conversations, Esther, in her new state as a whole self, wishes that she had said more than tacitly agreeing with everything Buddy said. Previously, Esther had "spent a lot of time having imaginary conversations with Buddy Willard. He was a couple of years older than I was and very scientific, so he could always prove things. When I was with him I had to work to keep my head above water" (56). These imaginary conversations usually start out as conversations they actually had, but in her head she speaks up where she failed to before. For example:

"Do you know what a poem is, Esther?"

"No, what?" I would say.

"A piece of dust."

Then just as he was smiling and starting to look proud, I would say, "So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you're curing. They're dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together." (56)

Though she has not yet managed to speak up to a man, or anyone, in her real life, Esther at least now knows that she would have something to say if a situation was to arise where she happens to disagree with someone who she feels is older and wiser than she.

Aside from learning what kind of man Buddy Willard is, and subsequently the type of man she does *not* want to have to spend the rest of her life with, Esther also discovers a desire for sexual experience that is not typically afforded to women like her. That is, pretty, intelligent, women who have a promising future and must remain pure for a future husband and a stable, comfortable life taking care of her husband and kids. From the moment Buddy shocks Esther with the admission that he has had an affair, Esther feels that the constraints forced on women in terms of sexual experience are unfair, and her instinct upon hearing something like this is to go out and “[sleep] with somebody myself just to even things up” (71). In fact, Esther is not upset about Buddy having an affair; she is most upset that he lied about it, that 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). Esther is enraged because he has lied about his sexual experience and is able to get away with it, but if Esther had done the same thing, Buddy would have dumped her at that moment and deemed her a slut. To deepen her disdain about the chasm between men’s and women’s sexuality, Esther remembers an article that her mother sent her called “In Defense of Chastity” : “The main point of the article was 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 reader must now recall Esther’s declaration that she never intends to get married and her desire to simultaneously occupy female and male spaces. She does

not want to depend on marriage to bring the two spaces together; she wants to be able to do so free of the pressures of marriage. Her biggest dilemma is finding a way to accomplish having the power and prestige she would have as a man, while still remaining a woman. When it comes down to it, Esther is a woman, and she embraces who she is in all her femininity, and expresses disdain with the article because it “didn’t seem to me to consider...how the girl felt” (81). As far as Esther can tell, all sexual experience caters to men: women must remain pure for their husbands, but husbands can have as many affairs as they want before they get married. The fact that this article fails to consider how the girl feels about sex reinforces this idea and Esther becomes more and more concerned that her only function as a grown woman will be to fulfill her husband’s sexual needs. What Esther realizes is that she has sexual needs of her own, and if she never intends to get married, then she has no one to remain pure for, so she begins to seek sexual experience with a man she will never have to see again. Unfortunately, she does not find anyone to fit her needs while she is in New York, and does not find someone until near the end of the novel, when Esther is close to being a whole new person.

Buddy unfortunately contracts tuberculosis and is confined to a sanatorium in the mountains, and when Esther visits one weekend, Buddy asks her to marry him. Based on everything Esther has told us up to this point, it comes as no surprise that Esther turns down Buddy’s proposal. All of these anecdotes regarding Esther’s relationship with Buddy are interspersed within her New York City timeline, indicating the importance of the realizations she comes to during this life-changing summer, and how these anxieties have been building up for her for quite some time. One of the most important realizations Esther had after Buddy’s proposal perfectly parallels what she wrestles with during her

internship. Esther confesses to Buddy that she is never going to get married, and after Buddy insists that she will change her mind, Esther, for once, does not respond with a passive “I guess so,” but actually stands up for herself: Buddy had once asked Esther if she would rather live in the country or the city, and after she replied that she wanted to live in the country and the city both, Buddy told her that she had the perfect setup of a true neurotic. Esther now admits that he was right, that she is neurotic, and Buddy, no longer the dominant one in their relationship, concedes that she could live between them.

Esther replies:

“Well, what’s so neurotic about that?”

Buddy didn’t answer.

“Well?” I rapped out, thinking, You can’t coddle these sick people, it’s the worst thing for them, it’ll spoil them to bits.

“Nothing,” Buddy said in a pale, still voice.

“Neurotic, ha!” I let out a scornful laugh. “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days” (94).

This is the most explicit discussion of Esther’s dilemma within the text: all of Esther’s anxieties come not only because of her inability to choose, but because she wants to choose two mutually exclusive things at the same time. Earlier in the text, Esther mentions a story she likes about a fig tree. This becomes an important image for her in terms of putting her dilemma into words, and she says that, “I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet” (77). Esther wants to have

a successful career, she wants to be a respected poet, she wants to have a string of lovers, and even if she does not want a husband and children, that path is still another fig on the tree. She will be sitting in the crotch of the fig tree, and flying between mutually exclusive things, for the rest of her life, unless she finds a way to reconcile them, and try on all of the different lives she wants, and become a whole woman.

By the end of Esther's summer in New York, she has been disappointed in nearly every way possible. She did not find a place to belong like she had hoped she would, she did not find any suitable men who would provide sexual experience, and she did not become the best version of herself as she hoped. After nineteen years working to fulfill the high expectations of others, and telling herself that those expectations were her own, she hoped that it would culminate in the discovery of herself, and that this discovery would involve a career, sexual experience, and a place where she feels she belongs. Instead, Esther only finds the core of her anxieties, and those anxieties cannot be contained any longer and she begins to breakdown. On the last night in the Amazon hotel, Esther gathers up the clothes she brought with her, goes up to the roof, and throws them all into the night breeze. All she is left with is the skirt and blouse a fellow intern lent her, an outfit that she will continue to wear day in and day out for the rest of the summer. Esther has no core self from which to draw, so she constantly tries on the lives of others, and she has gotten to the point where she does not even bother to wear her own clothes, because she does not feel that she is a real person who deserves her own nice clothes (remember in the beginning of the novel, Esther's anxiety about the frivolous clothes she bought for this trip). She is lost, without a place, without a plan, and with nowhere to go from here.

Esther's trip back home is off to a bad start: she has none of her clothes, blood stains on her cheek from a fight with a woman-hater on a failed date, and an unrecognizable reflection. She describes her appearance as looking like a "sick Indian" (112), and in the window of the train she sees, "A wan reflection of myself, white wings, brown ponytail and all, ghosted over the landscape" (112). Rather than coming into herself as a young woman during her summer in New York City, she has turned into a reflection she does not even recognize, who ghosts over the landscape. Because Esther came to the realization that she has no core self to draw on, she sees herself as a ghost of a person, one who looks alive but inside has no motivation and no future. More accurately, a ghost with almost no motivation, because the one thing that Esther had to look forward to and the one thing that had kept her going was the prospect of being accepted into a summer writing course taught by a "famous writer" and in order to be accepted "you sent in the manuscript of a story and he read it and said whether you were good enough to be admitted into his class" (103). Since Esther has always been a perfect straight-A student, she had no doubt that an acceptance letter was waiting for her at home. But because this is the summer in which nothing goes as planned for Esther, when her mother picks her up from the train station, she breaks the news to Esther that she did not make the writing course. She, expectedly, is devastated: "All through June the writing course had stretched before me like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer. Now I saw it totter and dissolve, and a body in a white blouse and green skirt plummet into the gap" (114). Everything that Esther had to look forward to and the one thing that kept her going is gone, and she is going to be stuck at home for the summer. At first she decides that she can spend her summer focusing on her senior honors thesis and a novel,

but as time goes on, Esther loses her ability to read, and write, and sleep, and everything gets worse and worse.

He first morning back at home, Esther is woken up by the sound of a squeaky stroller, pushed by the ideal image of domesticity that is Dodo Conway. As Esther peers through her bedroom window at Dodo, she says that “Dodo interested me despite of myself” (116). For the same reason that one of the figs on the tree is a family and kids, Esther cannot help but see the type of life that Dodo has as a viable option. However, on the next page, Esther then says that “Children make me sick” (117). Esther continues to struggle with the type of future she wants or can see herself having, and after crawling back into her bed and pulling the covers over her head, Esther thinks to herself: “I had nothing to look forward to” (117). After what was supposed to be an intellectually stimulating month in New York, Esther has returned home without having grown at all, and now that she has been rejected from the summer writing course she had her hopes on, she plunges full-on into an unexpected stasis. Unfortunately, Esther cannot completely submerge herself into isolated quietude just yet, since her friends and community still expect her to be the eager and social young woman she has been all these years, and as soon as she comes home, the phone rings off the hook. First, her friend Jody calls, with whom she was expecting to live while she attends her writing course, but she has to tell her that she is no longer coming. As she is on the phone with Jody, Esther’s voice becomes “strange and hollow,” and when Jody tells Esther that she should come live with them anyway, “the hollow voice said, ‘You better count me out’” (118). Not even Esther’s voice, in addition to her reflection, is her own anymore; the unfamiliar “zombie voice” also leaves a message at the Harvard Admissions Office that “Miss Esther

Greenwood was canceling all arrangements to come to summer school” (119). After this, there is just one more person to reply to: Buddy Willard. He wrote that he thought he was falling in love with a nurse in the hospital he is staying in, but Esther could come up and stay in his cottage with him in July if she wanted to. The reader very well knows that this is the last thing Esther would want to do that summer, and it comes as no surprise that she replies that she is “engaged to a simultaneous interpreter and never wanted to see Buddy again as I did not want to give my children a hypocrite for a father” (119). On the one hand, Esther displays the passivity she is used to in cutting off ties to any possible summer plans, because for the most part it is the hollow zombie voice that answers the phone and leaves messages. On the other hand, Esther has become aware of the parts of her life she no longer wants anything to do with and takes initiative to cut herself off from people who do not fulfill her.

However, because she is Esther, she cannot simply tell people that she wants to stay home by herself because she cannot stand the pretense of everyone around her. She comes up with an excuse to stay home: she is going to spend the summer writing a novel, and that “would fix a lot of people” (119). When she found out Buddy had TB, she mentioned “how convenient it would be now I didn’t have to announce to everybody at college I had broken off with Buddy and start the boring business of blind dates all over again” (73). Buddy with TB was her excuse for staying in on Saturday nights, and now Esther’s novel is her excuse for secluding herself and staying home for the summer. Then her mother also suggested she learn shorthand over the summer, and at first Esther thought that was a viable skill to have, at the very least to appease the Scholarships Office of her school, but this prompted her to think of all the other things she could be

doing, such as putting off college for a year to be an apprentice to a pottery maker, or move to Germany to become a waitress. Suddenly, the figs on the fig tree resurface, and Esther has too many choices and is stuck making none instead of one, and when she tries to picture a future for herself and the path she surely has chosen, her mind is blank: “I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three...nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn’t see a single pole beyond the nineteenth” (123). This is the first time Esther reveals to the reader her tendencies when thinking about her future, and by this point we well know her anxieties and have seen a few ways these anxieties manifest themselves, but this is the first time we see these tendencies in action. Esther sets her sights on one plan, write a novel, but her decision prompts her to think she is able to make more decisions, so suddenly she tries to make more than one plan for herself, and in doing this she puts herself right back where she started, with too many options and no decisions made.

Soon enough, even though Esther tries to make herself work on her novel and her thesis on Joyce, she cannot sleep and she cannot read and she cannot write, so she asks her doctor for more sleeping pills, but instead of writing her the prescription, she recommends Doctor Gordon, a psychiatrist. Before Esther met Doctor Gordon, she had hoped that he would be a kind old man to whom she would finally be able to explain how she is “so scared, as if I were being stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out” (128-129); in other words she feels herself becoming less and less necessary as a human being and is aware of this and desperately wants someone to be able to help her. Unfortunately, Doctor Gordon does not provide the needed comfort and

support, and instead becomes the catalyst for what causes Esther to attempt suicide. Doctor Gordon recommends to Esther's mother that they head to Doctor Gordon's private hospital to receive shock treatments. At this hospital, when Esther looks around at the patients who inhabit this place at all times, she describes them as figures who are not "people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life" (141-142). When Esther first sees her fellow patients, she reverts into her elitism and views herself as so much better than everyone else, but what she fails to realize is how close her description of the patients resembles her own situation. The only difference is that Esther is a shop dummy propped up in public, in New York City, on the train back home for the summer: she is in the same situation as the rest of the people in this private hospital, but her whole life she has viewed herself as better than people like this, and she falls into this same pattern and is unable to see herself as being in the same situation.

Doctor Gordon leads her into a room, Esther lays down on the bed, Doctor Gordon fits two metal plates on either side of her head, and after the nurse reassures her that everyone is scared to death their first time, Esther gets her first dose of electroshock therapy:

Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant.

I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done. (143)

Of course, the reader knows that Esther has not done anything, but she feels that she is being punished for something that she cannot help. She cannot read, she cannot write, she

cannot sleep, and now she feels that she is being “punished” for it, when what she needs is help, she needs answers, she needs someone like the man she hoped Doctor Gordon was going to be, someone who would listen to her and sit back “saying ‘Ah!’ in an encouraging way, as if he could see something I couldn’t...” (128). The people around Esther constantly disappoint her; before she meets anyone, she has expectations for them, that they will somehow be the one that will be able to fix her, or help her realize that she does not need to be fixed. What she really needs is someone who will help her realize that she can be fixed, but only she can fix herself. Though Doctor Gordon’s shock treatments do more harm than good, they are ultimately a vehicle for Esther to find a way to put herself back together. Unfortunately, she must plunge further into depression before finding a way out.

After the terrifying experience at Doctor Gordon’s, Dodo Conway picks up Esther and her mother to drive them home, and Esther announces that “I’m through with that Doctor Gordon” (145). Esther’s mother is relieved, because she “knew her baby wasn’t like that” (145) and that she “knew you’d decide to be all right again” (146), as if Esther had been going through all of this torture for the fun of it. This car ride consists of the two women Esther wishes to resemble the least: Dodo has a pack of kids and a boring life, and her mother spends her time teaching shorthand. These are the most prominent female models Esther has, but the prospect of turning out like them horrifies her, and a summer stuck in the suburbs around women who subscribe exclusively to this lifestyle brings to the forefront Esther’s anxieties about her future, and she must find a way to come up with a future she can see herself living, or stop the path she fears in its tracks.

After Doctor Gordon's, after Esther's mother believes she has decided to get better, Esther has to hide her downward spiral even further.

One day, Esther sits on a park bench, comparing a picture of herself to a picture of a dead girl's picture in the newspaper. Before pulling out the newspaper clipping, she feels around in her pocket and describes everything in there, including a "blue jiffy box containing nineteen Gillette blades" (146), which seems strange but inconsequential, until Esther thinks to herself: "I will just sit her in the sun on this park bench five minutes more by the clock on that building over there...and then I will go somewhere and do it" (146). By "it" the reader can deduce that Esther means kill herself, and now the box of razor blades in her pocket makes sense. For the next few pages, Esther discusses her requisite methods for suicide, and reviews her motivations:

I summoned my little chorus of voices.

Doesn't your work interest you, Esther?

You know, Esther, you've got the perfect setup of a true neurotic.

You'll never get anywhere like that, you'll never get anywhere like that, you'll never get anywhere like that. (146)

These voices speak primarily to her existential anxieties, but does not cover the gender anxieties that contribute to her descent into madness; the next sentence covers that:

"Once on a hot summer night, I had spent an hour kissing a hair, ape-shaped law student from Yale because I felt sorry for him, he was so ugly. When I had finished, he said, 'I have you typed, baby. You'll be a prude at forty'" (146). Memories of the hurtful things said to Esther about flaws in her character come back to her, and the narrative parallels the anxious spiral she cannot shake:

“Factitious! My creative writing professor said at college scrawled on a story of mine called “The Big Weekend.”

I hadn’t known what factitious meant, so I looked it up in the dictionary.

Factitious, artificial, sham.

You’ll never get anywhere like that.

I hadn’t slept for twenty-one nights. (146-147)

At this point, the reader knows as well as Esther the disconnect between who Esther wants to be and who everyone else wants her to be, and who everyone else thinks she wants to be. Even when she verges on following through with ending her life, she thinks that if she looks in the mirror while she does it, she will be separated from herself enough to do it, but “the person in the mirror was paralyzed and too stupid to do a thing” (148). Esther cannot separate herself enough to end her life because she wants to hold on to an image in the mirror, onto an image of herself that she can see, and if she can see herself and relate to herself, maybe she can recognize a jumping off point, a core self to draw from in order to create a cohesive self that she can see herself as outside of the mirror.

In the midst of her burgeoning interest in ways to commit suicide, she tries to get out in public and act like a fully-functioning human being, so she spends a day at the beach with her friend Jody and her boyfriend, and a boy they brought along for Esther to interact with. This boy, Cal, is nice enough, but Esther is so far gone from the person she used to be that she is not even sure if she likes him or not. Because death and suicide are prevalent in Esther’s mind, all she can think about is what it would be like to drown. But because she has only been able to stand on the brink of death, unable to cross the threshold, when she challenges Cal to a race to a rock far out into the water, she uses it as a moment to test out her theory that drowning must be the best way to die. Thinking back

to Esther in the bath at the Amazon hotel, the reader must remember her intimate relationship to water and the comfort it provides for her. Her moment in the water at the beach becomes another attempt to become clean and pure like a newborn baby, but Esther is so fragmented that she cannot come out of the water as the new person she wants to be. As she swims in the water, her “heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears” (158); her heart does not beat strongly and loudly in her chest, instead it is dull and verging on lifeless, but with just enough life to keep her going, to make her think, “I am I am I am” (158). The lack of commas invokes a sense that she does not feel that her heartbeat warrants continuation, and the beginning of the next paragraph begins, “That morning I had tried to hang myself” (158). By this point, the reader has made it abundantly clear that she no longer wishes to inhabit the Earth.

Finally, after weeks of pondering how to end her life, Esther comes up with the perfect way. She writes a note to her mother that she is going for a long walk, she breaks into her mother’s closet where Esther’s sleeping pills are hidden, steals them, crawls into the crawl space, where she takes the fifty pills in the bottle, and waits to die. As opposed to previous attempts, in which Esther tries to end her life above ground, the first serious attempt takes place underground. Also unlike the other attempts, Esther actually gets close to death, and feels herself drift off to sleep in her underground tomb: “The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep” (169). Because she physically buries herself for this attempt, she goes through a burial and her story becomes one of rebirth. Her burial ends the chapter, and the following chapter begins with “It was completely dark” (170). The reader is right there with Esther as she

slowly comes out of her death-like slumber, and aside from moaning, the first thing she hears herself say as she wakes up is “Mother!” (171), as if the image of rebirth needed to be made any more explicit. Once she is found, Esther’s life takes a turn. Her biggest fear, institutionalization, has come true, and she finds herself in a hospital. One of the first things she does when she is able to see out of both eyes again is ask to see a mirror. The nurse denies her access to one, and when Esther repeatedly asks why, the nurse says “Because you don’t look very pretty” (174), as if that is Esther’s biggest concern right now. Esther wants to see a mirror to see if she is still unrecognizable to herself, or if she has been successful in transforming herself into the person she wants to be. The nurse hands her a mirror, and at first Esther does not see what the trouble is because it was not a mirror but a picture: “You couldn’t tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head” (174). When Esther realizes that it is not a picture at all but a mirror, she drops the mirror and smashes it on the ground in shock. Externally, Esther has achieved something she has wrestled with for so long: gender ambiguity. She knows that she is still a woman, but anyone glancing at her would not be able to tell right away. This is the first indication that Esther rebirth is successful: before she can become a woman with the ability to transcend the constraints of her gender and inhabit the male space, she must start from square one, and appear to be without either gender.

Esther gets transferred from ward to ward, and before Philomena Guinea comes through for her again and makes it possible for her to get the best care at a private hospital, she is stuck sharing a room with other patients. Just as she did in her public and “healthy” life, she is fed up with people asking her if she is fine and expecting her to

blindly say that she is. She is sick of pretending, and this manifests into borderline childish behavior. A nurse sets a tray of thermometers on the edge of her bed, and “A heavy naughtiness pricked through my veins, irritating and attractive as the hurt of a loose tooth. I yawned and stirred, as if about to turn over, and edged my foot under the box” (182). The thermometers break and balls of mercury scatter the floor, one of which Esther scoops up before anyone can notice. She keeps the ball in her hand, and looks at it and thinks “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). She cannot help but smile at this little ball of mercury because it reminds her of herself and it gives her hope: she has broken herself into a million pieces, and now that she is recovering, she can work on fusing herself into one whole again. Fortunately for Esther, this fusion is expedited and made more possible by Philomena Guinea and her generous offer to fund the rest of her recovery and place her in a well-respected private hospital. Esther tries to be grateful, but since she is still in her in-between space and without a core identity she recognizes, she cannot feel a thing: “If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn’t have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air” (185). She has not yet recovered enough to reach the point where she does not feel stagnant in her life; she still sits in the crotch of the fig tree unable to make an irrevocable decision, and because of this she is stuck under the bell jar, and cannot let go enough to escape. The bell jar is the metaphorical representation of Esther’s anxieties: she can exist and survive with them, but she slowly suffocates in its stuffy, stagnant air. It is her

inability to be afforded the freedom of a man, to have a career and a family; it is her confusion that stems from this anxiety, her lack of interest in continuing to live because it would be the same stale life forever. Because she has been trapped beneath the bell jar her whole life, she has to do something drastic to free herself from it, and the first major step to setting herself free was submerging herself underground. Now she can begin to break free.

Though Esther is not yet freed from the bell jar, her transference to a new hospital begins the process of finding her freedom. As soon as she gets there and they take her to a room of her own, the psychiatrist appointed to her comes to introduce herself. Esther is shocked to find that Doctor Nolan is a woman: “I didn’t think they had woman psychiatrists” (186). At last, Esther meets someone who fails to meet her expectations, but rather than this being a disappointment as it usually is, Doctor Nolan exceeds her expectations in a way Esther never thought possible. Esther describes Doctor Nolan as “a cross between Myrna Loy and my mother. She wore a white blouse and a full skirt gathered at the waist by a wide leather belt, and stylish, crescent-shaped spectacles” (186). None of the women Esther meets before now has been both described as “stylish” and has what Esther sees as a respectable career. This is the first notion Esther gets that it is possible to remain feminine and stylish and have a job that typically is only afforded to men, for once proving that it is possible to enter a man’s world. Doctor Nolan becomes the person Esther needs to help her fix herself, to discover the possibility of putting herself back together. The relationship between Esther and Doctor Nolan only strengthens as time goes on. During their first one on-one-meeting, Esther tells Doctor Nolan that she did not like Doctor Gordon and the shock treatments he administered.

Doctor Nolan tells her that they were not supposed to be like that, and after Esther tells her that if anyone tries to do that to her again she will kill herself, Doctor Nolan assures her that “You won’t have any shock treatments here. Or if you do...I’ll tell you about it beforehand, and I promise you it won’t be anything like what you had before” (189).

Doctor Nolan builds trust with Esther, she listens to her concerns and fears, and is overall radically different from Doctor Gordon. If Esther had to face another person who reinforces her deepest anxieties, the possibility of recovery would be non-existent, and *The Bell Jar* would have a similar ending to Plath’s short stories, which is an ending that lacks resolve and closure for their respective protagonists.

Expectedly, Esther has a few visitors while in the hospital, but these visits do the opposite of cheer her up: “I hated these visits, because 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 went away utterly confounded” (202). Her visitors do what everyone in Esther’s life has always done: judge her against their own standards. Esther has attempted to live up to these standards her whole life, but she is no longer the type of person to do something just because someone expects her to, and subverts expectations by being herself, without hiding behind pretense and someone else’s standards. Solidifying Esther’s trust of Doctor Nolan, when Esther complains about these visits, specifically her mother, Doctor Nolan simply nods:

She seemed to know what I meant
“I hate her,” I said, and waited for the blow to fall.
But Doctor Nolan only smiled at me as if something had pleased her very,
very much, and said, “I suppose you do.” (203)

Doctor Nolan does not try to defend her mother or any of the other visitors, nor does she tell Esther that she should be grateful for any visitors at all. She just listens, and lets Esther be herself.

Unfortunately, despite Esther trusting Doctor Nolan more than she has trusted anyone for a long time, she faces her worst nightmare, shock treatments, once again. Without warning, the morning nurse fails to bring in her breakfast tray, a foreboding sign of impending shock treatments. She thinks there must be some mistake, but the maid confirms her fears, so Esther curls up in a corner with a blanket over her head: “It wasn’t the shock treatment that struck me, so much as the bare-faced treachery of Doctor Nolan. I liked Doctor Nolan, I loved her, I had given her my trust on a platter and told her everything” (211). This is the first time that Esther actually expresses love for another human being in her life, and this emphasizes the pain at her discovery that she will have to endure more shock treatments. However, just as with everything else about Doctor Nolan, Esther’s expectations are subverted: she goes through the treatments with Doctor Nolan by her side, and afterwards she experiences a breakthrough: “All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air” (215). Unlike the protagonists of Plath’s other stories, Esther now has a positive and hopeful experience with shock treatments. If her previous stories are an apprenticeship to this larger work, *The Bell Jar* succeeds where the others did not, proving that she has found a way to write through the anxieties she wrestled with, and created a protagonist who transcends these anxieties and comes out the other side a successful human being. But, Esther still has a ways to go until her hopeful ending.

The next important person Esther meets in her recovery is Joan Gilling, a former girlfriend of none other than Buddy Willard. Esther's relationship with Joan is much more complicated than her relationship with Doctor Nolan. First of all, Joan is a patient in the hospital because she read the story of Esther's disappearance and re-discovery in the newspaper, and was inspired to go to New York to kill herself. Before this meeting, Esther had had ambivalent bordering on negative feelings about Joan, because of her relationship with Buddy and because she consistently smelled like horses. But now that she and Joan seem to be in the same mental state, Esther feels that she could change her mind. Esther asks Joan what she did to try to kill herself, and Joan shows her the still recovering wounds on both of her wrists, and after Esther asks how she did it, she thinks to herself, "For the first time it occurred to me Joan and I might have something in common" (199). Then later she thinks that because Joan has more freedom and privileges than she does at the hospital, she is "the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me" (205). Just as Esther's opinion of Doreen changed rapidly depending on the day and her mood, this feeling of commonality changes once Esther discovers that Joan may be a lesbian: she enters the room of a fellow patient, DeeDee, to ask for sheet music, but when she enters, she hears giggling, and after DeeDee speaks, another voice says "Hello, Esther" (219), and she is mortified to discover that this voice belongs to Joan. Before this revelation, and without any warning to the reader, Esther wants nothing to do with Joan, and wants her to leave her alone: "I wanted to tell her to get the hell out, she gave me the creeps, only I couldn't do it" (216-217). She cannot tell her to get out because she still feels a sort of kinship with Joan, and without Esther realizing it, Joan brings up new aspects of her gender anxieties she did not realize

she had: “Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own” (219). Joan is a foil for Esther: at a basic level they are nearly identical, but Joan fails, Esther succeeds. Toward the end of Esther’s story, after Joan fluctuates between more and fewer privileges in the hospital, and even an impending release, Joan goes missing and is later discovered to have hanged herself. Esther’s obvious homophobia directed toward Joan is not simply because Joan is a lesbian, but because Joan goes against the gendered norms that Esther is subjected to and struggles so hard to go against herself. Unfortunately for Joan, her form of subversion is not yet possible in the era in which she lives, so her path goes in a direction that Esther’s does not, and she is unable to come out the other side of her narrative a successful, and living, human being.

The final important figure Esther meets on her journey to herself is a math professor named Irwin. As previously explored, part of Esther’s attempt to become a woman who can inhabit the male space includes gaining sexual experience with a man she does not have to marry. After Esther’s discovery of Joan’s controversial lifestyle, she discusses it with Doctor Nolan, and her gender anxieties are brought forth once again. She thinks back to a woman poet at her college who lived with another woman: “And when I told the poet I might well get married and have a pack of children someday, she stared at me in horror, ‘But what about your *career*?’ she had cried” (220). There is nothing more confusing than being told that a career is the most important goal after growing up being told that being a wife and mother is the sign of a successful life. This moment perfectly exemplifies the conflicting expectations Esther has to live up to, and it is no wonder she feels herself trapped in the crotch of the fig tree, forced to pick one fig

and watch all the others shrivel and drop away. Esther is unfortunate to live in the time she does, because it is still taboo to be a woman and to want to have it all. Lucky for Esther, she has a positive female role model who affords her possibilities of the transcendence into the male space she desires. She tells Doctor Nolan that she hates “the thought of being under a man’s thumb,” and that “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). She also expresses her anxieties about the negative connotations of a woman with sexual experience, and recalls the article about the “Defense of Chastity,” to which Doctor Nolan laughs and says “Propaganda!” She sends Esther to a doctor to whom she can go to get fitted for birth control, and as she climbs onto the examination table, she thinks to herself “I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex” (223). She successfully finds a way to un-demonize sex, and feels that she is becoming her “own woman” (223). Finally, Esther is coming into herself and fighting her anxieties.

Then, she meets Irwin. Irwin is her final gateway into becoming the woman she wants to be free of the anxieties imposed on her by the patriarchal society she lives in. Because she is doing so well in her treatments, Esther has been afforded privileges to leave the hospital for periods of time and go out into town. It is during one of these excursions that she meets Irwin on the steps of a library, and after accompanying him to his study, she “decided to seduce him” (226). This marks an incredible growth in Esther’s character; earlier, back in New York, when she met Constantin the Simultaneous Interpreter, she had said that she had decided to let him seduce her, taking the passive approach, indicating that she is still in a world where she is under a man’s thumb. Now,

she takes the initiative to seduce him herself, indicating that she has found a way to ignore expectations set forth by males and has learned to decide her own fate. She successfully seduces Irwin and finally loses her virginity. Unfortunately, because Esther's life is never easy, she hemorrhages and has to go to the Emergency Room. She survives, thanks to Joan calling a cab, and she is now a sexually experienced woman who has no desire or obligation to marry the man who provided said experience. She is free.

This brings us to the last chapter of the novel, after Esther has left Irwin for the hospital and after Joan's death. At this point, Esther is on the verge of an interview with the board of directors of the hospital to determine if she is fit for release. Her mother assures her that everything will be back to normal when she comes home, and that they will act as if everything that happened was a bad dream. Esther thinks to herself that "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream" (237). Esther now has some breathing room under her bell jar, and while it has not been removed completely, there is every indication that she will be completely free someday. There is proof that Esther has grown from that person trapped in the bell jar because she recalls all that she has been through, not as a bad dream, but as all of the things that make her who she is now: "But they were part of me. They were my landscape" (237). Esther does not want to forget everything that has happened, because she realizes that it was all necessary to get her where she is now, in a place where she can look at her future and see past the nineteenth telephone pole, where she does not have to watch every fig shrivel and drop to the ground. She feels free enough to be able to make a future for herself. Unfortunately, before Esther is freed from the hospital, Buddy Willard

comes to see her, and he is so toxic to her mental health that he may as well be the bell jar himself:

How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?

And hadn't Buddy said, is if to revenge himself for my digging out the car and his having to stand by, "I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther." (241)

Buddy is the ideal image of the patriarchy because, even when he visits Esther while *she* is in the hospital, he forces his anxieties on her, and brings up marriage once again, and brings back all of the horrible, stifling anxieties Esther is still working through.

Unfortunately for Buddy, Esther is a new woman with the ability to have thoughts of her own, and she does not let his anxieties disturb her convalescence.

After Buddy leaves Esther for good, she calls Irwin to have him pay her hospital bill, and when he asks when he is going to see her again, Esther says "Never" and "hung up with a resolute click" (242). After this she feels that she is "perfectly free" (242). After this she attends Joan's funeral, and after she is buried, Esther stands there reminded that she is very much alive:

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.
I am, I am, I am. (243)

Unlike the previous utterance of "I am," this time there are commas separating each one, indicating that Esther now feels that her life warrants continuation, and she wants to continue to be. Then, when she faces the interview that determines whether she will be release from the hospital, she sits outside the room and thinks "There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (244)

Esther has been reborn, and unlike any other protagonists of Plath's fiction, she stands on the threshold of a new life, a life that she defines for herself, without letting societal pressures and her own gendered and existential anxieties affect her. Plath's short story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" ends with "He forgets not his own" (citation), indicating that the narrators anxieties will be back for her again. Esther succeeds where the "Johnny Panic" narrator fails because she realizes that the bell jar may descend again, but now she has Doctor Nolan on her side and has cultivated methods for coping and breaking through the anxieties that have the power to suffocate her. As she crosses the threshold, literally the door to her interview, there is hope that she will be okay from here on out, and that she will continue to overcome the challenges faced to her as a woman who desires to inhabit a male space.

Conclusion

As shown in the last sixty or so pages, Sylvia Plath was able to write extensively about complex anxieties inherent in an intelligent, middle-class, well brought up female coming of age in the 1950s. She was able to write so well about these anxieties because she herself experienced them her entire life, and she writes at length about her gender anxieties in her journals:

I am jealous of men—a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine, any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life—his career, and his sexual and family life. I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter, it is there, insidious, malignant, latent. (Journals, 98)

She cannot break free of her envy, and to solve this dilemma of jealousy and the desire to live as the man has the freedom to do, Plath writes extensively about women who share her anxieties, and her short stories are her way of working through these anxieties. Her protagonists portray three different methods of coping, or not coping, with an existential crisis stemming from a desire to transcend gender.

Plath's own anxieties translate into different types of women in her stories: there are the women in "Among the Bumblebees" and "Stone Boy with Dolphin" who suddenly realize that they are on the brink or in the midst of said crises, and they begin their journey to finding answers or solutions to their crises. Then there are the nameless women in "Tongues of Stone" and "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," who face institutionalization for the breakdowns that result from their anxieties, and their struggle with their marked difference from the normative women existing successfully in society while they are stuck behind metaphorical bars. Finally, there are the women of "Initiation" and "Mothers," who attempt to find a place within their gender where they feel they belong and still have the freedoms afforded to men, by being part of an elite female group. These stories are mere practice leading up to Plath's longest, and most successful, examination of these gender crises: *The Bell Jar*. Esther Greenwood shares all of the anxieties the women of Plath's short fiction face, and she works through similar methods to find a way to be the woman she wants to be and defy society's expectations that fail to align with her own. She tries to find a place to belong, and when that fails, she begins a process of rebirth that ultimately leads to her institutionalization. From there, she gains the abilities necessary to transcend her gender expectations and anxieties and successfully leads a double life like the one Plath wrote about in her journals.

Where the protagonists of Plath's short stories fail, Esther Greenwood succeeds, proving that Plath was able to find her narrative voice and craft a complex story about a woman who wants to have it all, namely the ability to transcend the constraints set on her by her gender. It is also about a woman who makes significant progress in finding a way to overcome her existential anxieties and live in two worlds: a woman's world, where she can have kids and a husband, and a man's world, where she can have a respectable and successful career. In a throw-away anecdote in the beginning of *The Bell Jar*, Esther mentions a baby: "...last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with" (*TBJ*, 3), implying that the Esther who now writes about her nervous breakdown has overcome her anxieties and, at the very least, is a mother. Esther Greenwood is a successful culmination of Sylvia Plath's apprenticeship through her short stories, and though her life was cut tragically short, her protagonists live on in a world free of the bell jar and the stifling constraints inherent within.

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