

Seeing Through the Bell Jar: Distorted Female Identity in Cold War America

Rosi Smith
Nottingham, UK

Abstract: Through the character of Esther in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, this essay investigates the struggle of middle-class white women coming of age in 1950s America to achieve personalized identities. It argues that the Cold War era led to the creation of an ideology of cultural containment, enforcing prescriptive roles on women within an American suburban, conservative, and conformist setting.

Investigated here are methods by which this model of domesticity was promoted. Also, examined here is the fracturing of identity those methods caused in women, who were unable to fully assimilate themselves into this role.

Butler's theory of performativity is employed to assess strategies of female identity formation. Furthermore, it indicates how functionalist approaches arising from popular Freudianism defined gender roles as principally biologically determined and saw differing models of sexuality and female dissatisfaction as illnesses treatable by psychology. In this context, Esther's search for a self with whom she can identify becomes the novel's principal quest and is, by drawing on the concept of hyper-realism, explored through the processes of observation, reflection, and image reproduction.

Kat, the feisty, shrewish heroine of the 1999 film *10 Things I Hate About You*, is shown reading Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* when in the depths of teen angst. Kat is the stereotypical Plath reader, representing the generations of bright, troubled young women who have recognized their own pain in Esther Greenwood's minutely-evoked disintegration. The much-discussed events of Plath's mental illness and suicide, made known to the world at large by the posthumous publication of her letters and journals, have mythologized her

internal life.¹ *The Bell Jar* tends to be read under the cloud of this mythology, either as the epitome of a book sentimentally exploring subjective aspects of existence or biographically, as a set of clues to the causes of her death. Certainly, the text speaks to something universal—the struggle to grow up and build an identity—but an approach that grafts Esther Greenwood’s personality and pain onto a *fin de siècle* heroine such as Kat is dubious.

Plath and her protagonist came of age in an era where women were explicitly told that happiness could only be achieved through the enactment of a biological imperative, in a society in which all deviance was treated with suspicion. More recent readings, such as Pat MacPherson’s *Reflecting on The Bell Jar* (which assesses Esther’s breakdown against the background of Cold War paranoia) show growing awareness that specific socio-political conditions are inextricable from Esther’s personal search for a viable image of herself and are, as such, more compelling.

This paper explores Esther’s search for individualized female identity in Cold War America. It argues that the culture of personal, as well as political, containment (supported by education) curtailed the sanctioned possibilities for women’s development. This caused many to display what was commonly interpreted as neuroticism when torn between choices framed as mutually incompatible. This fracturing is evident in Esther’s psyche and the archetypes of femininity she sees around her, none of whom are able to display a multi-faceted, personalized identity in which she can recognize herself. It further contends that the simplistic idealization of femininity in terms of biological destiny made educated women, whose mental lives could not be contained in this role, limit their intellectual exploration and dissociate from their bodies. This failure of physical and mental self-recognition is discussed with reference to the reflected, photographic, or otherwise distanced images prevalent in *The Bell Jar*, including

1 After the breakdown, suicide attempt, and treatment subsequently fictionalized in *The Bell Jar*, Plath regularly visited a therapist and suffered from periodic depression (often associated with her tumultuous marriage and dissatisfaction with her writing). She finally committed suicide at age thirty, dramatically gassing herself while her children slept in the next room. In an attempt to rescue Plath from the accusation of morbidity, her mother offered much of her correspondence for publication as *Letters Home*; this was seen as defamatory to her husband (Ted Hughes) and he (possibly in retaliation) published her journals, which showed a much more troubled consciousness than the letters. For an enlightening discussion of these publications see Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman*.

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the significance of the metaphor of the bell jar as a site of distorted vision and reflection. In a society where paranoia and surveillance were rife it is impossible to separate image, performance, and identity, because all are ideologically constrained and Esther's profoundly personal self-alienation is inextricable from the external political climate. Esther's ability to assimilate an identity is hampered by more than her own pathology. The images of femininity available to her are so contained and so distorted by the various lenses through which they are perceived that contradiction and neurosis can be said to be built into the structures of her society.

Esther Greenwood, a brilliant student accustomed to prizes and publication, wins a competition to work for a month as a guest editor on a New York fashion magazine. She spends her time working, socializing, and reflecting on her time at college and her unsatisfactory courtships. Esther is disengaged from the whirl of activity around her and confused about her future direction. On her final night she rejects the fripperies of New York (casting her wardrobe into the night) and heads home to her mother and the suburbs. Rejected for a summer writing course, she sinks into deep depression and, after traumatically mis-administered electro-convulsive therapy (ECT), makes a serious suicide attempt. She is then hospitalized and after therapy and treatment (including more ECT), she gradually recovers. Towards the end of the book she takes charge of her body, arranging contraception and orchestrating the loss of virginity. The novel ends with Esther's appearance before the board of her hospital, suing for her release.

The events of *The Bell Jar* mirror very closely those that began for Plath in the summer of 1953. The attitudes and character of Esther cannot, however, be directly read as Plath's. MacPherson notes that while Esther retains a cynical detachment and observer status with regard to her New York experiences, Plath's writings of the time display involvement with, and gauche enthusiasm for, the glittering world of *Mademoiselle* (18).² Plath's decision to write a fictionalized rather than a directly-autobiographical account suggests an intention to comment more broadly on the process of entering adult womanhood in Cold War America. By beginning her novel with reference to the Rosenberg executions³ Plath ties the tale, from the outset, to the persecution of that which

2 The magazine aimed at female college students for which Plath worked that summer.

3 Regarded by many as the defining act of McCarthyism, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a Jewish Communist couple, were executed for passing US nuclear secrets to the USSR.

deviated from the American ideal. The leitmotif of the Rosenberg story is symbolically tied to Esther's acts of rebellion and her mental illness.

When Esther states that the execution of the Rosenbergs has “nothing to do with me” (Plath 1) she demonstrates dissociation from society at large at the same time as expressing her involuntary empathy with the fate of these outsiders: “I couldn't help imagining what it must be like, being burnt all along your nerves” (Plath 1). Plath, writing with pertinent knowledge Esther lacks—that she will feel that exact sensation when subjected to unanesthetized ECT—conveys the irony of Esther's dissociation. Esther's internalization of the state-sanctioned ideal of domestic femininity and her subjection to the patriarchal ideologies of society have displaced her connection to the active citizenship and collective responsibility of a functioning member of a democracy. When she is subjected to ECT she sees it in terms of a punishment, just like that inflicted on the Rosenbergs: “I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done” (Plath 138). In a society enamored of technological quick fixes,⁴ it is significant that the establishment regarded mental illness, criminality, and homosexuality as soluble by the application of electricity.

Esther's dissociation from the executions is not tantamount to condoning them. She sees Hilda's demonization of the Rosenbergs as inhuman—the embodiment of Plath's perception of the American public's reaction to the executions as a “complacent yawn” (MacPherson 35). Esther's response shows disenfranchisement rather than disinterest, the same impulse that encouraged women who felt they were constrained not to use their education to avoid engaging with it; MacPherson identifies her silence as coerced: “show[ing] how McCarthyism enforced its normative tyranny” (MacPherson 39).

Society had been permitted, even mandated, to monitor, arrest, and punish deviance and unconventionality. Dissent on a personal and political level was conflated. If the personal and the political are understood as inextricable, as fifties political rhetoric would suggest⁵—and indeed as the feminist movement tends to

Widely thought to have been falsely accused or scapegoated, the Rosenbergs polarized American public opinion and Esther's disapproval designates her firmly in the liberal camp. Plath's own vehement anger about the executions is recorded in her journals.

4 Evident in the Kitchen Debate as well as memoirs of the period—see, for example, Bill Bryson's *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* (especially pages 6-8 and 75-96).

5 As in, for example, the conflation of communism and homosexuality.

argue⁶—then the retreat to domesticity and the suburbs needs to be regarded in terms not just of the intellectual, emotional, and psychological effects on the women concerned but also its wider social and political significance.

LEARNING HER PLACE: CONSTRAINED FEMALE ROLES IN COLD WAR AMERICA

The fifties are frequently vaunted as a heyday for white middle-class America—a time of prosperity, fecundity, and innocence.⁷ This innocence, however, was for many short-lived. The median age for marriage in females sank from twenty-two, at the turn of the century, to just twenty through the 1950s, with the commonest age for women to marry standing at just eighteen.⁸ Women still single on leaving college became the exception rather than the rule.

In *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan posits that women in the fifties undertook a regressive move back to the home under the influence of a mystique that idealized the role of homemaker and gave it an unjustified privileged status. Psychoanalytical and anthropological insights, she argues, were used to condition women into believing that female self-expression and fulfillment were possible only within a feminine model of sexual and social passivity and receptivity. Plath had clearly internalized this sense of inevitability, stating in her journal that: “my whole circle of action, thought, and feeling [is] rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity” (Kukil 77). Friedan outlines the extent to which brilliant young women jettisoned or sidelined their education and careers—“two out of three girls who entered college dropping out before they even finished” (150)—to put their husbands through college or to maintain their perceived femininity, and the subsequent effects of these decisions on their happiness and mental health.

Popular mythology, contends Friedan, laid out a conformist model of the professionalized middle-class housewife, which role operated to the virtual exclusion of personalized or elliptical pathways. It is this quandary that faces Esther in *The Bell Jar*. When she sees her potential futures laid out they are as

6 An example of this is Cixous’s contention that writing and expressing sexuality in a female fashion is political.

7 Statistics and discussion about this perception can be found in the introduction to Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound*.

8 These figures are from the US Bureau of the Census and were accessed on January 25, 2008 via <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005061.html>.

branches of a tree, each distinct in its trajectory and irreconcilable with the others. It is in the blank starkness of this choice that her sense of self and direction begin to crumble.

The contentions of *The Feminine Mystique* apply to a very specific group of women—young, white, middle class, comfortably off, and living in suburbia as either full-time homemakers or with a job requiring skills well below their capacity—and to those about to be initiated into that group. These women were represented in US propaganda of the time as the apotheosis of contentment and the American way. In the Kitchen Debate,⁹ Nixon evoked such women as axiomatic evidence of the superiority of US values as the antithesis of the evils of communism. Such representations, along with the unprecedented prosperity enjoyed and the desire to create solid, rewarding home lives for the men that had fought in World War II, meant that more and more women aspired to be in this group.

In her study of the Cold War American family, *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May recognizes the power of discourse such as the Kitchen Debate to integrate ideology into lifestyle choices and domestic structures. She traces much of the desire for a stable, secure family life with traditional and clearly-defined roles, to the uncertainty and fear occasioned by scars of the Depression, World War II, anti-communist hysteria and the very immediate threat of nuclear war. In *Killing the Angel in the House*, Elaine Connell identifies Plath's caustic assessment of the phenomenon of retreat to suburban life as perceived security and protection in an uncertain world. In "The Applicant" Plath writes of the objectified wife: "It is . . . / Proof against fire and bombs through the roof" (Plath, *Ariel* 6), mocking the interpretation of marriage as "an emotional panacea for wider social evils" (Connell 91).

Plath and Friedan both studied at the prestigious Smith College, though a decade separated their graduations. That decade, Friedan contends, effected such a change of attitude to learning among students and educators that she had trouble recognizing the personalities and aspirations of students when she returned to the college to conduct interviews in 1959. At a time when seventy percent of women at a mid-western university answered, "What do you hope to get out of college?"

9 The discussion held at the World Trade Fair between Nixon and Khrushchev in 1959. The traditional macroeconomic and military debates were jettisoned here and the focus was on domestic goods and the comparative positions of women in the two societies.

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with ‘the man for me’” (Friedan 165), women were reluctant to place too great an emphasis on their intellectual development. Friedan compares their discussions, “mostly about our dates” to her own undergraduate debates about “all that was wrong with the world” (153).

The Bell Jar portrays a similarly anti-intellectual stance among students; Esther is seen as abnormal, even pitiable, when devoting herself to her work. Her relief at the opportunity that Buddy Willard’s TB gives her to retreat to books, safe in the confirmation of femininity gained from being “practically engaged” (Plath 69), demonstrates the pressure to define oneself in terms of sexual behavior. The idea that enthusiastic study is a dirty secret is also noted by Friedan, who relays stories of women making clandestine trips to the library and dropping challenging classes that they loved in order to maintain appearances.

Universities of the time tended to consider their community function to be at least as vital as their intellectual one (Pirsig 149-56). Educators responded to the fact that many well-educated housewives were dissatisfied and depressed with the conviction that their education had rendered them unfit for their role as women. The educators’ interpretation of the malaise led to programs of study in many universities that discouraged creative or critical thought in women. There was a move away from academic study towards a softer discipline of liberal arts and functional courses in marriage and the family, some colleges even making these courses compulsory (Friedan 156), thus corralling women into a sphere of domesticity.

Discourses such as the Kitchen Debate and Adlai Stevenson’s commencement address to Plath’s own graduating class, in which some of the brightest women in America were told (by the ostensibly liberal speaker they had themselves selected) that their role in the nation’s future was in the home (MacPherson 45). This reinforced the sense that the political establishment, across the spectrum, supported the mystique and the separation from professional and public life that it implied. Women were given the opportunity to develop intellectually on the tacit understanding that their intelligence would not be used outside the home (Connell 35).

That such differentiated education curtailed the possibilities of women in terms of finance, work, and social and political power makes it possible to see the relationship between college-educated men and college-educated women as one of class. Effectively limiting women’s work to that undertaken within the home,

distancing them from public life, or making it impossible for them to undertake skilled paid work had the potential to render women (brought up in exactly the same middle class suburban environment as their husbands) a de facto laboring class, subservient to men.

Yet this class distinction is in many ways illusory, based as it is on factors not economically prescribed but subtly presented to women as the means of their own real emancipation: Nixon's contribution to the Kitchen Debate demonstrated the commonly-held view that professionalized housewifery was a boon to previously unfulfilled women who had, in their terms, sublimated their womanly urges in pursuit of career or public engagement.

Friedan notes that sex-directed educators saw the problems that women had in embracing their designated roles as arising partly from early education and family life, which "made American girls grow up feeling free and equal to men" (75). Moulding women to their biological function could solve fractured identity; the disruptive influences were masculine aspirations, designated as concentration on career, dominance, and intellectual self-discovery. Friedan opposes that contention, recognizing the fracture but citing the limitations of domesticity as the pernicious element of the binary. In *The Bell Jar* Esther states that she "was only purely happy 'til I was nine years old" (Plath 71), an age significant to Esther (and Plath) as that at which she lost her father but also approximately corresponding with the time at which American girls began to lose the androgynous equality of childhood and experience pressure to conform to the mystique. The loss of a male at that time, and a narrowing of spheres of influence to the suburban femininity defined by domesticity and by sacrifice—"my mother scrimped" (Plath, *Bell Jar* 71)—may have exacerbated her sense of pressure to conform and of the inevitability of her life path.

Along with explicit teaching of social structures, illustrated by the functional courses on the family, education provides constant implicit learning, assimilating each individual into the rules and expectations of their society until they recognize as obvious truth that the subject described by that society is really them. *The Bell Jar* is the story of what can happen when the process of interpellation¹⁰ is only partially effected. Esther demonstrates both rebellion

10 Althusser explains "interpellation" as the process by which one is hailed and recognizes ones own subjectification as axiomatic.

against the mystique and feelings of inadequacy when measured against it. She can see that the subject in question should be her but not with absolute confidence that it really is her.

Subjects, understanding as self-evident the priorities of their society, participate willingly in their own constriction by freely acting out their designated roles and encouraging this in others, thus perpetuating those roles and structures. In simplistic terms the terrible thing Esther had done, which resulted in her shock treatments, was to have failed to choose the role prescribed for her. She refused her role partly by direct and repeated rejection of a domestic destiny: "I'm never going to get married" (Plath 89); "I didn't want to serve a man in any way" (Plath 72); "I wanted . . . to shoot off in all directions myself" (Plath 79). It is also clear, however, that much of her failure to interpellate arose from contradictory influences blurring the image to which she was to conform, which problematized the perceived obviousness of her role as subject.

In New York, "three women . . . represent three possible feminine identities for [Esther]" (Connell 46), each acting as an archetype and actively attempting to persuade Esther to fall in with their model.

Betsy is the personification of domestic femininity. Prosaically cheerful, she waxes lyrical on the natural harmony of male and female corn she has witnessed in her upbringing; her impassioned invocation of this symbiosis symbolizing her unquestioning commitment to the mutually supportive biological functions of men and women in society. Betsy later becomes a photographic model and is held up to young women as an image of ideal femininity.

Doreen is Betsy's antithesis, sexually adventurous and iconoclastic. Esther admires this embodiment of sexuality but cannot fully imitate her. In contradictory statements she says that "Everything [Doreen] said was like a secret voice speaking out of my own bones" (Plath 7), and "it was Betsy I resembled at heart" (Plath 21), demonstrating her partial assimilation into both elements of the virgin/whore binary, further contributing to the blurring of her identity. Although the two are opposites, they share the characteristic of being defined in relation to men, Betsy by her passivity and Doreen by her predation.

Altogether separate from this definition is Jay Cee, Esther's editor, who Esther likes and respects. This liking, however, is recognized as proscribed and rebellious and occurs *despite* "her plug-ugly look . . . [and] *in spite* of what Doreen said" (Plath 5, my italics). The rebellion derives from the fact that Jay Cee is part

of an older, more career-minded set of women, formed by early feminism, who represented a challenge to the mystique.

Propaganda of the new woman¹¹ was couched in modern theories and explicitly endorsed sex and pleasure (within early marriage). Independent, feminist women appeared to be out of touch, suggesting deferment of the happiness readily available to the new woman, and to be older and less glamorous than their adversaries. When Doreen persuades Esther to leave her work and go to a party Esther sees this as a rebellion against Jay Cee and the other feminist intellectuals with whom she is equated and as an expression of independent thought:

Every old woman I'd ever met seemed to want to teach me something but suddenly I didn't think I had anything to learn from them. I shut the typewriter. "*Smart girl*" said Doreen. (Plath 6, my italics)

Although Esther knows that Jay Cee is married, she cannot comprehend her as a sexually-rounded person. Jay Cee looks "terrible but very wise" (Plath 36) and would presumably appear less wise were she beautiful. Esther has geared her life towards a professional or academic career but her experiences at college and in New York have set this up as contradictory to love and family, portrayed as indispensable for happiness. Thus her conviction as to her path is faltering and she answers Jay Cee's questions as to her future with "I don't really know" (Plath 30). Plath felt this same tension; conscious of the dry, unsensual image of the career woman she writes: "I could be more of a prisoner as an older, tense, cynical career girl than as a richly creative wife and mother" (Kukil 164), notably associating careerism simultaneously with age and the incomplete womanhood suggested by the term "girl." Faced with the different models of womanhood surrounding her, Esther has been unable fully to interpellate into any model because each has influenced her and none seems a coherent mirror of her own identity. Thus, the dominant ideology has failed fully to incorporate her.

When she begins to break down, Esther enacts the metaphor of herself, sitting atrophied in the crotch of her fig tree. Mutually exclusive futures each close off parts of her that she believes to be essential and, as such, each is rejected and Esther sinks further and further into inertia.

11 The term used to designate fulfilled, professional housewives of the era.

SELF-IMAGE: ESTHER'S ALIENATED SEARCH FOR A PERSONALIZED IDENTITY

Even by the point of birth, argues Althusser, we are assimilated into our societal roles, accepting them as axiomatic. The cultural influence of the predominant ideology of each community has ensured that “individuals are always-already subjects” (Althusser 119). He admits that his contention “may seem paradoxical” (ibid) but it becomes more comprehensible when laid against other theories that examine the inception of identity. Judith Butler is aware of the forces that create identity before that identity can choose itself. She states in the preface to *Gender Trouble* that:

The question of the subject is crucial for politics, and for feminist politics in particular, because juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not “show” once the juridical structure of politics has been established. (3)

Therefore, because all actions and thoughts take place within it, ideology defines that which we consider to be most personal. Ideology not only obscures which ideas come from our self and which are ideologically prompted, but also shows that the concept of self has no meaning without, and cannot be said to pre-date, ideology. Esther is in conflict with the explicit ideology of her time but her ideas and criticisms of herself, as when she describes her inadequacies in the female realm (Plath 72), also emerge from that ideology. She understands herself as an outside observer—able to watch the gruesome calmly and see the hidden flaws of others (Plath 59)—but, born into the society, she cannot stand outside it to construct an identity fully separate from its assumptions. Even her rebellions derive from her inextricable relationship to the society that has formed her.

If one is not a subject, a gender, or a member of a community how is identity to be discovered? Can we even conceive of such a person? Althusser would argue not, because there is no individual who is not always already a subject, undertaking ideologically-prompted actions “*in all consciousness* freely chosen as a subject” (113, my italics). This idea relates closely to Butler’s theory of performativity, which argues that identity cannot pre-date the gender it performs; thus Butler is able to accept Simone de Beauvoir’s contention that “gender is something one does rather than something one is” (Salih 91) while recognizing that these actions are not the result of simple volition but of continued, constrained performance within the expectations of society.

The functionalist courses so popular in the fifties actively encouraged young women to play the role of woman but this ignored the question of what, if they were playing the roles of women, they were underneath—assuming rather than the function (the performed actions) defined the substance. Butler's logic encourages us to reject both functionalism and the essentialist approach which posits a real personality, suggesting that underneath were further sets of, this time primarily unconscious, performances that created the desires and pressures to undertake conscious performances. These layered performances reveal more performances—never an unadulterated core.

If, as with Esther's position, one is incompletely assimilated into society's expectations, these performances become more consciously recognized and lead to further fracturing of identity. Performances conforming to sanctioned images create a selection of false selves but no sense of a real self that they are supposed to represent. The lack of a primary, self-defined image leads Esther to fantasize various self-images that are never more than two-dimensional. Because the roles offered are not recognized by Esther as her own identity, her fantasies involve the appropriation of the bodies and identities of others. When watching a Russian interpreter at the UN, Esther desires to "crawl into her" (Plath 71), in the belief that the defined role enacted would give her an accepted place in the machinery of her society: "It mightn't make me any happier, but it would be one more little pebble of efficiency among all the other pebbles" (Plath 71).

For Esther, once she has lost her identity as an artist (no longer able to read or write) and a student (rejected from her summer course), the extent to which her performances defined her identity is apparent. She dons and discards various personalities: claiming to be, for example, an orphan and a prisoner's daughter. Deprived of her customary performances—judged and validated by grades, prizes, and dates—she becomes a horror movie staple, the shapeless entity taking over the bodies and lives of others. Even her clothing (borrowed from Betsy before leaving New York) represents the identity of another. It is as though she is selecting from a wardrobe of sanctioned female identities, none of which she can fully inhabit.

Esther's inability to really become any of these incarnations, along with her sense of the contradictions between her desired futures, leads her to attempt to re-imagine the possibilities of female identity. Esther parodies the platitudes of Buddy Willard's mother, who saw a woman's role as "the place an arrow shoots

off from” (Plath 79). Each man is represented as different, “an arrow shooting off into the future” (ibid), every one on its own trajectory, while women are defined by their stability and sameness. Plath challenges this idea but also subverts it from binary connotations in a way that Butler might recognize. In the initial phrase, immanence is contrasted with direct forward momentum (the feminine passive, the masculine on a linear course) but Esther states that she wanted to “shoot off in all directions at once” (ibid), destabilizing the binary image and imagining a multitude of conceptions. This also goes beyond Friedan’s account of women negotiating the balance between home and career, raising the possibility of not just adjusting the primacy of one or the other but exploding both and finding as yet unimagined priorities.

Plath had, however, at least partially internalized the stated contradictions between career and family, stating in her journal that she feared a contented marriage would breed a bovine, passive attitude in her: “the physical sensuousness will lull and sooth to inactive lethargy my desire to work” (Kukil 100). Esther sees this process at work in Mrs Willard and the “cowy” (Plath 127) Dodo Conway and likens it to being “brainwashed . . . numb as a slave in some private totalitarian state” (Plath 81). The much-vaunted association between domesticity and contentment is retained in her consciousness, but contentment is also viewed as symptomatic of a less-complete humanity. The most fully-content character in *The Bell Jar* is Valerie, a patient she meets who has had a lobotomy. Valerie is so well able to meet the expectations of society that on their first meeting Esther cannot understand why she is institutionalized at all.

Esther’s attempt to find an accommodating identity has been so dependent on fantasy and imitation that she has no original self that stands as distinct from her false selves. This blurring of real and false selves is reminiscent of the post-modern idea of hyper-reality.

Hyper-reality¹² denotes a discursive process by which fantasy and reality participate in mutual creation and are, therefore, not merely indistinguishable but rely upon one another for their existence. Such discourse can be applied to the creation and policing of gender roles. If Butler is right and gender emerges from the sum of our performances—performances conceived within strict societal boundaries—then this is a conglomeration of actuality and fantasy. Identificatory

12 For a fuller definition and exploration, see Baudrillard’s essay “Simulacra and Simulations.”

mimetism takes place in reaction not only to the people around us but also to fictional and media representations.

In American females entering womanhood in the early fifties, inclinations to love and reproduce combined with fears of real and fantasy dangers in the outside world. These fears combined with theoretical and media representations of femininity to create an idealized version of domestic womanhood that bore all the hallmarks of hyper-reality. As women accepted the resultant persona as really them, they enacted the model of the suburban, gender-defined family, thereby cementing it as reality and laying the foundation for the interpellation of others.

Esther's ambivalent relationship with the mystique arises from a dialectical process between representations of that which she is (or ought to be) and a sense of self attempting to extricate itself from, but integrally formed by, those representations. Unable to create a self that fulfilled both her desires and the edicts of society, Esther is self-alienated. A process Terry Cooper describes as:

gradually becom[ing] a stranger to ourselves. The actual self, consisting of our real feelings and experience, becomes twisted, distorted and stretched into a mold of the "appropriate" self. (130)

Throughout the novel, Esther is alienated from her image in reflections, photographs, etc., a process MacPherson identifies as common in the 1950s when women watched "themselves in mirrors according to the meticulous standards of feminine appearance they learn[ed] as femininity itself" (9). At each stage during her disintegration, Esther presents us with reflected images that are unsatisfactory and unrepresentative of her conception of herself. The source of this alienation appears in great part to be sporadically-mixed performances of the hyper-real not internally lived and an assumption of conformity to that hyper-reality not externally performed. Reflections and distanced visions become the pervading image of *The Bell Jar*—distorted, tantalizing images, embodying the fiction of tangible reality. These representations manifest themselves via veils of glass, the curvature of which modifies each image to varying degrees.

In the opening passage of the novel, Plath describes an oppressively hot New York in which glossy plate-glass windows give Esther constant access to her reflection and reflected images of the surrounding world. She describes herself as others, she assumes, must see her: in terms of her patent leather (also reflective) accessories, her success and the shining picture of her, apparently much courted and desired, which was published in the magazine for which she works. This

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image is immediately identified as illusory but is nonetheless the first appearance of a standard by which Esther will judge herself for the rest of the novel.

It is also clear not only that the images through which this impression is conveyed are deliberately falsified—the all-American hunks that surround her in her photograph are “hired . . . for the occasion” (Plath 2)—but that she has participated in the fictionalizing of herself. Esther has bought lots of expensive clothes in order to play the role of the successful socialite that she will be in New York, suggesting that, at least in anticipation, she bought into the myth of her projected image. The reality of her experience, however, is at odds with her expectations and she now sees her collaboration in buying the clothes and perpetuating the myth as “stupid” (ibid) when juxtaposed with the Rosenberg executions.

Esther’s move towards recovery can be seen as an attempt to separate her real and fantasy selves and reject the fantasy. When the magazine image is presented to her at her asylum, Esther disclaims it, refusing to accept that the person pictured is her. This can be construed in a negative sense—that her breakdown has separated her from the smiling, brilliant girl she once was—but an alternative interpretation is possible. When working at the magazine, the smiling girl was one that she recognized as really her—at least to the extent that she had a relationship with it and participated in its creation. After the experiences of her summer, she has grown beyond the manufactured image of herself and engages with her own reality in a way that bears no relationship to the smiling half-self. Although accepting the image would have gained her adulation among the other patients, she chooses awkward facts over glossy fiction.

While working at the magazine, Esther enacts the hyper-real dialectic between fiction and reality. She performs the dual role of fulfilling the challenging post of assistant editor and being photographed and written about doing the same (the women who had won the placements being both the authors and subjects of the magazine edition). She is both writer and subject of articles—doing and acting out the job.

She also sees enough of the workings of the magazine to understand the process of representation. The banquet at *Ladies Day*¹³ is a case in point. She is

13 “[T]he big women’s magazine that features lush double-page spreads of Technicolor meals” (Plath 23).

fully aware that the perfect food and lifestyle being portrayed is a phantasm, because she has just witnessed the difficulties of creating a flawless visual image amid such practical concerns as melting ice cream. She is, however, still drawn in by the magical food and made not simply hungry, but sensuously excited by the spread. However, when she ingests the image—tucking into delicacies with gusto and jealousy—the food is poisoned and she falls ill. The point is that she knew the image was hollow, or at least hyped, but succumbed nevertheless. She knew it in the same way that she saw and despised the drudgery of domesticity but was still drawn to the life of a husband and family.

This seeming paradox arises from Esther's sense that images should contain truth. As a burgeoning poet, she operates in a realm where the symbolic has power as a conveyor of meaning. When she argues (mentally) with Buddy Willard that poetry is no more a "piece of dust" (Plath 53) than any other aspect of life she recognizes that seeming chimeras can, in fact, contain the essence of truth more effectively than physical actuality.

Esther's relationship to her reflection changes as the novel progresses and each step towards greater or lesser self-recognition corresponds to an increase or decrease in her mental alienation. In New York, when she returns from her night out with Doreen and Lenny (the night that was her experimentation with rejecting her good-girl persona and removing herself from the structure of academic success and acclaim) she is assailed by reflections. In the lift mirror she is unable to recognize herself (due to the smudges on her face but also, it seems, due to the incongruity of her night to her normal pattern of existence). Then, in her hotel room, a mercurial mirror distorts and dehumanizes her face. She is unable to reinsert herself into her virginal self-image and similarly immaculate sheets until she has undertaken the ritual purification of a hot bath, in which she talks explicitly about dissolving away the experiences and influences that she has osmosed.

In her relatively-sane state she is able to preserve the hyper-real image to which she understands she should conform and re-impose it upon her tainted self. Later, when it is not the smudged and defiled face she cannot recognize but the image of herself as a smiling, successful girl that is held in the mind of others, she is no longer able to wipe the one from the other in defense of wholeness or sanity.

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At the most painful period of her breakdown—the nadir of self-alienation—Esther cannot connect with any of the images available to her. She loses favor at the hospital by breaking the mirror that shows her a face, unrecognizable at first, bruised and battered by her suicide attempt. Despite seeking a method of suicide that was quiet and internal, denying physical reality, she has created a body, as well as a mind, that is horrifying and is unable to reconcile this appearance with any part of her fractured self-image.

Distorted vision is most clearly exemplified in the overarching metaphor of the bell jar itself. In his psychoanalytic exploration of Plath's work, David Holbrook recognizes the bell jar as "a sheet of glass between her and reality" (Holbrook 80); he notes that this is a frequent symptom in schizoid patients but does not go on to analyze the view of the world available from within the jar.

The bell jar is a curved glass structure from the inside of which all images would be distorted or made grotesque as in a hall of mirrors. The person underneath would be unable to recognize themselves or would be conscious only of a deformed self. The curved surface would also show more than one reflection, allowing for a variety of false (or at least contradictory) selves to be envisaged. Indeed, the nature of the arc would mean that the image straight ahead would always be the most distorted and those in peripheral vision the least. Each image, therefore, would look clear and normal when viewed laterally (as with Esther's attraction to uncomplicated domesticity when imagined) but would distort when viewed directly (as with her repulsion from real domesticity in the guises of Mrs Willard and Dodo Conway).

In each case, when Esther moves nearer to a situation or person she gains better understanding of its distortions and layers. Buddy Willard, adored and idolized from a distance, shows evidence of "fault after fault" (Plath 79) on closer inspection and, significantly, his defining failure is hypocrisy: the presentation of a false image. If we accept Holbrook's contention that the bell jar is an analogy for the mental illness in which Esther is trapped, it suggests that others, without her condition, would not be subject to the multiple visions that the bell jar provides. However, the distorted, ugly view of the world, other people, and even herself is often more accurate and illuminating than the clear, simplistic views that are available without the warp of the bell jar. This suggests that it is the sane, fully-interpellated subjects who are living in fiction.

“MY OWN WOMAN” (PLATH 213): PHYSICALITY AND VOLITION IN *THE BELL JAR*

The symbolism of the bell jar also includes structured external observation and experimentation. The subject inside is monitored, assessed, and judged by external agents. When Esther is asked by Buddy to show herself naked, she is repelled by the idea and reminded of the demeaning process of having her naked picture taken for the university records and used to judge her posture. Here the personal and the political are framed in similar ways. Institutions and people are both represented as looking for the same thing in Esther—conformity to an ideal, the perfect posture, the model girl, and so on. In this way, the bell jar is reminiscent of the process of suburban living, where, although insularity was increased by drawing people more firmly into their nuclear family units and eschewing communality, personal space was very much on display. Esther notes the disapproval in her home suburb that one family had a hedge so high that you couldn't see into their garden because the norm was for low fences leaving immaculate gardens on display as an advertisement of lifestyle. The open plan style of idealized suburban homes also allowed little scope for the cultivation of private space; the whole home was on display to visitors—creating a need for even greater commitment to domestic duties—and women were unable to find a place of refuge from the continual presence of their families (May 150-62).

Viewed in this way, Esther becomes an object, as opposed to a subject and, as such, her volition is called into question. Her actions are determined by external scrutiny, rather than internal motivation. At each stage in her story she is judged and defined by others: from college, where her brains and popularity are assessed by her peers, to the asylum, where she pretends to read in a performance of normality. Accustomed to monitoring and structure, when Esther enters the vacuum of her suburban summer she is unable to determine her own actions. From as early as her time in New York, Esther recognizes that, “I wasn't steering anything, not even myself” (Plath 2).

Her objectification shows Esther as alienated from her physical self as much as from her personality and image. In a society where personal paths were seen as biologically determined the body was, for women in particular, a societal structure of containment. The combination of Freudian thought and the binding of sexual experimentation to probable motherhood made bodily femininity a

prison. Plath stated in her journal that: “I envy man his *physical* freedom to lead a double life—his career, his sexual and his family life” (Kukil 98, my italics). Esther’s actual loss of virginity is unexciting and results in terrible hemorrhaging but the accessing of contraception that made it possible is represented as a vital step in her recovery. It is, significantly, not the sexual activity with a man, but the autonomously-undertaken fitting that makes her “[my] own woman” (Plath 213) and gains her control over her own person. Here, again, the rejection of fantasy is necessary for self-fulfillment: Esther only seeks out the contraception once Dr Nolan has disabused her of “propaganda” (Plath 212). At the time of her breakdown, Esther is so thoroughly dissociated from her body that it no longer obeys the demands of her mind.

In a moment Holbrook identifies as “the bell jar coming down” (Holbrook 80), she decides to get away from the stifling air of the suburbs and join her friends but her hand “collide[s] with a wall of glass” (Plath 114), mind and body cleaving and dissociating. Lack of self-recognition in her everyday life prevents Esther from inhabiting and directing her destiny by writing, studying, working, or healing herself: “the muted female body speaks its paranoia as paralysis of the will” (MacPherson 38).

This does not however suggest that her suicide attempt is an action beyond her will: quite the reverse. Her body here is presented as the force (separate from her because alienated) attempting to rivet her to an existence of which she no longer wants any part. Her suicide attempts are the only times that Esther seems to jettison her detachment and observational quality in order fully to immerse herself in her existence, as if her ability to end her life confirmed her objective reality, as opposed to the hyper-reality of her various performances. It is a choice, finally, in which she is an active agent.

Esther’s urge to commit suicide seems to stem, at least in part, from the freedom she experiences on her ill-advised ski trip. From enacting performances from which she is alienated—dutiful girlfriend to a man she holds in contempt, polite tourist and so on—she experiences her descent as a transcendental moment: the embodiment of the perfect white purity she attempted to attain through vodka, hot baths, and assimilation into the “Betsys [she] resembled at heart” (Plath 21). She identifies the feeling of free fall as pure happiness, a feeling she previously stated had eluded her since she was nine, before the constrictions of feminine, and societal expectations. This happiness is connected to the

performance of a simple, powerful action and to the possibility of transcending her human frame: “the thought I might kill myself formed in my mind as coolly as a knife or a flower” (Plath 92).

In a world that offers her conflicting and unattainable versions of herself as a living woman, she apprehends death as a simple, unpolluted truth, incorruptible by fantasy and expectation. It offers her a realm where she can act rather than observe and where results are clear-cut; there can be no doubt as to her success or failure, no external judgment of her worth. Throughout the scene, “whiteness” is a key image; The “white and silent distances” (Plath 92) and her single “smooth, white path” (Plath 93) facilitate the clarity of purpose she hoped to obtain from her similarly “icy and immaculate vodka” (Plath 10). Esther is the center of the activity and those who have other expectations of her are distanced and marginalized. The normally-proactive Buddy becomes “numb, brown and inconsequential” (Plath 93) and she the embodiment of pure white action, at one with the perfection and inviolability of the snow, overturning the image of her as a “small black dot” (Plath 15) that we see in New York when she is operating as voyeur in Doreen’s sexual encounters.

The predilection to dissociate from one’s body is noted by Adrienne Rich, who, like Plath, completed her education and began her writing career during the 1950s. In her 1976 book, *Of Woman Born*, she writes of “brilliant women . . . trying to think from outside their female bodies” (Rich 284). She argues that the discouragement of women’s intellectual development and the patronizing conflation of female intelligence with fuzzy intuition and limited fields of interest made the pursuance of specifically female thought unattractive to academically gifted women seeking to make their voices heard. Their rigorous minds seemed to have little connection with the placid mentality into which their sex was stereotyped and thus, by deliberately disavowing that connection, they were precluded also from speaking from the perspective of their gendered bodies.

This separation of intellection from feminine physicality can be seen operating in Esther throughout *The Bell Jar*. Again and again Esther dissociates from her physical self; when she shies away from self-harm on the basis that “what I wanted to kill wasn’t in the skin, but somewhere else, deeper” (Plath 142) she reveals a profound truth. Her being drawn towards suicide and self-destruction is based on feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing but these are not connected with her physicality. This is not to say that she is dissatisfied with her

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mind while at ease in her body, but that she has relegated her physical self to a position of such little relevance, so fully alienated, that it is not involved in her conception of herself. While “everyone I met in New York was trying to reduce” (Plath 23) she is able to gorge herself at buffets, restaurants, and banquets. Her body only gains significance when it stands between her and the eradication of her despised consciousness, as when it determinedly bobs to the surface of the sea.

The later poetry suggests that Plath, at least by the time of writing *The Bell Jar*, felt a strong sense of ownership of her body. In “Lady Lazarus” she declares:

There is a charge for the eyeing of my scars
There is a charge for the hearing of my heart.
It really goes. (*Ariel* 10)

Declaiming the actuality of her life force and her exclusive control of her person, the poem evokes an anger that recurs several times in *The Bell Jar*. From the undignified treatment of the woman giving birth at Buddy’s hospital and the unwelcome visitor who comes to “see what a girl crazy enough to kill herself looked like” (Plath 167), to the “eighteen separate eyes” judging Joan’s sanity, Esther rails against the invasion of state and male agency into the personal physicality of women.

The power of *The Bell Jar* is that, through the fictionalization of her own fight to find identity, Plath evokes the internal conflicts of a generation of women whose personalities were swaddled in oppressive layers of idealized images of how they should be as good Americans. Anne Stevenson, writer of the controversial Plath biography *Bitter Fame*, tells of the 1950s as:

. . . a period that I still find troubling to recall, precisely because duplicity was so closely woven into its fabric . . . we lied to each other and we lied to ourselves . . . When Ted Hughes writes about the struggle of Plath’s “true self” to emerge from her false one, he is surely writing about a historical as well as a personal crisis. (Malcolm 15)

Barred by ideology and the bell jar from direct participation in the world, Esther experiences this historical crisis within her psyche. Scrutinized through lenses, mirrors, milk-bottle glasses, and scientific vessels, her performances all emerge in the consciousness of a critical audience and are inseparable from the Cold War culture of surveillance. Esther’s true self is irrevocably fractured and

distorted because its formation occurred under the ideological compulsion to contain profound contradiction under the glossy veneer of polished glass.

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