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Female body in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar and Ariel

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1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* and her poetry collection *Ariel*, like much of her work, prominently feature imagery related to the female body. The body in question is not only observed through its physical appearance, but also by cross-examining its societal role. The author's early experiences with loss and familial detachment were deeply intertwined with her work, as Plath's confessional style offered a raw and intimate glimpse into her internal struggles. This thesis aims to coherently analyze and present how the notions of femininity, motherhood, and identity are embedded within Plath's writing. By examining *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*, this thesis will provide an overview of Plath's literary output in terms of sexuality, motherhood, and identity.

The early 1950s were particularly challenging for American society, a period marked by internal and external tensions. The Truman administration's declining popularity, Mao Tse-tung's redoubtable communist regime, and the Soviet advancements in atomic weaponry created a pervasive sense of instability and fear. This atmosphere of Cold War paranoia significantly influenced the collective consciousness of American citizens. Moreover, this fear extended to the domestic sphere, with American women being recognized as a significant yet underutilized source of intellectual power. Despite this recognition, societal norms pressured women into traditional roles as housewives, often at the expense of their education and personal aspirations. The cultural discourse of the time, reinforced by post-war cookbooks and domestic ideologies, sought to diminish women's roles in society, confining them to the home as wives, mothers, and homemakers.

By implementing Eva Illouz's concept of sexual capital, this thesis explores how Esther's journey in *The Bell Jar*, and female imagery in *Ariel*, reflect the broader societal pressures on women to conform to ideals of beauty, sexual desirability, and motherhood. At last, the thesis provides an overlook of Plath's perception of the female body in the context of nakedness and concealment, displaying it through what is considered masculine and feminine traits and styles of writing.

2. Sylvia Plath: Historical Context

Sylvia Plath's life and work have been subjects of extensive literary analysis, often intertwined with her tumultuous personal history. Born in Jamaica Plain, Boston, to Otto and Aurelia Plath, the poet had early in her life experienced loss and familial detachment. Otto Plath, a distinguished biologist, passed away when Plath was only eight, leaving an indelible mark on her psyche. This early separation from her father is often reflected in her works, as Plath frequently employed the motif of the paternal in her poetry. Her mother, Aurelia, was working as a professor at an all-female community college in New England and had a tense relationship with her daughter. Their relationship, like Plath's connection with her early deceased father, was also exhibited throughout her writing. Early in her childhood, Plath discovered a passion for writing and excelled in formal education, winning many awards for her literary output, primarily for her poetry. Only for the last seven years, has she worked as a professional poet (Bloom 11). She employed a "confessional" writing style and was inspired by many male confessional poets, such as Walter Whitman and Robert Lowell. Kathleen Margaret Lant mentions that Plath identified with mostly male writers because she found them "powerful", even though she was envious of their freedom and assertiveness (Lant 631). Because of this connection between men and power, she considered femininity limitative and draining. In her journals, she would often express her fear of coming across as "sentimental" and "emotional", which are some of the characteristics traditionally associated with feminine behavior (Lant 632). To prevent these "feminine" aspects from emerging from her writing, Plath opted for concealment. That is to say, she would hide the said feminine elements of her persona, which Lant compares to "a clothing of the inadequate female body" (Ibid.). When expressing her fascination for Virginia Woolf, Plath was mostly impressed by Woolf's capacity to escape and conceal her femininity (Ibid. 633). Therefore, Plath connected certain "weaknesses" to femaleness, a product of the dominant culture during 1950s America. Plath had considered the female body to be vulnerable and was therefore conflicted about her life as a woman, and her work as a poet.

Lant describes an instance in which, through the course of two years, Plath corresponded with a Chicago man named Eddie Cohen, who was a fan of her poetry. Namely, Plath revealed a lot of details from her personal life to Eddie, possibly because the great distance between them and the subsequent impossibility of developing an intimate relationship gave her a sense of security. Not long after, Plath felt exposed, feeling that she had revealed

too much of herself, and asked Eddie to send her letters back to her. Eddie refused her request, and after they met, he revealed that he was surprised by her lack of impulsiveness and spontaneity, implying that her personality was a "mask" (Lant 635). This kind of behavior on Plath's part can be interpreted in many ways, one of which is that she felt the necessity to hide her true self both in her writing and in her personal life. She maintained a false image of herself even around the people whom she was in close relationships with. Only when she was under the impression that the person wouldn't be able to apprehend the real her, she would lower her guard and discard her false persona. Lant describes this as "a war against herself", and emphasizes how, in her attempt to unshackle the female body, Plath subjected it to "a representational order which dictated its annihilation" (Ibid. 636). For Plath, navigating her creative aspirations and her female self became an issue, causing her to conceal her femaleness, as she mistakenly thought she was concealing her vulnerability.

In the introduction to his work *Bloom's Major Poets: Sylvia Plath*, Bloom claims that Plath's popularity is "worthy of critical meditation" (Bloom 9). He attributes this phenomenon to the beloved writer Maya Angelou as well and explains that she and Plath share a similar audience – people who usually do not read poetry. In Plath's case, he adds, the audience in question consists of feminists who idealize Plath as "a victim of male violence" (Bloom 9). The psychological notion "The Sylvia Plath concept", which implies that poets and intellectuals¹, in general, are more auto-destructive and prone to mental illnesses, was named after her². This proves that Plath's persona is deeply engraved in the cultural consciousness (Mitchell 16). In 2000, Martin Arnold evaluated that, at the time, there were around 104 books that dealt with Plath and her legacy, or which discussed her personal life to some extent (Mitchell 19). Interestingly, the number of books that addressed the lives and works of other notable poets, such as Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and others, was much lower. The commercialization of Plath's legacy can be viewed in many film adaptations of her life, one of them being the 2003 biopic *Sylvia*, starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Daniel Craig. As Paul Mitchell states in his work *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Negativity*, Sylvia's daughter Frieda was appalled by the BBC's biopic and thus banned the filmmakers from using excerpts from Plath's work (Mitchell 17). This resulted in the film mostly dealing with Plath's personal life with Ted Hughes and her suicide, rather than her poetry. However, the mentioned biopic was far more successful than

¹ E.g. Virginia Woolf.

² A research conducted by Arnold M. Ludwig confirmed that "members of the creative arts had higher lifetime prevalences of depression and mania than members of other professions" (Ludwig 1850).

the earlier adaptation of Plath's life, the infamous *The Bell Jar* from 1979. The film only loosely follows the events of Esther's life, even though it was meant to adapt the events from the novel. Furthermore, poor acting, screenplay, and directing had additionally worsened the film's quality, making it fail both critically and commercially (Maslin 1979). Such adaptations of Plath's life may be a result of massive public interest in her personal affairs, which occurred even before her literary success³, even though Mitchell claims that she had died in "relative obscurity" (Ibid. 15). Thus, practically every adaptation of the poet's life contains sensationalized elements from her life in order to attract a wider audience.

There is much to be said about the process of publishing Plath's works after her death, especially with her collection of poems, *Ariel*. Her ex-husband, also a known poet, Ted Hughes, had publicly admitted that he had significantly modified the original manuscript written by Plath (Mitchell 25). As Mitchell states, some poems containing a marital theme, such as 'The Rabbit Catcher', 'The Jailor', 'The Courage of Shutting-Up', and several others., were cut from the version that Hughes published. However, Hughes did not remove some arguably hostile-sounding poems, such as 'Daddy', 'The Applicant', and 'Fever 103', contradicting the assumption that his editing of the collection was entirely self-centered and preservational (Mitchell 28). Luckily, Plath had sent *Ariel* to various journals before her death, which ensured the publication of the original manuscript and, subsequently, the comparison with Hughes's version. In addition, Hughes admitted that he did not manage to cut as many poems as he wanted, because he did not have enough time. As Kathleen Margaret Lant states in her work *The Big Striptease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Ted Hughes is "quick to assert that her work is highly bound with very personal content" (Mitchell 623). Mitchell finds his reaction "interesting" considering that Plath's poems are not entirely autobiographical (Ibid. 28). On the contrary, in one instance, Plath even downplays the connection between her personal affairs and her work as a poet (Mitchell 29). Hughes's openly hostile attitude towards some of the poems, Mitchell describes, only produces a counter-effect, and encourages the reading of Plath's work as autobiographical (Ibid.).

After Plath's death, her possessions and authorship rights were managed by The Plath Estate. The estate was supervised by an estate agent and Ted Hughes's sister Olwyn, who had displayed a rather hostile policy to many scholars who dealt with Plath's life and work. In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose claims to focus on Plath's literary work, rather than

³ More specifically, her first suicide attempt had gained massive media attention. Later on, she obtained some recognition after the publication of *Colossus* (Mitchell 23).

on her personal life (Mitchell 21). However, Olwyn Hughes was deeply disturbed by this book because of Rose's alleged misinterpretation of Plath's sexuality in her analysis of the poem 'The Rabbit Catcher'. Furthermore, Ted Hughes also criticized Rose's reading and implied that such analysis can be dangerous and damaging. This assertiveness on Hughes's part suggests his necessity to control how Plath is interpreted (Mitchell 21). A similar incident had occurred with the writer Anne Stevenson, who was tasked by the Plath Estate to write an account of Sylvia's life. In the "Authors Note", Stevenson notes that her book was at first the fruit of dual authorship, which Mitchell interprets as a criticism of Olwyn Hughes and her assertiveness in the writing process of the book (22).

Bearing in mind the historical context of Plath's work, it is safe to state that modern readers gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of her legacy through the diverse interpretations available today, in spite of failed censorship attempts. Unlike the predominantly biographical and sensationalist interpretations that were popular in the 20th century, contemporary audiences can access critical analyses that explore the complexities of her work beyond her tragic persona. Therefore, Plath's contributions to confessional poetry and her impact on feminist literature today are widely recognized.

2.1. *The Rosenbergs, Soviet Paranoia, and the Housewife Syndrome*

The Rosenbergs were executed in the summer of 1953, the time when the events from *The Bell Jar* took place. They were accused of being Soviet spies, responsible for passing on American national defense secrets to Soviet officials, as well as recruiting other spies. Even though many⁴ suspected that they were innocent, nonetheless, they were electrocuted two years after being charged with espionage in 1951. Their prosecution and subsequent execution were greatly motivated by the space race and the anti-Communist frenzy that took place in the U.S. during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. In other words, the fear of soviet interference was instilled in the American people, mainly because the Soviets were, at the time, ahead of the Americans when it comes to developing their spaceflight capacity. In one part of the novel, Esther discusses the Rosenberg case with Hilda, another intern at the *Ladies' Day* magazine, who endorses the execution by saying "It's awful such people should be alive" (Plath 96). In another part of the novel, Esther considers sleeping with Constantin, a Russian interpreter who works for the UN. As Kate Baldwin elaborates in her article *The Radical Imaginary of The Bell*

⁴ For example, their sons Michael and Robert, as well as Walter and Miriam Schneir, had claimed that Julius and Ethel were used as scapegoats, and were therefore unjustly charged and executed (Parrish 806).

Jar, such a venture can be seen as "alarmingly un-American", as she would be "sleeping with the enemy" (Baldwin 31).

Michael E. Parrish suggests that the early 1950s were particularly difficult for the American society. Firstly, internal instability⁵ was fueled by the all-time low of the Truman administration. Secondly, Mao Tse-tung's governance was at its peak, with his communist regime posing a serious threat to the American sphere of influence. Lastly, the Soviets had established themselves as a serious opponent when it came to the development of atomic weaponry, putting at risk the American atomic monopoly (Parrish 806). Influenced by these circumstances, the consciousness of American citizens had been drastically altered. As Betty Friedan mentions in her revolutionary book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the Cold War paranoia also motivated American scientists to recognize American women as "the greatest source of unused brain-power" (Freidan 17). However, studying physics was considered "unfeminine", and young women were encouraged to pursue their lives as obedient housewives, regardless of their personal aspirations. Freidan explains that the percentage of female university students had dropped drastically at the beginning of the 1950s, and many of those who did attend university would drop out because they were getting married (16). Furthermore, the birth rate in the U.S. during the late 1950s was so high⁶ that it surpassed India's (Friedan 16). The Planned Parenthood⁷ movement made a great effort to appeal to the rather conservative post-war public and thus tried to find a way to ensure that women wouldn't abort children even if they were advised that their babies would be born deformed, or even dead (Friedan 16). Many women never had an occupation outside their household, with some of them only leaving the house to do the shopping, drive their children, or accompany their husbands to social events (Friedan 16). Friedan also mentions a phenomenon that reached an apex during the late 1950s: a third of women in the U.S. were employed, but hardly any of them were pursuing professional careers. To put it differently, the suburban housewife trope served as an ideal model for young American women. The ideal housewife had to possess traits that were considered feminine, such as being a good mother to her children, an obedient wife to her husband, and having no interest in the affairs that took place outside the family domain. This was often reflected in prominent pieces of media, such as *Life* magazine, which played a crucial role in shaping the cultural climate at the time. In the chapter *The Problem That Has*

⁵ For instance, the clashes between the Republican and Democratic parties (Parrish 806).

⁶ This increase was especially evident among college women (Freidan 17).

⁷ Previously known as the American Birth Control League.

No Name, Friedan explains that many women had realized that such a life was not only unfulfilling for them but that it drained them and made them feel like they "don't exist" (20). At the time, the social stigma surrounding women expressing any form of dissatisfaction caused this conversation to be long overdue. At first, the housewives resolved any form of disillusionment by occupying themselves with trivial ventures, such as furnishing the house, consuming sedatives, or having an affair. Discussing their doubts with other women posed an immeasurable risk, and thus it wasn't an option, or so they thought.

Author Jessamyn Neuhaus claims that cookbooks written after WWII were a fraction of a discourse that sought to diminish women's roles in society. More precisely, such discourse reinforced the image that women should only function as wives, mothers, or homemakers (Neuhaus 529). In her article *The Way to a Man's Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cookbooks in the 1950s*, Neuhaus investigates how post-war cookbooks were used as tools in reinforcing the repressive social norms of the 1950s. At the beginning of her article, she explains that to grasp the gender norms of a given era, it is necessary to question who is tasked with cooking for the family (Neuhaus 31). At that time, processed foods, such as prepackaged products, were becoming increasingly popular in the U.S. The main advantages of this type of food was its quick and simple preparation and its relatively good taste. American women were expected to be innovative when serving such foods, because "uninspiring" meals were interpreted as an unfeminine lack of effort (Neuhaus 533). To put it differently, women who did not take their time to make the food "presentable", and served it as it was, were seen as inadequate homemakers and indifferent to the prescribed nourishment requirements for their families. This obsession with altering processed foods, however, created a countereffect: the time that was saved preparing the meal was used on presenting the meal, thus not sparing any time at all. This way, processed foods had defined their initial purpose, which is convenience. Neuhaus proceeds to elaborate on this phenomenon by quoting Roland Barthes's description of ornamental cuisine:

"...there is an obvious endeavor to glaze surfaces, round them off, to bury the food under the even sediment of sauces, creams, icing, and jellies... Hence a cookery which is based on coatings and alibis, and is forever trying to extenuate and even to disguise the primary nature of foodstuffs, the brutality of meat or the abruptness of sea-food" (Barthes, *Mythologies*, 7, qt. in Neuhaus 534).

This transformation of food, according to Barthes, was a consequence of a post-war society that increasingly moved away from the "natural" and turned to mass production and artificiality. Such food modifications allowed housewives to achieve much-anticipated creativity in their cooking and thus impress their families. By altering food, women ensured their position in the household: although every member of the family knew how to prepare a ready-made dish or open a can, only the wife/mother knew how to make the dish special (Neuhaus 535). Food modification was the defense housewives utilized against the developing world. Thus, the component of traditional values that is the family dinner, was preserved despite the rapid changes in a post-war society.

In the year 1960, things began to change. The issues of a disenchanted housewife started gaining some attention in the media in TV programs such as *The Trapped Housewife* and in newspapers like *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* (Friedan 22). However, these displays were widely dismissed by random and inconsequential reasoning, such as blaming education and the loss of femininity as the sources of housewife dissatisfaction. As a solution for this educational "problem", home economists advised workshops on homemaking, while college educators suggested discussions on family and domestic living (Friedan 23). What is more, Friedan claims that "a number of educators suggested seriously that women no longer be admitted to the four-year colleges and universities..." (Friedan 23). Therefore, the focus was not on solving the issue by attempting to find out what exactly makes housewives unhappy, but on suppressing every form of female emancipation. In order to stifle the said emancipation, there was an attempt to deny women's right to education. Another way to deal with the issue was the proposition to impose mandatory nursing and babysitting services upon young women, but this suggestion was not taken seriously (Friedan 24). Moreover, the most common way of dealing with the "problem that has no name" was either dismissing it completely or pretending that the solution for it doesn't exist. Housewives were told that they had nothing to complain about since they enjoyed many benefits in their role, such as complete freedom to regulate the time and pace of their work, no threat of competition (unlike in the corporate world of their husbands), and the safety and commodity of their home.

Throughout the 1960s, the majority of organizations advocating for sexual egalitarianism were operating separately (Albert 47). In other words, there was very little cohesion and unity within the feminist ranks, up until the end of the decade. In 1968, women's

liberation protests took full swing⁸, and female activists began to organize in small groups to discuss plans, tactics, and goals. Generally, they would debate the rejection of beauty standards, topics related to contraception and abortion, personal experiences of sexual harassment, sexuality in general, and many other topics relevant to the female cause. Albert asserts that women's liberationists recognized the fact that women were sometimes unjustly treated within the ranks of the Civil Rights Movement. For instance, women were usually tasked with doing low-hierarchy jobs, such as being secretaries or assistants, and were often subjected to verbal and sexual abuse. Ironically, the Movement replicated the existing hierarchies in American society, and implemented them within its organizations, at the expense of women. Nonetheless, the emergence and participation in said protests had a positive effect on many women, as they started to realize that their voice, actions, and input could change the existing state for the better.

2.1.1. *Female writing*

The 1970s were marked by the emergence of radical feminism, a movement that brought about a critical reanalysis of women's writing. In her book *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979), Carolyn Heilbrun mentions evident perplexity when it comes to femaleness in literature. She elaborates that accomplished women writers are often "male-identified", and that this tendency represents a failure in regard to female identity (Heilbrun 103). This occurrence can be observed in Sylvia Plath as well, who subconsciously identified her creative output with maleness. Lant goes as far as to state, "When Plath thinks of herself as an artist, she thinks of herself as male" (Lant 644). In other words, Plath considered creativity a characteristic exclusive to masculinity. Lant elaborates on this with an example from Plath's diary, in which she compares the act of writing on a clean page with the act of rape, i.e., the desecration of an innocent body. This metaphor shows how Plath considered writing to be an assertive act, which places the writer in a position of power. In addition, Plath described in her diary the regret of not being able to practice freedom in the way that her male contemporaries do. She thought of this obstruction as a consequence of her feminine "vulnerability"; she is unable to live freely and experience the world in the way she desires to, because of her female body.

⁸ The demonstration at the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, in particular, was one of the first and most influential protests. Over two hundred women protested by throwing bras, shoes, etc. into the "freedom can" and hanging a women's liberation banner from the venue's balcony (Albert 48).

Perhaps Plath's perception of male vs. female creativity⁹ was shaped by the fact that, for a long time, the exercise of creative imagination was reserved exclusively for men (MacCharty 3). This is why Bridget G. MacCharty explains that "...women's contribution to fiction can only be judged in relation to their opportunities" (MacCharty 5). In addition, she draws attention to the "masculine condemnation" of female writing, which was present from the beginning of women's literary output (MacCharty 8). Concretely, the predominantly male reading public feared that female occupation with writing would inspire women to reject their social and domestic duties (MacCharty 8). In addition, the said public were apprehensive about female writing overshadowing the one created by male authors (MacCharty 8).

Judith Kegan Gardiner, in her work *On Female Identity and Writing by Women* (1981), discusses how feminist psychology, through the notion of female identity, elaborates on the distinctive features of modern writing by women (Gardiner 348). She goes on to explain that the concept of female identity is a particularly useful tool, particularly when used to narrate the ways in which male and female writings differentiate. The reason behind this usefulness is the fact that the said identity consists of several variables, and is, therefore, more descriptive than, say, a theory that encapsulates a singular opposition. Kegan Gardiner asserts that:

"In order to reach a theory of female identity, however, we must first adapt identity theory as it is now constituted by male theorists who assume a male paradigm for human experience" (Gardiner 348).

In other words, she believes that to explore what female identity consists of, the implementation of male-constructed identity theory is unavoidable. However, she emphasizes that "for every aspect of identity as men define it, female experience varies from the male model" (Gardiner 349). Therefore, the engagement of male-conceived identity theory is a result of the absence of female identity theory. This, however, does not mean that there is no variation between these two theories. In other words, the difference between feminine and masculine experience is omnipresent, making the human perspective not inherently masculine.

⁹ The main difference between the two, according to Plath, was the absence of the latter, i.e., female creativity was non-existent.

3. *The Bell Jar*: Femininity, Identity and Motherhood

The novel, which was published in 1963, was attributed to Victoria Lucas, a pseudonym Plath had used to hide her identity (Baldwin 22). Namely, Plath had opted for hidden authorship because she wanted to avoid revealing the identities of the people who inspired her characters in the novel (Mitchell 23). She was revealed as the real author of *The Bell Jar* after the novel was reissued by Faber & Faber in 1964. Expectedly, this issue gained more attention from critics and the general public than the one published a year prior. Furthermore, Plath's posthumous fame reached its peak only after the publication of *Ariel* in 1965, with the said collection becoming "one of the most successful poetry collections of the twentieth century" (Mitchell 25).

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, Jo Gill asserts that "the narrative voice of *The Bell Jar* is one of its greatest strengths" (Gill 78). By referencing the Rosenbergs case, the voice establishes a reassuring pattern throughout the novel: Esther is focused on the events that do not directly concern her and detached from others around her, as well as from herself (Gill 78). Esther herself addresses the bias of representation, even when it seems to originate from direct personal experience: "I never told anybody my life story, though, or if I did, I made up a whopper" (Plath 1). This implies that Plath intended for the readers to question everything she says, which is why Esther cautions against readily accepting something as true. (Bayley & Brain).

The Bell Jar is set in NYC and begins in the summer of 1953, i.e. "the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs" (Plath 1). Esther Greenwood is a young student who was, among eleven other girls, chosen for an internship at a fashion magazine in New York City. All of the girls were staying at the female-only hotel, Amazon, and were tasked with making some sort of contribution to the magazine. Esther is dissatisfied with her stay in NYC and feels as if she was not taking advantage of this new opportunity, as she states, "I was supposed to be having the time of my life" (Plath 2). Although she successfully passed the difficult selection process in which only candidates with exceptional short stories, poems, essays, and the like were awarded, this accomplishment did not bring her any particular satisfaction. However, despite her academic success and promising career prospects, she feels increasingly detached from her life and the people around her. The glittering world of New York only heightens her feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction.

During a taxi ride through town, Esther and Doreen meet Lenny, a quirky disc jockey who invites them to join him for drinks at his house. As Lenny approaches the girls, Esther notes: "...I didn't have any illusions. I knew perfectly well he'd come for Doreen" (Plath 8). Esther experiences another disappointment when she realizes that Frank, Lenny's friend she was set up with, is a man of below-average height. Here, once again, her femininity is called into question. Esther is dissatisfied with her physical body, mainly because she is frequently reminded of the importance of being attractive to gain social acceptance and professional opportunities. This can be observed in a sequence in which she comments on her "lack" of breasts when selecting an outfit for the night out with Doreen: "I was skinny as a boy and barely rippled" (Plath 7). In another excerpt, she mentions her height:

"I'm five feet ten in my stocking feet, and when I am with little men I stoop over a bit and slouch my hips, one up and one down, so I'll look shorter, and I feel gawky and morbid as somebody in a sideshow" (Plath 9).

Both of these physical characteristics, i.e. above-average height in women, and smaller breasts, are traditionally considered to be unfeminine traits. These misconceptions influenced the attitude Esther has toward her own body and make her ashamed of her appearance. In the excerpt in which she describes her height, it is obvious she succumbs to her insecurity of coming off as masculine; she twists her body in an attempt to make herself look shorter. Maybe she does so to deceive her shorter counterpart but is also afraid of being observed and ridiculed by the people in their surroundings. She points out that her height not only makes her feel masculine but also makes her feel like a circus freak. All in all, Esther's body does not meet the requirements of the ideal female body at the time. Given that the 1950s were much more conservative than today, such departures from the social norm have had a harder effect on women, particularly on girls.

Upon meeting Lenny and Frank, Esther decides to conceal her real identity. She introduces herself as Elly Higginbottom from Chicago and elaborates this by saying:

"After that I felt safer. I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston" (Plath 11).

Esther's complex self-perception causes her great difficulty in creating her own identity. She tries to solve this issue by creating a fake persona and detaching herself from society. That is why she considers that people would look at her differently in Chicago: "In Chicago, people

would take me for what I was" (Plath 127). She believes that no one would judge her for her past actions because they were the actions of her old self, unrelated to her new identity.

After returning from her outing with Dorren, Esther again negatively reflects on her appearance:

"I noticed 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" (Plath 17).

It should be noted that, throughout her narration, Esther often uses racially charged comparisons to describe herself, her friends, or other characters in the novel. In this case, she compares her worn-out appearance to that of a Chinese woman. From today's perspective, such descriptions could be seen as questionable, to say the least. However, social norms from the 1950s are significantly different from those that exist today, so there is a high chance that the utilization of such descriptions was not unusual at the time. It is worth noting, however, that the '60s were a time of great political change, such as the emergence of the Sit-ins, SNCC, which later fueled the Civil Rights Movement (Albert 6). Bearing in mind that the novel was published during the early sixties, racially motivated narratives, such as the ones mentioned, were examined more critically (Albert 12). Nonetheless, Esther's thoughts and actions are not equal to those of Plath, even though the novel is highly autobiographical. Therefore, identifying the character as the author is unjust. However, Plath's writing in this instance can be observed through Hywel Dix's idea of cultural memory and the genre of autofiction. According to Dix, "authors re-write dominant narratives about the world in which they work" (Dix 2). He discusses how particular texts place authors as typical members of a given culture, community, and so on, enacting the change from individual to collective narration that characterizes cultural memory (Dix 2). Such writers narrate their individual lives while simultaneously recounting the larger cultural context (Dix 2). Therefore, Esther's character personifies the anxieties of American women during the 1950s, as she reflects the cultural norms of that time. At last, Dix states that it is unreasonable to expect an individual author to act as a spokesperson for an entire community, let alone a city, nation, or culture. Autofiction allows authors to insert themselves¹⁰ as representative figures in stories about those

¹⁰ In this case, Plath and her cultural context are inserted through Esther's racially charged narration.

communities, telling their life stories in relation to the collective's larger stories and histories (Dix 2).

During her time in New York, Esther's perception of womanhood is mostly influenced by her friend Doreen, and her boss Jay Cee. Doreen and Jay Cee play out two completely different models of femininity for Esther. At first glance, it seems that these two women have nothing in common. Doreen is an attractive, easygoing, and to some extent rebellious young woman. She behaves noticeably differently from the other internship girls, which attracts Esther. Doreen lives her life by transgressing the limits of "proper" conduct for a young woman, such as frequently attending bars and not finishing her writing tasks on time. This way, she opposes the strictly prescribed rules of femininity and "appropriate" behavior. Jay Cee is a responsible, intelligent, and career-driven woman. She contrasts Doreen not only in character but also in appearance, as Doreen describes her as "ugly as sin" (Plath 5). When it comes to Jay Cee, Esther does not focus on her looks, but rather on her accomplishments and overall image:

"She wasn't one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter. She read a couple of languages and knew all the quality writers in the business" (Plath 5).

Esther considers her a motherly figure, as she states: "I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do" (Plath 36). Moreover, Jay Cee also defies feminine principles; she is an established and highly respected individual within her profession. Therefore, both Doreen and Jay Cee, in their own characteristic ways, exhibit similarity in their rejection of imposed feminine values. On the one hand, Esther is attracted to Doreen's freedom and casual attitude towards life, and on the other, she wants to be a career woman like Jay Cee. Esther loves and identifies with both of these women, even though they are substantially different.

Another interesting anti-feminine feature of the novel is Esther's relationship with food: "I'm not quite sure why it is, but I love food more than just about anything else" (Plath 24). For Esther, food holds sentimental value. She recounts visits to a country club where her grandfather worked and served her fancy meals, introducing her to delicacies such as "caviar and anchovy paste" (Plath 24). In Chapter Three, Esther describes in detail the food at the Ladies' Day magazine luncheon:

"The sight of all the food stacked in those kitchens made me dizzy. [...] I had bowed my head and secretly eyed the position of the bowls of caviar. [...] I paved my plate

with chicken slices. Then I covered the chicken slices with caviar thickly as if I were spreading peanut butter on a piece of bread. Then I picked up the chicken slices in my fingers one by one, rolled them so the caviar wouldn't ooze off, and ate them" (Plath 24-25).

These food indulgences seem to highlight Esther's stay in New York. What is more, her descriptions of food reflect a dose of selfishness; she wants to conquer someone else's portion and is preoccupied with preventing anyone from competing with her for her desired meal. Esther pays a lot of attention to the act of eating, primarily because she wants to perform it "properly". She feels observed by the others around her and tries to make her eating as feminine as possible, which contradicts her food-craving nature. After meeting a famous poet, whom she was introduced to by Jay Cee, she discovers that the rules of proper table manners do not apply to everyone equally. While all three of them were having lunch, she reckons, the poet used his fingers instead of cutlery to eat his salad in a rather disorderly manner. Nevertheless, his strange behavior did not seem to surprise anyone around them; "The poet made eating salad with your fingers seem to be the only natural and sensible way to do it" (Plath 25). Esther believes this is the case because the poet carries out this act in complete self-assurance, and that anyone can achieve the same result if they act confidently. She, however, neglects the fact that the poet in question is a man, and that his actions won't be as harshly judged as those of a woman. Despite Esther's infatuation with food, she claims that she does not possess a skill that is commonly associated with women and food, and that is the ability to cook: "I started adding up all the things I couldn't do. I began with cooking" (Plath 40). Regardless of her desire to practice complete femininity concerning food, she fails to achieve it in the aspect where such femininity is, traditionally, most evident. As previously explained¹¹, in the 1950s, cookery was among the most highly regarded skills a woman could possess. Except for her lack of cooking skills, Esther's compulsive eating contradicts the feminine ideal, as it is traditionally seen as a masculine trait. Her immense appetite, as Jo Gill states, was seen as "punishable gluttony" (Gill 78). This notion reappears later in the novel, when Esther is denied a meal after electroconvulsive therapy. After her treatments have terminated, Esther treats herself with an abundant breakfast, an act symbolizing "new life and hope" (Gill 77).

After returning home to Boston, Esther's mental health deteriorates, she becomes increasingly depressed and struggles with the pressure of societal expectations, her future, and

¹¹ Chapter two, Subchapter: *The Rosenbergs, Soviet Paranoia, and the Housewife Syndrome*.

her identity. She experiences a creative block, which makes her powerless in navigating emotions. Even though she spends most of the summer sleeping, she eventually develops insomnia. At last, Esther decides it is time to seek professional help. Not knowing that her problem is psychological, she visits her family doctor, who then redirects her to Dr. Gordon. After the psychotherapy with Dr. Gordon proves to be futile, she is scheduled for shock therapy at his hospital. In the following excerpt, Esther describes her eerie visit to Dr. Gordon's private hospital, fixating on the strange behavior of his patients:

"I focused more closely, trying to pry some clue from their stiff postures. I made out men and women, and boys and girls who must be as young as I, but there was a uniformity to their faces as if they had lain for a long time on the shelf, out of the sunlight, under siftings of pale, fine dust" (Plath 136).

[...]

"Then my gaze slid over the people to the blaze of green beyond the diaphanous curtains, and I felt as if I were sitting in the window of an enormous department store. The figures around me weren't people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life" (Plath 136).

Esther wonders if such disturbing scenes might present a foreshadowing of her future. The uncanny behavior of Dr. Gordon's patients indicates that they probably underwent electroconvulsive therapy and lobotomies, a common practice in dealing with mental illnesses during the 1960s (Kellner 220). In addition, such procedures were often performed without general anesthesia, as modes of modern anesthetic had not been developed at the time (Kellner 220). Esther's skepticism towards Dr. Gordon proves to be justified, and after her traumatizing experience with shock therapy, she decides to terminate her treatments completely.

After her failed suicide attempt, Esther is placed in a private mental hospital where she meets Dr. Nolan, a female psychiatrist. Dr. Nolan attests to be quite unconventional in her approach to psychiatry and is utterly opposed to Dr. Gordon's practices. Still mistrustful of Dr. Nolan's intentions, Esther begs her not to force her to undergo shock treatments, especially without informing her beforehand. Dr. Nolan promises to do so, and the two form a trusting relationship. Like with Jay Cee, Esther sees Dr. Nolan as a motherly figure but also admires her for her professional achievements. As Mariana Cheves Peterson claims, of all the female characters in the novel, the only person Esther manages to create bonds with is Doctor Nolan (Peterson 62). Eventually, Esther is again subjected to electroconvulsive therapy. She sees this

as an act of betrayal and believes she was let down by Dr. Nolan, one of, if not the only, person she trusts. After her first treatment, she notes: "Doctor Nolan put her arm around me and hugged me like a mother" (Plath 203). Perhaps this tendency of searching for a motherly figure among professionally accomplished and career-driven women stems from her resentment towards her biological mother's ordinariness:

"My mother was the worst. She never scolded me, but kept begging me, with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong" (Plath 195).

Therefore, Esther's complex relationship with her own mother forces her to look for her replacement in other women.

"I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, [...], and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. 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" (Plath 73).

The fig tree analogy is one of the most famous excerpts from *The Bell Jar* (Smith 2). To illustrate her existential struggles, Esther uses the story from the book she had received from the "good friends" at Ladies' Day. The story deals with a Jewish man and a Catholic nun, who would pick figs together from the tree between the man's house and a convent. They meet there up until the day they witness a bird hatching from an egg in a nest on one of the branches. By accident, they touch each other's hands, and the nun no longer returns to pick the figs. Afterward, she is replaced by an angry kitchen maid, who takes count of the figs to make sure that both she and the man have picked the same amount. Esther is faced with many options for her future: she can follow the path of many women before her and become a housewife, she can establish herself as a poet, a professor, or an editor, she can travel the world, have many lovers, and things as such. However, she finds herself lost in all these options, for the reason that she wants to have them all. The figs, or paths, are mutually exclusive: she can choose one, but that would mean suffering the loss of all the others. Her indecisiveness causes her to starve

to death, as she is unable to select her path. Bearing in mind the 1950s rules of femininity, it is evident that Esther "...suffered from wanting so much in a world that did not allow women to want anything at all" (Wurtzel qt. in Gill 77). Her food indulgences are highlighted yet again, as she seeks to fulfill her physical desires in a world where women must focus on feeding others rather than themselves (Wurtzel qt. in Gill 77).

Like many girls of her age, Esther places great importance on the preservation of her "chastity", or more specifically, her virginity;

"When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue. Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and Black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only significant difference between one person and another. I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line" (Plath 77).

She plans on abstaining from sex before meeting and marrying the right man. For a long time, she believed this man would be Buddy Willard, her childhood crush and a student of medicine at Yale University, who was a few years her senior. For several years, she had admired Buddy from afar and firmly believed that he did not even register her existence. This assumption proved to be false after Buddy invited her to join him at his university Junior Prom. As their relationship solidifies, Esther realizes that he is not the person she thought him to be. Firstly, she recalls some patronizing comments Buddy had made when they were discussing her passion for poetry. Secondly, his traditional values start to irk her more and more, as she realizes that her future as a poet comes into question in the event that she marries Buddy. Lastly, Esther experiences the biggest disillusionment after she learns that Buddy has been sexually active. She thinks of his act as a transgression of purity and grows resentful towards him. She feels betrayed by Buddy, and considers him to be a hypocrite; despite his well-adjusted exterior, he is a phony. This causes her to change her view on virginity, as she states;

"Ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck. It had been of such enormous importance to me for so long that my habit was to defend it at all costs. I had been defending it for five years and I was sick of it" (Plath 218).

Yet again, Esther rejects traditional values and prescriptive feminine behavior. Despite her socially commendable lifestyle, years of living chastely and protecting her image had only

brought her betrayal and discouragement. Soon after this turning point in her life, Esther almost gets raped by Marco, a self-proclaimed womanizer whom she met through a friend. Shortly after meeting him, she states:

"Marco's small, flickering smile reminded me of a snake I'd teased in the Bronx Zoo. When I tapped my finger on the stout cage glass the snake had opened its clockwork jaws and seemed to smile. Then it struck and struck and struck at the invisible pane till I moved off" (Plath 101).

By comparing Marco to a snake, Esther evokes an image of a sly, untrustworthy, and dangerous individual, a man whose intentions inherently collide with hers. Even though she no longer needs to defend her virginity, she does see Marco as a suitable mate. At the end of their date, he violently attacks her by throwing her on the ground and lying on top of her. Esther manages to fight back by biting and striking him in the face, which results in him backing away. As he retreats, he calls Esther "a slut" (Plath 105). This disturbing scene attaches another strain to Esther's already complex relationship with sexuality. The instance in which she was closest to engaging in a sexual act was violent, traumatizing, and out of her control. This contradicts her decision to take matters of sex into her own hands.

When discussing sexuality in *The Bell Jar*, the notion of nakedness is crucial and omnipresent in Plath's writing. Her approach in writing about body and nakedness, as the approach of other female writers in the 1950s, greatly differs from that of their male counterparts. Feminist literary scholar Shari Benstock states that female writers are more aware of their "otherness", as their experience of the social and political effects of the phallic law is influenced by the law of gender (Benstock 9). Ketu Katrak states that "the female body is in the state of exile including self-exile and self-censorship, outsidership, and un-belonging to itself within ... patriarchy" (Katrak 2). This "self-exile" and "self-censorship" Katrak speaks of indicates that the notion of concealment of the body is intertwined within female writing. Not only is the concept of body concealment not popular in male writing, but the works of male authors exhibit completely different views of corporality. According to Kathleen Margaret Lant, the male writers present the male body as something that "betokens joyous transcendence, freedom, power" (Lant 624). For Plath, however, the body does not stand as something that encapsulates glory but as an "embarrassing reminder of the self's failures, an icon of the poet's vulnerability" (Lant 625). Therefore, Plath's works exhibit how the female body is associated with fear, vulnerability, and entrapment, rather than strength, impenetrability, and freedom, as

is the case with male writers and male bodies¹². In other words, the symbol of the naked body functions differently in the female context compared to the male context. To exemplify this, Lant uses the example of the unclothed male body as a symbol of strength and potency. This view on the bare male body is frequent in the Western discourse, which sees the naked male body as "sexually armed" (Lant 626). On the contrary, the female unclothed body is often, if not always, viewed as fragile and defenseless against "penetration, rape, and pregnancy" (Ibid.). The reason for this can be, as Brownmiller explains, the perception of male genitalia as a weapon and a source of fear, which had deeply influenced the public discourse (Brownmiller qt. in Lant 628). Therefore, Plath used masculine tropes to create figures of creativity (Ibid. 630).

The instance in which Esther finally loses her virginity comes about almost at the end of the novel. During her time at Belsize, she was allowed the privilege of visiting the nearby town. On one of her outings, at the stairs of a public library, she meets Irwin. This young mathematics professor invites Esther for coffee and dinner, by the end of which she decides to have sex with him. In this instance, she chooses her partner on the grounds of sexual appeal and character compatibility, rather than on traditional parameters, such as a good reputation or socio-economic background. In line with Eva Illouz's interpretation of "good" sex, Esther's choice was influenced by her rejection of traditional, domestic sex as the only appropriate form of sexual conduct (30). All in all, the decision to indulge in sexual activities presents a huge milestone for Esther, as she notes: "I lay, rapt and naked, on Irwin's rough blanket, waiting for the miraculous change to make itself felt" (Plath 218). However, the "miraculous change", as she describes it, seemed to be quite underwhelming, except in terms of physical pain.

"Then the stories of blood-stained bridal sheets and capsules of red ink bestowed on already deflowered brides floated back to me. I wondered how much I would bleed, and lay down, nursing the towel. It occurred to me that the blood was my answer. I couldn't possibly be a virgin any more. I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition" (Plath 219).

¹² Terrence Diggory asserts that such a difference between masculine and feminine poetry is reflected in the fact that female confessional verse seems more "closed" compared to the poetry written by men (Diggory qt. in Lant 625). Diggory goes on to question the female poets' escape from nakedness and the necessity for protection, but, as Lant states, neglects one important issue: the difference in the physical experience of nakedness between the genders (Lant 626).

Esther feels relief after getting rid of the "burden" that is her virginity. Even though the act itself wasn't particularly pleasant, she is thankful to have it over with. In a way, Esther invests her body because she believes she will get something in return. In her case, she seeks freedom in the form of a redefined identity. As Kaplan & Illouz state in the introduction to *What Is Sexual Capital?* (2022), women were valued through the lens of chastity, which became their sexual capital (5). Specifically, this was the case in Christian societies, where a woman's virginity indicated her commitment to God and religious principles. If a woman preserved her chastity, she enjoyed a good reputation and consequently earned the title of a "high-value" woman. This connection between sex and capital is further explained by Kaplan and Illouz, who assert that: "if sexuality is a form of capital, this is because it uses attributes that also maintain the domination of women by men" (8). In other words, women do not benefit from their sexual capital, as it does not resolve the gap between the genders, but rather utilizes it to create more inequality. This is exemplified in the following definition of sexual capital:

"According to the thesis of the commodification of sex, the main problem with contemporary forms of sexuality is that, instead of liberating human beings, sexuality has become yet another realm conquered by capitalism" (Kaplan & Illouz 15).

Esther wants to pursue freedom, but her intention is fruitless because neoliberal rationality has disrupted the meaning of freedom. Her interactions with men also reflect the influence of sexual capital; they are often fraught with power imbalances, as well as with societal expectations about gender roles and sexuality. For example, this was evident in Buddy Willard's patronizing attitude and traditional views on women's qualities. Esther's battle to assert her autonomy in her relationships with men underscores the tension between her personal aspirations and the limitations imposed by societal norms. Therefore, the pressure to accumulate and prolong sexual capital contributes to her deteriorating mental health. Her descent into mental illness is a result of the overwhelming demands of navigating a world where her value is constantly measured by her sexual desirability and conformity to prescribed roles. At the same time, she grapples with the desire to reject the norms associated with sexual capital, as she is reluctant to marry and conform to traditional domestic roles.

When it comes to the topic of sexual capital, a madonna whore dichotomy is present in a conversation Esther has with Eric, a "hawk-nosed" Yale student. During their discussion on sexuality, Eric compares women who are sexually active to animals, as he states:

"...if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business" (Plath 75).

This view Eric has on female sexuality emanates from his inability to accept women as full-fledged, complex, and sexual human beings. He separates sexuality from women, as he is unable to accept it as something natural, and inherently human. Therefore, he separates women into two categories: those who are chaste and deserve respect (the madonna), and those who are sexually active, or "animalistic" (the whore). Ironically, he doesn't scrutinize his own sexuality, and will "...go to a whore if he had to" (Plath 75). Despite his views on sex, which contradict Esther's, she still considers sleeping with him. Nevertheless, Eric places Esther within the "madonna" category, and they break contact soon after.

Esther's education was partially funded by the wealthy novelist Philomena Guinea, who, because of her prolific poetry career, gained Esther's respect.

"Mrs. Guinea answered my letter and invited me to lunch at her home. That was where I saw my first fingerbowl. The water had a few cherry blossoms floating in it, and I thought it must be some clear sort of Japanese after-dinner soup and ate every bit of it, including the crisp little blossoms. Mrs. Guinea never said anything, and it was only much later, when I told a debutante I knew at college about the dinner, that I learned what I had done" (Plath 38).

When dining at Miss Guinea's home, Esther mistakenly consumes the contents of a finger bowl. Such bowls are used for washing one's fingers before and after eating. This faux pas on Esther's behalf indicates her lack of exposure to fine dining. The unfamiliarity with table manners highlights the class difference between her and Miss Guinea. Despite attending a prestigious university, Esther comes from a middle-class background. In one instance, she even mentions that Philomena Guinea was "buying her freedom". This incident underscores Esther's sense of alienation in an affluent environment.

When visiting Buddy at Yale, Esther beholds a disturbing sight of cadavers and bottled-up babies.

"These cadavers were so unhuman-looking they didn't bother me a bit. They had stiff, leathery, purple-black skin and they smelt like old pickle jars. After that, Buddy took me out into the hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies

that had died before they were born. [...] I was quite proud of the calm way I stared at all these gruesome things" (Plath 59).

On a surface level, she seems to be unimpressed by these sights. Nevertheless, it may be that she tries to display an image of indifference in order to impress Buddy Willard. In other words, she avoids expressing any emotion because that is her defense against Buddy's patronizing tendencies. As previously mentioned, Buddy is fairly conservative when it comes to his expectations of women; he considers Esther to be his subordinate.

During the same visit, Esther and Buddy witness a woman giving birth:

"You oughtn't to see this" Will muttered in my ear. 'You'll never want to have a baby if you do. They oughtn't to let women watch. It'll be the end of the human race" (Plath 61).

This statement from Will, a young doctor and friend of Buddy, aligns with the traditional trope of women being emotionally unstable. Therefore, he tries to "protect her" by advising her not to witness the childbirth.

"I was so struck by the sight of the table where they were lifting the woman I didn't say a word. It looked like some awful torture table, with these metal stirrups sticking up in mid-air at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes I couldn't make out properly at the other. [...] The woman's stomach stuck up so high I couldn't see her face or the upper part of her body at all. She seemed to have nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs propped in the high stirrups, and all the time the baby was being born she never stopped making this unhuman whooping noise" (Plath 61).

[...]

"... the baby's head stuck for some reason, and the doctor told Will he'd have to make a cut. I heard the scissors close on the woman's skin like cloth and the blood began to run down -- a fierce, bright red" (Plath 62).

Unlike the sight of the cadavers and the pickled babies, Esther is deeply distressed by the scenes from the delivery room. She thinks of childbirth as something violent, oppressive, and even humiliating. The woman giving birth has no control over her body, she is sedated and unaware of what is happening. This is because of a drug she was given, which enabled her to forget all

the troubles labor had brought her and focus on producing more offspring. Because of this, Esther asks herself if there is "another way to have babies" (Plath 63). Motherhood has been celebrated as the peak of womanhood, a flourishing of female potential. Several times throughout the novel, Esther expresses her resentment towards motherhood, consequently questioning her femininity. Such a view on childbirth and motherhood deeply opposes the patriarchal definition of what a woman should think like. Furthermore, Esther fears motherhood and marriage will result in a loss of identity, something she greatly values.

4. *Ariel*: Femininity, Identity and Motherhood

4.1. *Barren Woman*

Plath's 'Barren Woman' is a poignant exploration of infertility, loss, and wasted potential, as the poem's speaker uses stark and disturbing imagery to convey a profound sense of emptiness and yearning.

Empty, I echo to the least footfall,
Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 1-2).

The speaker begins the poem by describing herself as "empty," drawing attention to a profound sense of void. The metaphor of a "museum without statues" suggests a space meant for grandeur and significance, yet devoid of its intended purpose. The "pillars, porticoes, rotundas" evoke an image of classical architecture, and thus further emphasize the intended beauty and glory that now feel meaningless in the absence of content.

In my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself,
Nun-hearted and blind to the world (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 3-4).

In the image of a fountain "leaping and sinking back into itself" the speaker's internal experience of recurring hope and disappointment is symbolized by this cyclical futility. The description "nun-hearted" is connected to chastity and solitude, while "blind to the world" indicates a disconnect from life by reinforcing themes of isolation and barrenness.

I imagine myself with a great public,
Mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 6-7).

The narrator envisions herself surrounded by numerous admirers or followers. Therefore, the speaker feels a need for recognition, validation, and perhaps the fulfillment of her creative or maternal potential on a grand scale. Plath uses Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, to depict a powerful, winged figure. "White" possibly symbolizes purity, triumph, or a romanticized form of creation or offspring. Apollo, another figure from Greek mythology, represents beauty, arts, and knowledge. The speaker imagines herself as a mother to these mythological and significant figures, which symbolizes a desire to create or give birth to something extraordinary and meaningful.

Instead, the dead injure me attentions, and nothing can happen.

Blank-faced and mum as a nurse (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 8-10).

The speaker is haunted by the "dead", which can be interpreted as memories, lost dreams, or past failures¹³. This image occupies her thoughts and attention, causing her emotional pain and preventing her from moving forward or creating a new life. The phrase "nothing can happen" emphasizes a sense of stagnation and impotence. Therefore, the presence of the "dead" hinders any potential for change, growth, or new creation.

4.2. *Lady Lazarus*

In this poem, the body is described in various states of destruction and resurrection, which symbolize Plath's ongoing struggle with mental illness. One of the most familiar poems included in *Ariel*, 'Lady Lazarus' is replete with images of rebirth and seizing control of one's own body.

A sort of walking miracle, my skin

Bright as a Nazi lampshade

[...]

Peel off the napkin

O my enemy (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 4-5, 10-11).

Phrases like "peel off the napkin" and "my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade" suggest the notion of nakedness, stripping away the outer layers, exposing the vulnerability underneath. It can be seen as a metaphor for revealing her true self, stripped of societal expectations and pretenses. In this context, the body is used as a site of control and rebellion. By stripping away the external, the inner self exposes itself in its true form, possibly opposing the rules of the outside world.

Plath believed that her body, like all female bodies, made her prone to male-perpetrated sexual violence and aggression, and consequently restricted her experience as a human and a poet. Her ex-husband Ted Hughes had observed the two contradicting polarities that marked her writing; her life as a woman and the notions she used to describe the female experience in her work, and her usage of elements of masculine strength, which she used to showcase her creativity (Lant 647). He goes on to explain how Plath felt the need to "bare herself" (Lant 647) just like the poets who inspired her had done, but was unable to do so because she was forced to hide her "vulnerable existence as a woman" (Lant 647). Lant asserts how, for Plath, the

¹³ In this context, past failures may represent miscarriages.

much-desired self-revelation was inevitably accompanied by a sense of danger (Lant 647). For this reason, she exercised assertiveness in her metaphorical "masculine" world, and caution in her reality as a woman. Lant notes that, in her writing, Plath conducts a war between two different fragments of herself; Plath as a metaphorical "masculine creator", and the feminine motif she addresses (Ibid. 648). In the said war, she uses sexual metaphors that reflect cultural hierarchies of power, and thus, everything that represents femininity is eradicated. The motif of femaleness in her poems is often threatened by the "male creator" and, at times, even completely annihilated. As Lant concludes, the female body in Plath's poetry is never used as a representation of ascendancy; on the contrary, even though the said body symbolizes Plath herself, it is more often than not subjected to violence and destruction¹⁴.

Out of the ash
 I rise with my red hair
 And I eat men like air (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 82-84).

The final stanza conveys a powerful assertion of autonomy and vengeance, indicating that the speaker will no longer be a victim. The speaker reclaims her power in spite of the world that tries to ruin her. The recurring imagery of rebirth symbolizes her determination to assert her identity, contrasting the forces that are trying to overpower her. All in all, the reclamation of power is both personal and political, as it challenges the patriarchal structures that intend to be in charge of women's lives.

4.3. *Ariel*

There are three popular interpretations of 'Ariel': it is a poem that deals with a horse Plath had owned, the holy city of Jerusalem, or the spirit named Ariel from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Bloom specifically reflects on the critical view of William V. Davis, who claims that the poem most probably deals with Jerusalem, or more specifically, with Judaism (Bloom 61). Davis states that Plath had an "obsession" with Judaism, and explains this by mentioning the imagery Plath had used in her famous poem 'Daddy'. In the said poem, the narrator compares her father to a nazi soldier, and herself to a Jewish inmate. In addition, Davis alleges that the line "Gods lioness" touches upon the Hebrew phrase Ariel, or "lion of God". Moreover, he mentions the poem 'Years' as another example of Plath combining religious bliss with horse symbolism. In the mentioned poem, the poetic subject experiences a deeply personal religious

¹⁴ Plath's poetry has been regarded as "violent" and "self-destructive" especially when placed in context with her suicide (Lant 649).

experience and thereafter tries to elucidate this experience to the reader (Bloom 62). Davis asserts that in both 'Ariel' and 'Years', the reader comes into the same prophetic essence. In both poems, Plath identifies the imagery of darkness and stasis as a "religious mystery", and recognizes both emotional and religious stagnation (Bloom 62). At last, both poems remain in the aforementioned darkness.

As for the poem's contents, it is replete with images of movement. At first glance, the poem depicts horseback riding, but on a deeper level, it deals with "ecstasy and revelation" (Bloom 61).

Stasis in darkness.

[...]

Hauls me through the air

Thighs, hair;

Flakes from my heels (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 1, 16-18).

The poem is static at first but then accelerates the pace through the description of the speed and intensity of light, and this leads the speaker to the so-called purification. In the first stanza, stillness is connected to darkness, signifying this lack of movement as something negative. As the poem progresses, the narrator distances herself from her old self and approaches the glimmering future. The narrator may die in the process, but she is liberated because her death creates a new life, a rebirth of sorts.

White

Godiva, I unpeel

Dead hands, dead stringencies (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 19-21).

The beginning of this stanza contrasts with the first stanza, which displays dark and static imagery. The appearance of the word "white" suggests that there is a forthcoming transformation through which the narrator moves on her way to liberation. By referencing Lady Godiva, Plath is reinforcing the notion of nakedness. This notion is also reinforced by the word "peel", which indicates that the narrator is free of darkness once her surface deadness is discarded. Once again, the image of nakedness is reinforced. Since Godiva's complexion was rather white, Bloom suggests that she used this image to contrast the blackness in the previous lines (Bloom 59).

As Bloom asserts in his thematic analysis of the poem, the last word "morning" sounds like "mourning", which bespeaks the idea of reincarnation - "the idea that something must die in order for something new to be born" (Bloom 58).

4.4. *Nick and the Candlestick*

This poem addresses Plath's son, Nick, and blends themes of motherhood, nature, and existential despair with vivid and surreal imagery.

I am a miner. The light burns blue.

Waxy stalactites

Drip and thicken, tears

The earthen womb

Exudes from its dead boredom.

Black bat airs (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 1-6).

In the first stanza, the word "miner" probably represents a mother, and the "earthen womb" is her uterus. Motherhood is presented as an unfamiliar cave, which the speaker needs to learn how to navigate. In doing so, the speaker suggests that nourishing this new life depletes her and generates fear. She feels worn out and estranged, as caring for her son diminishes her resources. The light that guides her "burns blue", indicating that its flame is close to extinguishing. In other words, as the speaker gets deeper into motherhood, her strength gradually diminishes.

Wrap me, raggy shawls,

Cold homicides.

They weld to me like plums (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 7-9).

The speaker also says she is wrapped in "raggy shawls" that do not manage to keep her warm. As the speaker's tools grow sparse, her ability to care for herself and for her child decays along with them.

Its yellows hearten.

O love, how did you get here?

O embryo

[...]

In you, ruby.

The pain

You wake to is not yours.

Love, love,

I have hung our cave with roses,

With soft rugs—

[...]

You are the one

Solid the spaces lean on, envious.

You are the baby in the barn. (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 22-24, 27-33, 40-43).

The speaker refers to her body as a "cave" and an "echoer", indicating a vast, empty space. This way, motherhood has transformed her body from a place of vitality into one of desolation. The speaker sees herself as a shell of her former self, and is unable to imagine how her inhospitable womb once nurtured her child, asking him, "how did you get here?". As she mourns her body, her mortality becomes apparent—just one among many fears that motherhood generates. The speaker's experience of early motherhood is treacherous, as fear and exhaustion act as additional burdens that she must carry. However, she must remain calm despite her difficulties, as societal norms prevent her from expressing her despair. In this poem, Plath provides a radically authentic account of motherhood by disclosing the many unsettling challenges that come with it.

4.5. *The Rival*

Although some critics¹⁵ believe this poem was written about Ted Hughes's mistress, Assia Wevill, Jessica Meheta offers a different perspective. She argues that the main topic of 'The Rival' is a miscarried child. On the other hand, Robin Peel argues that the poem is directed toward Plath's mother, Aurelia (Peel qt. in Meheta 51). Namely, Plath would often lead a written correspondence with her mother, and the poem might reference this in the line "arrive through the mailslot with loving regularity" (Plath, *Ariel*, line 14). Susan Schwartz agrees with Peel, and adds that the "moon" symbolizes Aurelia, just like in the poem 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', also featured in *Ariel* (Meheta 51). Vivian Pollak introduces another interpretation by claiming that "the rival" in question is Marianne Moore, a poet who criticized Plath's work (Meheta 51). All in all, this analysis will focus on Meheta's perspective, which places children and miscarriage as the main motifs of the poem.

The idea that 'The Rival' refers to a miscarriage stems from Plath's own experience with spontaneous abortion in 1961. Meheta particularly reflects on the first three lines of the first stanza: "If the moon smiled, she would resemble you./ You leave the same impression/ Of something beautiful, but annihilating" (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 1-3). She elaborates that babies can be described as "annihilating" because they are in need of constant attention and assistance, consequently annihilating the mother. Nonetheless, the loss of the baby destroys the mother even more (Meheta 53). Such instance is described in the following lines of the second stanza:

And your first gift is making stone out of everything.
I wake to a mausoleum; you are here,
Ticking your fingers on the table, looking for cigarettes,
Spiteful as a woman, but not so nervous.
And dying to say something unanswerable (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 6-10).

Here, Meheta connects the "stone" and "mausoleum" to the Greek myth of a lithopedion. A lithopedion, or "stone baby", is a phenomenon in which a fetus is too large to be absorbed by the mother (Meheta 53) As a result, the mother experiences a miscarriage in which the fetus externally calcifies (Meheta 53). Waking up in the "mausoleum", Meheta adds, could translate to discovering the loss of the fetus (Meheta 53). The line "spiteful as a woman, but not so nervous" can be attributed to Plath's daughter Freida, as she was a young girl at the time the

¹⁵ E.g. Suhair Nafie Abdul Aziz Al-Shaia (Meheta 52).

poem was written. Thus, the speaker claims Frieda exhibits behavior common in adult women, but she is still a little girl.

In the last stanza, there is a mention of traveling to Africa: "No day is safe from news of you / Walking about in Africa maybe, but thinking of me" (Plath, *Ariel*, line 17). Meheta interprets these two lines as the speaker's longing for adventure, something unavailable to her due to her responsibilities as a mother. Sylvia Plath has mentioned in some of the letters to her mother that, she too, yearns for this nonchalant lifestyle (Meheta 53). Thinking back on the first stanza, perhaps this entrapment is yet another annihilating aspect of motherhood.

4.6. *Fever 103*

This poem consists of themes of illness, purification, and transcendence. In addition, it deals with the bare self, sexuality, and sin, among other motifs. The poem is written in free verse, allowing Plath the flexibility to explore her themes without the constraints of a regular meter or rhyme scheme.

Pure? What does it mean?
 The tongues of hell
 Are dull, dull as the triple
 The flames are killing
 Themselves in the air (Plath, *Ariel*, lines 1-5).

The poem opens with a questioning of purity, immediately setting a tone of introspection and skepticism. The flames "killing / Themselves in the air" suggest self-destruction and futility, reinforcing the theme of a purgatorial state. In the third stanza, the omnipresent flames are now transforming the speaker.

In the line "I am too pure for you or anyone" (Plath, *Ariel*, line 34), the speaker expresses her alienation from the world. That is, she distances herself from the rest of humanity, and is now both triumphant and isolated. This misplacement can be connected to the theme of the "improper" practice of femininity which is exhibited in *The Bell Jar*. The transformative process through which the speaker undergoes describes both destruction and purification.

However, Lant asks an important question:

"Where is the self that Plath seems to be trying so hard to uncover? Although the movement of the poem leads us to expect some revelation, when we look with anticipation, there is no one there" (642).

She also adds that the poem cannot be interpreted as an ode to the new self, a rebirth of a sort, or as something liberating because there is nothing left. As the external in the poem is burned, the inner body is "eradicated" as well (642). In addition, it is worth noting that poems like 'Fever 103°' have caused Plath's poetry to be decried as "sick verse", schizophrenic, or even pathological, and her aesthetic violations have often been described as excess without a cause, or the simple result of hopelessly "bad taste" (Wurst 24).

5. Conclusion

Plath's *The Bell Jar* and her poetry collection *Ariel* offer profound insights into the themes of femininity, sexuality, and identity. Through these works, Plath explores the intricate and often painful journey of self-discovery in the context of societal expectations and personal turmoil.

The socio-political context of the 1950s is crucial when discussing Plath's writings, as they were marked by Cold War anxieties and rigid gender norms. This atmosphere of Cold War paranoia significantly influenced the collective consciousness of American citizens, including their perceptions of gender roles. The era's emphasis on domesticity and the suppression of female intellectual and professional aspirations contributed to widespread dissatisfaction among women. In addition, the cultural narrative enforced through media, education, and even cookbooks reinforced a narrow view of women's roles, stifling their potential and perpetuating a cycle of repression. The feminist movements of the 1960s, with their emphasis on rejecting beauty standards and advocating for reproductive rights and sexual autonomy, introduced a change necessary for the improvement of women's societal norms.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's journey highlights the tension between individual aspirations and collective expectations. Plath's portrayal of Esther's complex self-perception and resistance to conventional roles serves as a poignant critique of the limitations imposed on women. Ultimately, *The Bell Jar* remains a powerful exploration of the ways in which sexual capital shapes and distorts female identity, offering a timeless reflection on the challenges women face in asserting their autonomy and achieving genuine fulfillment. Through Esther Greenwood's story, Plath not only captures the essence of her own struggles but also provides a resonant commentary on the broader societal dynamics that continue to influence women's lives today. The novel's enduring relevance underscores the ongoing need to critically examine and challenge the structures that define and confine women's societal functions. Moreover, Esther's experiences with mental health care reflect broader critiques of the medicalization of women's bodies and minds.

The *Ariel* collection continues this exploration with intense and vivid imagery, delving into the themes of transformation and rebirth. In poems like 'Ariel' and 'Lady Lazarus', Plath examines the process of shedding old identities and confronting inner demons, ultimately seeking empowerment and liberation. These poems reflect a fierce grappling with personal and sexual identity, framed within the broader context of femininity. Authors such as Betty Friedan,

Eva Illouz, and Jo Gill provide a valuable framework for analyzing Plath's representations of struggles with beauty standards, sexual relationships, and the pressures to conform to prescribed gender roles.

In conclusion, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* offer a rich and multifaceted exploration of the impact of sexual capital on female identity. Through the lens of Esther Greenwood's experiences, *The Bell Jar* critiques the societal norms that constrain women's lives and highlights the ongoing struggle for autonomy and self-definition. Throughout the *Ariel* collection, Plath juxtaposes the roles of mother and individual, revealing the tension between personal freedom and societal expectations. Sylvia Plath's writings continue to resonate with readers, offering valuable insights into the complexities of gender, mental health, and societal expectations. Their enduring relevance attests to the importance of challenging and reimagining the narratives that shape women's lives, paving the way for a more equitable and understanding society.

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7. Summary & Key Words

In her works *The Bell Jar* and the poetry collection *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath delves into the themes of femininity, sexuality, and identity, offering a poignant critique of societal expectations and personal turmoil in the context of the 1950s. Plath explores the tension between individual aspirations and collective expectations, particularly in *The Bell Jar*, highlighting the limitations imposed on women. Her exploration of struggles with beauty standards, sexual relationships, and gender roles continues in *Ariel*, where she examines themes of transformation and rebirth. In this thesis, all of the notions mentioned above are detected and analyzed, providing insight into how the enduring relevance of Plath's work underscores the ongoing need to challenge and reshape the narratives that define women's lives.

Key Words: identity, femininity, sexuality, society, motherhood, body.