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Esther's Sartorial Selves: Fashioning a Feminine Identity in *The Bell Jar*

During her final night in New York City, *The Bell Jar's* (1963) protagonist, nineteen-year-old Esther Greenwood, creeps as “quiet[ly] as a burglar” onto the rooftop deck of the Amazon hotel and “feeds” her entire wardrobe “piece by piece to the night wind,” watching it flutter down to the “dark heart” of the city “like a loved one’s ashes” (111). Various interpretations of this scene range from a figurative suicide (Aird 94), a wholesale repudiation of her experiences in the city (Kolodny 83), a disavowal of “her culture’s standards of femininity” (Leach 36), an “unsuccessful attempt to be ‘reborn’ outside of the commodity culture” (Leonard 67), and an empowering renunciation of costume (Gilbert and Gubar 776). Esther’s disposal of her wardrobe marks the beginning of a nervous breakdown that will culminate in an attempted suicide. Yet despite the central role that clothing plays in this pivotal moment, and despite Esther’s preoccupation with clothing throughout the novel, the sartorial dimensions of her identity crisis, psychological collapse, and painful rehabilitation remain largely unexplored by critics.

In this article, I propose that Sylvia Plath, a writer well versed in the verbal and visual rhetoric of mid-twentieth-century American fashion magazines, critiques the discourses of fashion featured in these publications by presenting a protagonist who tries but ultimately fails to resolve her anxieties about class, gender, and sexuality through clothing. In so doing, I contend that Esther is unable to fashion a viable personal and professional self that encompasses elements of the multiple “feminine” identities available to white, middle-class, heterosexual women, not because of her mental illness, but rather because these identities and their various wardrobes ‘clash’ with one another. Furthermore, I demonstrate how Plath uses Esther’s dogged, often misguided determination to ‘do’ fashion correctly to highlight the performative nature of femininity—a fact that Esther is unable to grasp prior to her breakdown, but that proves fundamental to the treatment she receives. Plath further emphasizes the importance of costume in performing femininity by showing how women who willfully engage in socially unacceptable or unorthodox sartorial practices are labeled as “deviant” and/or “mentally ill”. Finally, I suggest that reading *The Bell Jar* through the lens of fashion not only provides insight into Esther’s identity crisis, breakdown, and rehabilitation, but also invites readers to reflect critically upon contemporary sartorial practices.

Although there has been no study of the roles that fashion itself plays in *The Bell Jar*, several critics have examined how fashion magazines inform Plath’s novel. In an article on Plath and *Mademoiselle* magazine, Garry M. Leonard convincingly argues that beauty culture and the commodification of femininity haunts Plath’s body of work, but although he ingeniously likens the “bell jar” that descends over Plath’s protagonist to “the plate-glass windows of department stores”, he stops short of examining how the clothing displayed in such windows contributes to Esther’s breakdown (62).

Caroline J. Smith’s “‘The Feeding of Young Women’: Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, *Mademoiselle* Magazine, and the Domestic Ideal” demonstrates how Plath uses moments of eating in *The Bell Jar* to foreground how the consumer culture espoused by women’s magazines in the 1950s contributes to Esther’s metaphorical starvation. While Smith discusses how clothing factors into *Mademoiselle’s* features and advertisements, her primary interest lies in how these texts represent domesticity and women’s ‘proper’ place in society. By focusing on ways in which fashion magazines helped shape attitudes about gender and identity in mid-twentieth-century America, this essay both draws and builds upon the insights offered by Smith and Leonard.

Because clothing weaves its way through Plath’s entire oeuvre, fashion theory has much to offer teachers, students, and readers of the author’s novel, poetry, short fiction, journals, and children’s stories. Fashion theory is particularly useful in reading Plath’s *bildungsroman*, for as Margaret D. Stetz contends, “the paths toward maturity along which heroines [of coming-of-age novels] navigate are so often paved with cloth.” Clothing, Stetz notes, is one of the key means by which young women learn and perform their cultures’ standards of femininity; consequently, clothing typically assumes a prominent place in novels that chronicle a female protagonist’s journey from young adulthood to adulthood (65). Because this journey is fraught with psychological peril for Esther Greenwood, clothing takes on extra significance in *The Bell Jar*. That Plath represents her heroine’s identity crisis, psychological breakdown, and recovery through her vexed relationship with clothing is particularly apt: as Anne Boulton and Robert Jerrard

assert, in western societies, fashion choices—expressed through cosmetics, hairstyles, accessories, and especially clothing—have the ability to both alleviate and exacerbate psychological conflicts (301-02). On the one hand, fashion acts as a potentially integrative force, functioning, as Elizabeth Wilson suggests, as a type of glue, bringing the “always fragmentary self” together into a “semblance of a unified identity” (11). On the other hand, fashion can also act as a disintegrative force, exposing the fragmented nature of the self by foregrounding the performative nature of identity. Boulton and Jerrard explain that fashion is also “subject to the opposing social-psychological drives of identification and differentiation” (317). In other words, fashion bears the contradictory need to express both uniformity/conformity and individuality, signaling an individual’s membership to one or more communities while also marking his or her difference from these communities’ other members.

Because of the multiple, often conflicting roles that fashion plays in the construction of the self, Fred Davis argues that ambivalence is fashion’s defining characteristic. In *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (1992), he contends that individual and societal “identity ambivalences” provide “fuel” for the fashion industry.

Prodded by social and technological change, the biological decrements of the life cycle, visions of utopia, and occasions of disaster, our identities are forever in ferment, giving rise to numerous strains, paradoxes, ambivalences, and contradictions within ourselves. [...] The designer-artists who initiate fashion intuit somehow the currents of identity instability pervading a people and seek through the artful manipulation of the conventional visual and tactile symbols of clothing presentation to lend expression to them, or alternatively to contain, deflect, or sublimate them. (17)

Often, Davis maintains, the instabilities that lead to cultural anxieties are focused on “the so-called *master statuses*” of “age, gender, physical beauty, class, and race” (to which I would add sexual orientation) (26, emphasis in original). By playing upon and amplifying the anxieties that these “master statuses” provoke, the fashion industry not only offers individuals the sartorial means with which to declare their identities to themselves and to the world, but also capitalizes—both literally and figuratively—on the cultural dis-ease that it works to articulate and/or suppress (26).

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath recognizes fashion’s ambivalent qualities and calls into question the integrative model of fashion espoused by publications such as *Mademoiselle*—the model for the unnamed “intellectual fashion magazine” on which Esther Greenwood works as a guest editor during her time in New York (32)—by presenting a protagonist who tries but fails to resolve her individual “identity ambivalences” through fashion. Touting its status as “the magazine for smart young women”—a *double entendre* conflating intelligence with fashionableness—*Mademoiselle* counseled its predominately white, unmarried, middle-class readers about colleges, careers, and dating, focusing primarily on the clothing and cosmetics that readers would need to succeed in each of these arenas (Walker 3). Features such as “Scoops of the Month” profiled a different *Mademoiselle* staff member or reader in each issue, highlighting not just their professional and personal accomplishments, but their clothing. In the photographs that illustrate each profile, the subjects are pictured wearing items from their wardrobe while performing job-related tasks. Thus Betsy Cuddeback, a kindergarten teacher “scooped” in *Mademoiselle*’s March 1953 issue, is photographed wearing durable yet fashionable dresses as she supervises a child’s birthday party and shows a student how to operate a mimeograph machine (223), while Lucile McLean, the director of promotion at the American Art Association Galleries who was “scooped” in the January 1953 issue, poses alongside works of art, modeling the elegant ensembles that she “chooses [...] as she would a painting, for good color and line” (93).

In these and in other “Scoops of the Month” columns from the early 1950s, clothing is presented as a constitutive element of the “scooped” young woman’s identity—a position that is in keeping with the magazine’s insistence that attending to one’s outward appearance through cosmetics and costume is the key to achieving personal happiness and professional fulfillment, as noted by Garry M. Leonard (66). The preoccupation with perfecting young women’s “surfaces” that Leonard finds in *Mademoiselle*’s columns is especially evident in the photographs that accompany the magazine’s articles and advertisements. As Ellen McCracken asserts in *Decoding Women’s Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms*, the images printed in fashion magazines present “an idealized mirror image of the woman who gazes at them” (13). The myriad images of attractive, happy, successful women wearing fashionable clothing that pervade *Mademoiselle* (and virtually every fashion magazine published before and since) state—sometimes tacitly, other times explicitly—that the clothing they wear is the key to their success. Accordingly, the captions that accompany columns such as “Scoops of the Month” and the text included in clothing advertisements instruct readers where they can purchase the garments featured in *Mademoiselle* so that

they, too, might fashion themselves as the “model” young women pictured in the magazine’s pages

Deeply influenced by the visual and verbal rhetoric of fashion magazines, Esther Greenwood initially subscribes to the integrative model of fashion that they espouse. In an attempt to resolve her insecurities about her lower-middle-class background, she uses scholarship money meant for her educational expenses to purchase a closet-full of expensive dresses and accessories that her family could not otherwise afford. But rather than resolving Esther’s anxieties about being merely a “Scholarship Girl” among wealthy young women (Wagner-Martin 55), her new wardrobe only heightens them, constantly reinforcing her belief that she is just a girl from “some out-of-the-way town [...], so poor she can’t afford a magazine” (2).¹ Although Esther does not appear out of place at the all-female Amazon hotel—thanks in part to the new wardrobe that she bought with her scholarship money—she is nonetheless envious of and fascinated by her fellow residents, bored young women whose wealthy parents are subsidizing their daughters’ husband hunting ventures and/or training at “posh” secretarial schools that require them to “wear hats and stockings and gloves to class” (4). Esther is equally envious and fascinated when she hears that the young women who attend Doreen’s “fashion conscious” college have “pocketbook covers made out of the same materials as their dresses” so that “each time they changed their clothes they had a matching pocketbook” (5). Although Esther finds this material abundance alluring, she cannot enjoy her own costly clothing: just as her maternal grandmother constantly reminds family members that their Sunday dinner cost “forty-one cents per pound” (26), Esther constantly reminds herself that the “queerly cut” dresses she bought cost forty dollars each. In addition, the night maid of the Amazon hotel—a “short, squat, mustached woman” responsible for ironing residents’ “day dresses and party frocks” who deposits a drunken Doreen outside of Esther’s door in the middle of the night—is so like Esther’s paternal grandmother, an “old-style European immigrant” from Austria, that Esther feels the urge to distinguish herself from Doreen, and, by extension, the other privileged young women whose dresses the maid tends (21). Significantly, Esther feels kinship with the working-class immigrant woman who launders and repairs expensive garments rather than with the young women who purchase and wear them, suggesting that her expensive new wardrobe fails to eliminate her anxieties about her lower-middle-class upbringing and instead increases her awareness of her precarious financial situation.

Esther’s anxieties about “proper” femininity are also manifested through fashion during her time in New York. As a young woman on the cusp of adulthood, Esther cannot decide what sort of woman she wants to be when she “grows up.” In one of the novel’s most frequently cited passages, Esther declares,

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 another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and a pack of lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn’t quite make out. (72)

Throughout the novel, Esther thinks of these “figs” in terms of their corresponding wardrobes. Just as the figs on the tree represent mutually exclusive potential lives, the various outfits available to adult women not only cannot be worn with other outfits, but they cannot even be housed in the same closet. When she envisions herself as a wife or mother, she sees herself “dawdling about in her nightgown and curlers,” preparing meals for and cleaning up after her husband (84), or “wearing what [her] grandmother called wash dresses, and sitting about in some kitchen with bright linoleum and fat arms, drinking pots of coffee” and tending her “parcel of kids” (150). When she thinks of working as a simultaneous translator at the UN, she wants nothing more than to “crawl” inside of the “double-breasted gray suit” of the “stern muscular Russian girl with no makeup” and “[rattle] out idiom after idiom” (75), and when she imagines herself as a *femme fatale* with a “pack of lovers,” she pictures herself in hyper-feminine ensembles that would not be out of place in the wardrobe of the sexually adventurous Doreen (77). While Esther “tries on” these identities, she finds that she cannot choose from among them because the same woman is not allowed to wear the culturally sanctioned uniforms of domestic, professional, and sexual fulfillment at the same time.

But although the career and life choices represented by the figs may be equally appealing to Esther, their concomitant wardrobes are not, for Esther finds it difficult to identify with the unattractive, unfeminine, and unfashionable “weird old women” who are “always trying to adopt” her (220). Esther can imagine herself as a successful professional like Jay Cee, the editor of the fashion magazine where Esther works as a guest editor (39), but she cannot bear to think of wearing Jay Cee’s hideous “office

suit[s] and luncheon-duty hats” any more than she can conceive of her “plug-ugly” boss “in bed with her fat husband” (5). Likewise, although Esther wishes to be a writer, she cannot see herself wearing the “emerald-feathered hat” of Philomena Guinea, the famous novelist who subsidizes both her education and her stay at a private psychiatric hospital, any more than she can entertain the idea of imitating her benefactor’s florid prose style (184). But as unappealing as Esther finds Jay Cee and Philomena Guinea’s fashion choices, she finds the “heather-mixture tweeds and [...] sensible shoes” of Mrs. Willard, her ex-boyfriend’s mother, as utterly repulsive as her “maternal maxims” (218); both are anathema to Esther’s artistic temperament and nascent feminist sensibilities. Esther cannot separate these “weird old women” from their less-than-stylish wardrobes, and, as a result, she is unable to envision herself following in their footsteps or accepting them as role models, regardless of whether their advice is sound or not.

Esther’s inability to engage with most of the adult women she knows without fixating on their sartorial choices also highlights the extent to which her anxieties about her sexual identity are tied to matters of fashion. Jay Cee’s business suits, Philomena Guinea’s outdated and outlandish hats, and Mrs. Willard’s bland, sensible ensembles are, to Esther’s mind, as incapable as their “weird” and “old” wearers of arousing male sexual desire—desire that Esther, ever aware of the dual burdens of her virginity and her good reputation, is both afraid and eager to evoke. Accordingly, Esther dresses fashionably but not provocatively during her time in New York, but develops a close friendship with Doreen, a slangy, sexy, and sarcastic Southerner with a penchant for revealing clothing. Even in the all-female space of the Amazon Hotel, Doreen’s wardrobe sets her apart from other young women: Esther notes that while everyone else, herself included, wore “starched cotton summer nighties and quilted housecoats, or [...] terry-cloth robes that doubled as beachcoats,” Doreen wore “full-length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through, and dressing gowns the color of skin, that stuck to her by some kind of electricity” (5). Doreen wears a similarly racy outfit on the evening that she and Esther abandon their plans to attend a work-related party in favor of spending time with a sexually aggressive disc jockey who approaches their cab, stuck in theatre traffic, to ask if they would consider joining him and his friends at a bar. While the tall, boyish Esther wears an inconspicuous black sheath made of shantung, the curvaceous Doreen wears “a strapless white lace dress zipped up over a snug corset affair that curved her in at the middle and bulged her out again spectacularly above and below” (5). In the dim light of the bar, Esther, masquerading as Elly Higginbottom from Chicago, feels herself “melting into the shadows like the negative of a person [she’d] never seen before in [her] life” as she watches the neon lights illuminate Doreen’s platinum blond hair and white dress (10). Esther observes Doreen throughout the evening, even accompanying her to the disc jockey’s apartment, where she continues to experience vicariously the sexual attention that her friend’s low-cut, hyper-feminine ensemble elicits from men. But once the “sexy” clothing begins to lead to sexual intercourse—Doreen’s breasts pop out of her dress as Lenny spins her around over his shoulder and bites her hip—Esther ceases to watch, and walks the forty-three blocks back to the hotel.

To Esther, Doreen’s daring wardrobe represents unbridled female sexuality at its most alluring and at its most dangerous. On one hand, Esther clearly takes pleasure in looking at Doreen’s clothed body, yet on the other, Doreen’s conspicuous clothing is deeply threatening to Esther, undermining her sense of self as she gazes at her friend’s bright white dress in the dimly lit bar. Esther’s highly eroticized descriptions of Doreen’s clothing and behavior lead Renee Hoogland to conclude—rightly, I believe—that Esther’s primary interest in Doreen is sexual. As “the object of [nineteen-year-old Esther’s] aggressive sexual desires,” Doreen is both attractive and repulsive to Esther, who is so preoccupied with the mechanics and power dynamics of penetrative heterosexual intercourse that she cannot fathom what same sex couples “do” to/with one another in bed (Hoogland 75).² And in an effort to preserve her “purity,” Esther disavows Doreen both figuratively and literally. She not only she takes a hot, cleansing bath that leaves her feeling “pure,” but she also leaves a drunken Doreen—who appears less alluring in the harsh lighting of the Amazon hotel’s corridor—slumped in a puddle of vomit outside of her hotel room door. Yet Esther’s bath is more than just a ritual to help rid her of her association with Doreen, and, by extension, illicit sexuality. She notes that she “never feel[s] so much [herself] as when [she’s] in a hot bath” (20). Her “meditation” in the bath helps her regain the sense of self that had eroded as she observed Doreen throughout the evening. Given Esther’s complicated relationship with clothing, it is telling that she feels most herself when she is free from the fashion objects that define her from without.

Despite her disavowal of the overtly sexual Doreen, Esther’s anxieties about sex continue to manifest themselves through clothing, as evidenced by her attempt to cultivate a friendship with Betsy, a virginal young woman from Kansas. If Doreen is the quintessential “bad girl,” then Betsy, nicknamed “Pollyanna Cowgirl” by Doreen, is the quintessential “good” girl, with her “her bouncing blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile” (6). As a model young woman, Betsy does fashion correctly, eventually becoming a fashion model: after her guest editorship, Betsy became a “cover girl,”

and Esther occasionally sees her “smiling out of those ‘P.Q.’s wife wears B.H. Wragge’ ads” (6). Betsy performs—or at least appears to perform—culturally sanctioned femininity through clothing, so Esther promises herself that she will be “loyal” to Betsy and abandon Doreen (22). Thus Esther attends the various fashion functions and luncheons organized for the young women working for the magazine, including the ill-fated *Ladies’ Day* luncheon where all of the young women—with the exception of Doreen, who was at Coney Island with her boyfriend gorging herself on hot dogs—become violently ill with food poisoning. Their symptoms become evident as Esther and Betsy sit together in a darkened theater, watching a Technicolor film that features two women—one “good,” the other “sexy” (and therefore bad). As it dawns on Esther that “the nice girl” will end up with the “nice football hero” and the “sexy girl” will up alone, she feels herself “in terrible danger of puking” (42). She and Betsy make their way back to the hotel, each taking turns holding the other’s head as they vomit in the cab and the elevator. After Esther’s attempt to masquerade as a “Pollyanna Cowgirl” results in a case of near-fatal ptomaine poisoning, she is glad that the wise-cracking, unconventional Doreen is on hand to nurse her back to health, and she decides to abandon her allegiance to the “virginal” Betsy.

Esther’s “reunion” with Doreen—who, despite being a “bad” girl, is a good friend—that leads to an attempted rape, the traumatic event that prompts Esther to toss her clothing off of the hotel roof. Because Esther’s New York experience is dominated by her vexed relationship with her wardrobe, clothing plays a key role in the incidents that occur during her final night in the city. As Esther attempts to pack the “grubby, expensive clothes” that “seemed to have a separate, mulish identity of their own” for her return to the Boston suburbs, she is interrupted by Doreen. When Doreen insists that Esther accompany her to a party in the suburbs as the date “of a friend somebody Lenny knew” (103-04), Esther refuses, telling Doreen, “It’s these clothes. [...] I just can’t face these clothes when I come back” (104). Doreen, who does not share Esther’s anxieties about clothing, stuffs them under the bed. Her clothing conquered for the moment with the help of Doreen, Esther agrees to go, wearing the black shantung dress that she wore when she accompanied Doreen to Lenny’s apartment.

Esther’s disastrous date with Marco darkly mirrors the consensual sexual encounter that Esther witnessed between Doreen and Lenny earlier in the summer. Just as Lenny slings Doreen over his shoulder, playfully biting her hip through her dress, Marco pushes Esther to the ground, biting into the strap of her dress, and just as Lenny’s actions cause Doreen’s breasts to pop out of her strapless gown, Marco tears Esther’s dress to the waist, exposing her breasts. When Marco initially throws her to the ground, Esther’s first thought is for her dress rather than for her personal safety, and it is not until he rips her dress, hissing the word “slut” into her ear, that she reacts, “[gouging] at his leg with the sharp heel of her shoe” and punching him in the nose (109). Having successfully fended off Marco’s attempted rape, Esther slinks off into the darkness, covering her shoulders and exposed breasts with a black stole, finding a ride back to Manhattan with a group of strangers when she is unable to locate Doreen and Lenny. Upon returning to the Amazon, Esther climbs to the roof deck and “feeds” her wardrobe “piece by piece to the night wind” (111). Just as she washes away her feeling of “dirtiness” in a hot bath after watching Lenny and Doreen’s flirtation earlier in the summer, Esther attempts to purge herself of the “dirtiness” born of Marco’s attempted rape by ritually casting away the “queerly cut forty-dollar” dresses that have utterly failed to transform her into the smart, confident, alluring young woman she wanted to become in New York.

As the destruction of her wardrobe suggests, clothing undermines Esther’s attempts to fashion a coherent identity for herself in New York. Clothing fails to resolve Esther’s anxieties for several reasons, not least of which is her failure to recognize that fashion is subject to and informed by the very cultural anxieties that plague her. As Davis explains in *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, the fashion industry thrives on societal ambivalence (26). Like Plath’s poetry and prose, American fashion of the early 1950s was shaped by the anxieties and contradictions of the period, and the anxieties and contradictions were many. Surging beneath the optimism that fueled the post-war “baby boom,” economic prosperity, suburbanization, and the rise of American youth culture was a strong undercurrent of pessimism brought on by Cold War paranoia, atomic-age anxieties, and widespread cultural malaise. As Martin Halliwell notes, the figure of the “man in the gray flannel suit”—a young, alienated, middle-class white man, often a veteran of the Second World War, working at a mid-level, white-collar job in the city in order to support his wife and children in the suburbs—represented this malaise, becoming a stock figure in fiction and film of the period (40). If the gray flannel suit came to signify ambivalence about post-war American masculinity, women’s fashions of the period, exemplified by the French designer Christian Dior’s ultra-feminine “New Look,” reflected a return to traditional models of femininity. Indeed, according to fashion theorist and historian Valerie Steele, “[from] stiletto heels and waspie girdles to white gloves and aprons, women’s fashion [of the 1950s] promoted restrictive images of

femininity: wife-and-mother and/or *femme fatale*" (29). Caroline J. Smith finds that these "restrictive images" were also reflected in fashion publications such as *Mademoiselle*, which, despite its avowed progressivism regarding educational and professional opportunities for women, nonetheless implied through its fashion features and advertisements that marriage and motherhood were incompatible with the professional accomplishments touted within its own pages (7). Thus while the garments designed for and marketed to "smart young women" like Esther through publications such as *Mademoiselle* may have encouraged their wearers to flaunt their youth, declare their femininity, and express their professional and personal aspirations sartorially, these articles of clothing were part and parcel of a culture that promoted a very narrow definition of womanhood. Consequently, Esther is continually frustrated in her attempts to resolve her anxieties about class, gender, and sexuality through clothing.

A second, related reason that Esther fails to fashion a coherent self through clothing is her difficulty in distinguishing images from reality. On the one hand, she clearly understands that the fashion image presents its viewer with an ideal. She recognizes that young women who see a picture of her "drinking martinis in a skimpy, imitation silver-lamé bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle [...] in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures" will think that she "must be having a real whirl," when, in fact, she is in the midst of a near-debilitating identity crisis (2). Yet on the other hand, Esther continues to take images and appearances at face value, believing, for example, that Doreen is truly "bad" and that Betsy is truly "good" in part because they look and dress in ways that have been visually coded as "bad" and as "good" in films and in magazines. Accustomed to consuming images that present fashion as an integrative force, Esther takes it for granted that one's clothing functions as a visual metaphor for one's identity, and therefore does not consider the possibility that clothing is merely costuming for the cultural performance that is identity. Thus when her expensive clothing fails to resolve her anxieties, Esther comes to think of her dresses as having a "mulish identity of their own," distinctly separate from her own identity (104). Moreover, as Christina Brizolakis points out, "Esther's estrangement from the 'normal' world is conveyed through a clinically detached and intensely visual style of narration" (35). This "intensely visual" narrative style reveals the extent to which Esther has been influenced by the visual rhetoric of fashion magazines such as *Mademoiselle*—a publication that, Leonard demonstrates, was almost wholly concerned with perfecting women's surfaces. Like a camera, Esther records the "surfaces" of the people she encounters with remarkable detail, focusing her gaze specifically on their clothing because she believes that the surfaces she observes/records accurately reflect her subjects—a belief that will become more pronounced as her detachment from the "normal" world deepens upon her return home.

Although Esther arrives in suburban Boston with an almost empty suitcase, she continues to carry the clothing-related "baggage" that plagued her in New York. Despite the disintegrative effects that clothing had on her psyche during her guest editorship, she nonetheless continues to cling to an integrative model of fashion, a point that Plath underlines through her protagonist's traveling costume. Having discarded her wardrobe, Esther takes the train home in an "unfamiliar skirt and blouse" provided by Betsy in exchange for Esther's bathrobe, the only item that survived her wardrobe purge. That Esther returns home in the guise of the all-American "good" girl the morning after Marco's attempted rape—the marks of which she still bears in the form of his dried blood on her cheeks—suggests that she believes she is partially to blame for the assault because she dressed provocatively. To Esther, who is still deeply invested in the belief that clothing defines its wearer from without, dressing like "Betsy and her innocent friends" is both an attempt to prove false Marco's accusation that she is a "slut" and an effort to reconnect with her pre-New York self (22).

The ties to that self are severed, however, when her mother informs Esther that she was not accepted into a writing course that was to have acted as "a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer." As this "bridge" collapses, Esther visualizes "a body in a white blouse and green skirt plummet[ing] into the gap" left in its wake (114). The image of a young woman wearing Betsy's clothing falling into the abyss is emblematic of Esther's experiences in suburbia, for throughout the summer, she feels and acts as though she is little more than a "body in a white blouse and green skirt." Accordingly, in the weeks that follow her return home, she neither changes nor launders her "Pollyanna Cowgirl" costume, instead reveling in the "sour but friendly smell" that the unwashed, "sweaty cotton [gives] off" (126). Critics such as Laurie F. Leach and Garry M. Leonard have pointed out how Esther's unwillingness to change or wash her clothing is, like her refusal to bathe and groom herself, a "repudiation of her culture's standards of femininity" (Leach 36). Yet considered in light of Esther's complicated relationship with clothing, her refusal to change out of her "Pollyanna Cowgirl" costume or to buy new clothing can be seen as a desperate, unsuccessful attempt to use clothing to present herself as a normal, healthy, all-American girl in the face of a growing sense of alienation. Esther's insistence on wearing Betsy's clothing, then, is a

testament to the power that clothing continues to exercise over her as her identity crisis deepens.

Esther's belief that clothing functions as the primary determinant of identity becomes more and more pronounced as her sleepless summer progresses. As a result, she begins to think of the people she encounters not as individuals, but as mannequins whose clothing defines them. Thus when Esther—reviving her “Elly Higginbottom” alias in order to engage in “bad” behavior on Boston Common—glimpses a “brown figure in sensible flat brown shoes striding [...] in [her] direction” as she flirts with a sailor, she is seized with fear, believing the woman to be the judgmental Mrs. Willard, even though she cannot “make out any features on the dime-sized face” (133). As the woman (who is not Mrs. Willard) passes, Esther cries into the sailor's uniform, thinking “what an awful woman that lady in the brown suit had been, and how she, whether she knew it or not, was responsible for [Esther] taking the wrong turn here and the wrong path there and for everything bad that happened after that” (134). The stranger's sensible suit poses a threat to Esther because it represents an identity—the practical suburban housewife who puts the needs of her husband and children before her own—that is abhorrent to Esther, but that, as a paragon of culturally sanctioned femininity, is nevertheless alluring. As she cries, blaming the unknown woman in the comfortable flats and brown suit for every mistake that she has made, Esther recognizes that her “bad” behavior—reading trashy newspapers, eating peanuts out of a paper bag, and cavorting with strange men on Boston Common—is in part motivated by her desire to avoid becoming nothing more than a “sensible tweed suit” or a “good” girl dressed in a green skirt and a white blouse. Yet despite (or because of) her mental illness, Esther intuitively understands that the psychiatric treatment she receives from Doctor Gordon is calculated to do little more than reduce her to a mannequin that is content to display its costume: while sitting in the patient's lounge before she receives electroshock treatment at his private clinic, she feels as if she is “sitting in the window of an enormous department store,” surrounded by figures who are not “people, but shop dummies, [...] propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life” (141-42).

In addition to equating clothing with identity, Esther begins to envision clothing as a means of escaping identity's burdens. Accordingly, she finds the anonymity provided by uniforms enormously appealing. Heeding her mother's advice that “the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody who was worse off than you,” she volunteers at the hospital. But “unlike the white-uniformed doctors and nurses, or even the brown-uniformed scrubwomen with their mops and their buckets of grimy water” (161), who “all look just alike” one another (162), Esther feels conspicuous in her “sage-green” uniform, and after a group of new mothers express their displeasure with Esther's efforts to improve the flower arrangements their husbands sent them, she runs from the hospital, stuffing her uniform “into the washbasin with the rubbish of dead flowers” (163). Esther also fantasizes about joining a convent—an all-female space in which uniforms are mandated by the church—but, upon remembering a story about a nun who “ended up in an asylum,” doubts that “the Catholics [would] take in any crazy nuns” (165). At this time, Esther's thoughts of suicide—death providing the ultimate release from identity—are also influenced by or related to clothing. When, for instance, she sees the Weeping Scholar tree in Boston's Public Garden, Esther thinks to herself that “[they] understood things of the spirit in Japan” (where she believes the tree is from) because “[they] disemboweled themselves when anything went wrong.” Ever practical, Esther speculates that the person committing *seppuku* “would have to be naked, or the knife would get stuck in their clothes” (138). Although Esther thinks that clothing would act as an impediment to suicide in the case of *seppuku*, she recognizes that it could be useful in other instances, and unsuccessfully attempts to use the “silk cord of [her] mother's yellow bathrobe” to hang herself (158). When Esther decides to overdose on sleeping pills after she runs out of money—the last of which she spends on the black raincoat she wears to visit her father's grave—she crawls into a hidden crevice in the cellar, wraps the coat around her, and swallows the pills. Just as Esther's black shantung sheath allowed her to “[melt] into the shadows” at the darkened bar with Doreen and Lenny earlier in the summer (10), the black raincoat, still damp from her visit to the graveyard, envelops Esther “like her own sweet shadow” (169). Because clothing has failed to help Esther fashion an identity, she attempts to use clothing as a means of escaping identity altogether.

When her suicide attempt fails, clothing is also at the heart of efforts to treat Esther, first at the psychiatric ward of the county hospital, and later at the expensive private institution paid for by Philomena Guinea, the author who also pays her educational expenses. Both of these institutions seek to rehabilitate Esther by re-educating her about the relationship between clothing and identity. Her rehabilitation goes slowly at first, for Esther is initially like an infant, even crying out “Mother!” when she first awakes from her coma. And, like an infant, Esther relies on her mother for clothing: Mrs. Greenwood purchases a new wardrobe for her daughter, and the county hospital nurses put these clothes on her—a process to which Esther is largely oblivious. Thus she awakes one morning to find

herself “dressed in a sheath, striped gray and white, like mattress ticking, with a wide, shiny red belt,” watching a nurse “stuffing the new underclothes and blouses and skirts and pajamas [her] mother had bought [her] into the black patent leather overnight case” (174). But even in her “infantile” state, Esther nevertheless continues to pay close attention to others’ fashion choices, directing all of her resentment and anger about her helplessness onto the “awful” purple cartwheel dress that her mother wears to visit her at the county hospital.

If nurses at the county hospital treat Esther like an infant by dressing her in the clothing that her mother bought for her, then the doctors, nurses, and patients at the private psychiatric facility teach Esther to “dress” herself in these outfits so that she can re-learn to perform culturally sanctioned femininity. Plath emphasizes the fact that Esther is going to learn to “fit” these outfits—and the cultural performances that they represent—by having her heroine observe nurses affixing labels reading “E. Greenwood” to her new clothes. Additionally, the facility’s female psychiatrists, play an important role in Esther’s clothing-related re-education, not only granting shopping privileges to patients who are deemed well enough, but also modeling ensembles that are professional, yet feminine. Esther responds favorably to their wardrobes, noting with appreciation when Doctor Quinn wears one of her “navy blue, immaculate suits with a plain, snow-white blouse showing in the V of the neck” (234). Esther is particularly impressed by her own psychiatrist, Doctor Nolan, whom she describes as “a cross between Myrna Loy and [her] mother” (187). Of all the adult women Esther encounters in *The Bell Jar*, Doctor Nolan is the only one whom she accepts as a role model. While her admiration is no doubt influenced by the psychiatrist’s professional qualifications, Esther seems even more taken with the older woman’s fashion sense, approvingly eyeing the doctor’s “white blouse and full skirt gathered at the waist by a wide leather belt, and stylish crescent-shaped spectacles” (186).

If Doctors Nolan and Quinn provide Esther with a sartorial style worthy of emulation, her fellow Caplan residents present her with sartorial transgressions that she must learn to reject and label as “insane.” Esther is initially guilty of such transgressions, wearing her pajama bottoms under her skirt so that she “won’t have to bother getting in and out of them all the time” (191). It is through her interactions with Valerie and Miss Norris that Esther learns the consequences of such sartorial misbehavior. At first, Esther believes that there is “nothing wrong” with Valerie, whom she first sees “reading [a] tatty copy of *Vogue* with intense interest,” because she expresses curiosity about fashion (188). Esther will continue to hold this view until she learns that Valerie previously underwent a lobotomy in Wymark, the hospital wing reserved for the most severely mentally ill patients, in order to help manage her uncontrollable anger, a procedure that rendered her (to borrow a phrase from current popular parlance) a “fashion zombie.” Miss Norris, Esther’s spinsterish, uncommunicative neighbor at Caplan, also exhibits “zombie-like” behavior, refusing to speak or acknowledge when she’s been spoken to. Yet even more than her uncommunicativeness, Miss Norris’s old-fashioned outfit—consisting of “high, black, buttoned boots,” a “a purple dress that fastened at the neck with a cameo brooch and reached midway between her knees,” a “schoolmarmish bun, and thin, silver-rimmed spectacles attached to her breast pocket with black elastic” (190)—indicates that she is out of step with the modern world, and, perhaps more importantly for Esther, unfit for marriage, as suggested by the appellation “miss.” Esther longs to help Miss Norris, but their “friendship” comes to an end when Miss Norris is moved to Wymark, presumably to receive more invasive treatment. Both Valerie, whose “perpetual marble calm” leaves her unable to think or to feel, and Miss Norris, whose inability and/or unwillingness to communicate leaves her completely isolated from others, serve as cautionary tales for Esther, an aspiring writer for whom the ability to experience and express emotions and thoughts is paramount (192). Through her interactions with these two women, Esther comes to understand the consequences of “unfeminine” behavior and unorthodox sartorial practices.

That Esther has learned her lesson about “doing” fashion incorrectly is apparent when Joan, a “big, horsey girl in jodhpurs” who attends Esther’s college and once dated Esther’s ex-boyfriend, arrives just as Miss Norris is taken away to Wymark. As Joan tells Esther about a series of sartorial transgressions that preceded her suicide attempt (wearing rubber boots instead of shoes and wearing a fur coat to a psychiatrist’s office in the middle of summer), Esther wonders whether Joan is making the story up “out of whole cloth,” and responds incredulously, believing that Joan is either “crazy” or is testing Esther “to see how crazy [Esther] was” (195-96). Although Joan’s wardrobe “sins” are no more egregious than those that Esther committed, Esther recognizes that Joan’s behavior is culturally unacceptable, and responds with disdain and repulsion.³ Esther’s unsympathetic response to Joan indicates that she has learned to label women who violate social and sartorial norms as “deviant” and “mentally ill.”⁴

After Joan’s arrival, Esther’s recover is largely fueled by her interactions with and reactions to her jodhpur-wearing double/rival, and Esther’s vexed relationship with clothing is almost always

a factor in their interactions. When Joan first arrives, she shows Esther the newspaper clippings that she has collected about Esther's suicide attempt—clippings that, Joan insists, inspired her to emulate Esther. Although Esther initially has difficulty "reading" herself in the photographs that illustrate these clippings, she is able to use the clothing and accessories that she wears in them to situate herself in the particular moments that the photographs capture. Thus while she cannot "imagine where such a tarty picture had been taken" when she sees "a big, blown-up picture of a girl with black-shadowed eyes and black lips spread in a grin," the jewelry she wears reminds Esther that this photograph was taken at the Bloomingdale's portrait studio (198). Similarly, Esther has no memory of posing for a photograph with her mother and brother in the backyard until she notices that she is "wearing dungarees and white sneakers," which she "wore in her spinach-picking summer" (198). Her clothes, not her experiences or memories, ground her in the moments documented in the photographs, thus Joan, who Esther thinks of as her double, constantly reminds Esther of her "failure" to fashion an identity for herself (205).

By confronting Esther with these pre-breakdown photographs, Joan makes Esther reflect on her "old self," and, in so doing, inadvertently forces her to confront her clothing-related anxieties. This becomes especially apparent when Joan, "leafing through a new issue of some fashion magazine," presents Esther, who has only recently been "promoted" to Belsize, with a photograph of "a girl in a strapless evening dress of fuzzy white stuff, grinning fit to split, with a whole lot of boys bending in around her," and coyly asks Esther whether she is the girl in the picture, knowing full well that she is (207). While her "fashionably dressed and carefully made up" fellow residents scrutinize the photograph for any resemblance between Esther and the attractive woman in the photograph (205), Esther, dressed in her pajamas with a blanket draped around her shoulders "like a stole" (206), refuses to admit that the photograph is of her, maintaining that that Joan is "quite mistaken" because the woman pictured in the magazine is "somebody else" (207). Esther's insistence that she is not the woman in the photograph is in a sense correct, for during her time in New York, Esther never felt like the confident, attractive young woman that the image depicts. In addition, if, as Ellen McCracken contends, fashion images represent "an idealized mirror image of the woman who gazes at them" (13), then the fashion magazine presents Esther with the image of herself as an ideal young woman. Yet Esther, who participated in the fashioning of this image, not only knows that the "anonymous young men with all-American bone structures" were merely "hired or loaned for the occasion," but she also understands that the evening dress did not make her the object of these young men's desire, but only served to heighten her sense of self-doubt (2). Because Esther has, to this point, maintained her faith in the integrative powers of fashion, she is deeply unsettled by the realization that just as fashion images do not reflect reality, clothing does not act as a straightforward visual metaphor one's identity. As a result, she suffers a setback and must undergo electroshock treatments, and it is through these treatments, performed in concert with Doctor Nolan's therapy sessions, that Esther comes to think of clothing as costuming, helping one perform identity but not constituting identity in and of itself. Thus while Joan's motivations to share the photograph of Esther in the fashion magazine are—to Esther's mind, at least—calculatingly cruel, her actions indirectly lead Esther to a better understanding of the role that fashion plays in constructing a public self.

Esther demonstrates her newfound understanding of identity and femininity as performative acts as she practices her "new, normal personality" in order to seduce a man. Again, Esther's actions are fueled by an encounter with Joan: she becomes determined to lose her virginity immediately after Joan confesses that she "likes" Esther more than she ever liked Buddy Willard. Just as Esther is repulsed by Joan's unfeminine sartorial practices, Esther rejects Joan's admission of same-sex desire, telling her that she "make[s] [her] puke" (220). And just as Esther left the sexually promiscuous Doreen lying in a pool of her own vomit in the hallway outside her hotel door, Esther "abjects" Joan, likening her and her lesbian advances to something unwholesome that must be expelled from her body. In order to rid herself of the "dirtiness" associated with Joan's lesbianism, Esther feels compelled to undergo yet another self-imposed purification ritual, this time dispensing with her own "purity" by having sex with Irwin, the professor of mathematics whom she meets on the steps of the Widener Library. Armed with a recently acquired diaphragm and impressed with Irwin's cosmopolitan attitudes and well-appointed study, Esther successfully seduces him. But as with her previous attempts to act "normal"—forsaking "bad" Doreen for "good" Betsy and masquerading as Pollyanna Cowgirl—Esther's efforts to assert her heterosexuality lead to a near-death experience. Instead of the "miraculous change" she expected, Esther instead feels a "sharp, startlingly bad pain" accompanied by uncontrollable bleeding. Rather than inform her lover of this complication, she has Irwin take her to the apartment that Joan is sharing with a nurse (229). Although Esther tells Joan that she is "hemorrhaging" without providing specific details, she nonetheless seems compelled to inform Joan that she has just lost her virginity, and, like a bride displaying a blood-stained bed sheet after the consummation of her marriage, Esther empties the blood

that had been pooling into her “winter-cracked black Bloomingdale shoes” onto Joan’s beige rug (231). Esther’s clothing also figures prominently in this interaction: before Joan takes Esther to the hospital emergency room, she must “[peel] back [Esther’s] blood-wet clothes” in order to stanch the bleeding with clean towels (231). But although Esther recovers from this experience, Joan does not: several days later, she suffers a relapse and moves back to Belsize, committing suicide shortly thereafter.

If Esther learns to “do” fashion correctly by emulating positive models such as Doctor Nolan and rejecting negative models such as Miss Norris and Joan, then the closing passages of the novel make it clear that she has learned her lesson: she walks into her exit interview at the asylum with her stocking seams straightened, her shoes “cracked, but polished,” and her “red wool suit [as] flamboyant as [her] plans” (243). As Garry M. Leonard notes, Esther parrots the snappy prose of fashion magazines in the novel’s closing passages, ostensibly in an effort to prove that she has completely recovered (78). Yet because each of Esther’s previous experiences in acting “normal” have all ended badly, Plath seems to suggest that although her protagonist has been “patched, retreaded and approved for the road” (244), she may nevertheless be headed down the road to disaster, for, to return to an automotive metaphor from the novel’s opening pages, Esther remains incapable of “steering anything,” “even [herself]” (2). Indeed, the (blood?) red suit that she wears to the doctors’ meeting recalls the borrowed red ski jacket that she wore when she purposely broke her leg. Just as Esther “couldn’t stop [her descent down the mountain] by skill or any belated access of will” (97), so is she similarly drawn “as by a *magical thread*” into the room where the doctors will decide her fate (244, emphasis added). Moreover, by having Esther wear the same “size seven patent leather shoes” that she bought on her lunch hour in New York—heels that have taken her through the streets of Manhattan and Boston, that have stood vigil on a rock on the beach as she contemplated drowning herself, and that, on two separate occasions, have captured her blood as it trickled down her legs—Plath implies that the paths Esther will tread in the future will be remarkably similar to those that she has already been down. Plath, then, undermines her protagonist’s seemingly optimistic conclusion by drawing upon the metaphorical baggage that clothing has accrued throughout the novel. In so doing, she suggests that while Esther’s sartorial re-education at Caplan and Belsize was valuable insofar as it taught her that femininity and identity are performance enacted in part through costume, it was problematic in that it never prompted her to question why she must perform these roles and don appropriately feminine costumes in the first place.

Reading Plath’s novel through the lens of fashion not only offers insight into Esther’s identity crisis, breakdown, and “recovery,” but also invites readers to turn a critical eye toward contemporary sartorial practices. Although Esther’s clothing-related anxieties are born of mid-twentieth-century American misgivings and mores, the concerns that the novel raises about fashion, femininity, and identity are still relevant to modern readers. Fashions may have changed in the half-century since Plath wrote *The Bell Jar*, but fashioning oneself through clothing remains a practice fraught with anxiety, especially for women. Indeed, the fashion researchers Alison Clarke and David Miller have found that the more fashion choices that are available to women—choices made possible, in part, by feminist movements—the more anxious women feel about their ability to fashion themselves (211). The popularity and pervasiveness of makeover programs that teach women to “do” fashion and femininity properly before they are “patched, retreaded, and approved for the road” are a testament not just to these anxieties, but also to fashion’s power to act as a normalizing, conservative force in women’s lives, despite its ostensibly liberatory potential. Thus while it may be tempting to treat Esther’s anxieties about fashion and femininity as historical curiosities made irrelevant by the Women’s Movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the fashion-related conflicts and contradictions that Plath’s heroine experiences nevertheless remain part of the cultural landscape. That *The Bell Jar* articulates these anxieties so powerfully is undoubtedly one of the reasons why Plath’s novel remains an enduring commercial and critical success nearly a half-century after its initial publication.

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NOTES

1. Plath's journals indicate that Esther's anxieties about class and clothing are based in part on her creator's.
2. Several critics, including Hoogland and Leonard, suggest that Doreen is not a "real" person, but is instead Esther's sexually promiscuous persona that must be disavowed because of her unacceptable behavior. Although my essay does not address this reading of Plath's novel directly, the possibility that Doreen and Joan—both of whom engage in unorthodox sartorial and sexual practices—are manifestations of Esther's psyche that must be rejected rather than integrated would be in keeping with my reading of the sartorial dimensions of Esther's breakdown and "recovery." If, in the world of the novel, Esther's mental health depends on her learning to travel the sartorial middle way represented by Betsy, it ultimately matters very little whether Joan or Doreen are "real" or projections of Esther's psyche.
3. Martin-Wagner points out that Esther's negative reaction to Joan's jodhpurs is also partially based on class envy because Joan's family could afford to finance expensive hobbies such as riding (55).
4. Interestingly, this disapproval doesn't extend to men. For example, when Jay Cee and Esther have lunch with a "famous poet," he wears "a horrible, lumpy, speckled brown tweed jacket and gray pants and a red-and-blue checked open-throated jersey" while "all the other men were dressed in dark suits and immaculate white shirts" (27). Although Esther implies that it is his confidence and cleverness that makes such a costume acceptable, she seems to understand that such behavior would not be tolerated in a female poet.