

ELENI REID

Nietzsche's "Dancing Star": Esther as Zarathustrian Prophet in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

In the spring of 1956, a year before writing *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath wrote a letter to her mother about her desire to depict the struggles of an individual within society. Plath wrote: "Now I am making a shift. The world and the problems of an individual in this particular civilization are going to be forged into my discipline" (*Letters Home* 222). There is no doubt that Plath had this goal in mind as she wrote her first novel. On July 15, 1957, in one of her journal entries, Plath wrote of the novel's protagonist: "Make her enigmatic. . . she is the white goddess. Make her a statement of the generation. Which is you" (289). It has already been established that the development of Esther's individuality is a central theme of *The Bell Jar*; however, no critical attention has yet been given to the Nietzschean themes of the novel, which drive Plath's portrayal of Esther's process of becoming an independent woman in the novel as well as her progression of becoming an artist, a "statement" of her generation. Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*, or Superman, is close to Plath's interests in the strong-willed, creative individual. In addition to acknowledging Nietzsche as having written, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the "bible of individualism at present," she adapts Nietzsche's precepts of the will to power and the affirmation of life to create her own statement about the stifling influence of society on women (Plath 7). Heather Clark and Christina Britzolakis, who observed Nietzsche's influence on Plath's poetry, documented Nietzsche's influence on Sylvia Plath, and this paper transitions from their observations of Nietzschean ideas in her poetry to providing an examination of Nietzsche's pervasive influence on her only novel. The following argument posits that Esther Greenwood's struggle against society in *The Bell Jar* has a philosophical source that can be found in Nietzsche's early writings, particularly his seminal work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther assumes a prophetic role akin to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, which can be seen in Esther's affirmation of life and will, as well as her resistance to and reevaluation of the herd mentality of 1950s American society. In order to be Plath's "statement of the generation", Esther must become a Nietzschean Superman.

Plath criticism has come a long way since the initial preoccupation with Plath's personal biography, which interested scholars of the 1970s and 1980s. Deborah Nelson, in her article "Plath, History, and Politics," states, "Until the late 1980s, few critics understood Plath to be writing about anything but her own suffering, though how they interpreted this act varied.... Plath, however, saw her poetic material as representative, not merely personal" (21). Nelson's observation recognizes a relatively recent movement in Plath readings to explore other emphases on Plath's writing.

In her poetry and fiction, Plath not only portrays the commodification of women that mainstream Plath criticism has pointed out, but also, as critics such as Pat MacPherson, Robin Peel, and Al Strangeways suggested, Plath was very much concerned with the political and ideological climate of her time. Luke Ferretter observes that these more recent studies "are interested in her large and diverse body of work as a whole, and focus their attention on less frequently discussed texts within this body of work, in order to build up a complete picture of the kind of thinker and writer Plath was" (1). It is the aim of this paper to contribute to the ongoing conversation of Plath's philosophical development as a thinker and writer.

"OUR BIBLE OF INDIVIDUALISM": NIETZSCHE'S INFLUENCE ON PLATH

Many scholars have recognized Plath's investment in political thought, though few have paid attention to Plath's interest in philosophy, specifically in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, the most recent exceptions being Robin Peel and Heather Clark.

In his article "The Ideological Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath", Peel writes that "Plath cites approvingly Nietzsche's celebration of power, will, and strength, and her discovery of Nietzsche became for a time the dominant influence on her worldview" (61). Clark makes the following insightful observation in *The Grief of Influence*: "Although Nietzsche has been criticized as a misogynist, he nevertheless offered Plath an ideological foundation that validated her own desire for autonomy and opened up possibilities of liberation from the tyranny of gender" (33).

In recognition of Plath's interest in Nietzsche, Christina Britzolakis provides an insightful analysis of the Nietzschean themes of Plath's poem, "Ariel". She argues:

“Ariel” is a thoroughly Nietzschean poem, a meditation on Zarathustra’s dictum that ‘the fleetest beast to bear you to perfection is suffering’. The conjunction of the tropes of arrow, sun, and nakedness recalls Zarathustra’s description of his ‘desire with rushing wings’ which ‘tore me forth and up and away... and then indeed I flew, an arrow, quivering with sun-intoxicated rapture’ (*Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*).

That Plath continued to write some phrases that are recognized as being “thoroughly Nietzschean” suggests she continued these themes in other writings. Interestingly, with the exception of Britzolakis, who noted Nietzschean themes in one of Plath’s later poems, no other critic considered that Plath’s interest in Nietzsche extends beyond her days at Smith College. As Britzolakis observed in Plath’s poetry, and as I will argue in the first Nietzschean analysis of *The Bell Jar*, Nietzsche had a profound influence on Plath’s personal development. His ideas of overcoming the fetters of society surely contributed to her feelings of strong independence as a woman prior to the second wave of feminism.

Sylvia Plath received her first copy of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in 1949 as a Christmas present from her mother. She continued to read Nietzsche at Smith College, where she took two classes that dealt with his teachings. She read the novel for Russian 35b in the spring of 1954 and History 38b in the same year among other works by Nietzsche, including *Beyond Good and Evil*, a work that continues the themes of the Superman and will to power that Nietzsche introduces in his fictional work. In addition to her much-annotated and underlined copy of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Plath also had in her library Nietzsche’s *The Use and Abuse of History*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, as well as the *Philosophy of Nietzsche*, Paul Carus’s *Nietzsche and Other Exponents of Individualism*, and William Hubben’s *Four Prophets of Our Destiny: Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kafka*.

Given the importance of Nietzsche’s philosophical novel to Plath, it comes as no surprise that in an essay entitled “The Age of Anxiety and the Escape from Freedom”, she calls *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* “our bible of individualism at present” (7). The novel is about 30-year-old prophet who, after spending over a decade in reflective solitude, tries to deliver the message of the Superman. He delivered the important prophesy that the Superman, in order to overcome the traditional morality of the time, must brave suffering with a will to power, shouldering the burden of society’s influence until she is able to create her own transcending morality; to be beyond good and evil, as Nietzsche would further argue in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche writes the following about his character: “The self-overcoming of morality, out of truthfulness; the self-overcoming of the moralist, into his opposite—into me—that is what the name of Zarathustra means in my mouth” (*Ecce Homo* 784). In the same essay, Plath frequently digresses from the subject of her assignment—which is to discuss the writings of Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* as well as other titles from the course—to talk instead about the prescient views of suffering in the modern world presented in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and she approvingly cites Nietzsche’s teaching that “one aspect needed on the road to genuine freedom is ... suffering,” a concept that certainly anticipates Esther Greenwood’s suffering in *The Bell Jar* (7). Plath’s essay ends with the following statement: “Our favorite Nietzschean epigraph will close this paper: ‘One must still have chaos in one to give birth to a dancing star’” (8). Plath’s poem “Notes on Zarathustra’s Prologue”, written in 1955, is further evidence of Nietzsche’s influence on Plath. Written a year after her classes on Nietzsche, the poem is one of her first creative works to exhibit the themes of Nietzsche’s philosophy as it is articulated in the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Clark notes that in addition to this poem, Plath wrote several others that indicate “experiments with Nietzschean ideas”, such as “Doomsday”, “Insolent Storm Strikes at the Skull”, and “Temper of Time” (31).

Plath wrote “Notes on Zarathustra’s Prologue” in 1950-1951, and it was published in a limited edition of collected poems called *The Crystal Gazer* (1971). The poem consists of two eight-line stanzas: the first is Plath’s poetic summary of Nietzsche’s famous work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the first eight lines of the poem, Plath portrays Zarathustra’s horror of the last man and his characteristic qualities of intellectual and social cowardice. Her derision for him is clear: he moves “like a shrill flea” and “guards his ranks, / for last man wanders not alone lest jolt of thunder knock him down!” (lines 2, 4-6). In the second stanza, Plath transitions to her own age, providing a series of images that indicate her society’s recognition of Nietzsche’s message. While in Nietzsche’s generation the human race laughed at Zarathustra’s precepts of the death of God and of the Superman, Plath demonstrates that her society recognizes its post-Christian state: “Today bright jetplanes cry abroad / their whirlwind message: God is dead!” (lines 9, 10). The Superman, Plath suggests, is the best response to the loss of meaning in the world, and one can only become a Superman by embracing pain (line 11). In the remaining lines of the poem, Plath concludes with an image of rebirth: her favorite Nietzschean “dancing star” sprouting out of the “womb of chaos” (lines 15, 16). The poem is noteworthy because it signifies Nietzsche’s importance to

Plath in her poetic formation. It could be argued that the first stanza is simply a summary of Nietzsche's thought, but the second stanza clearly indicates that Plath views Nietzsche's message of the Superman overcoming chaos and suffering as a relevant concept for her own art and life. Her belief that art could redeem and transform suffering is also Nietzschean, and it is more present in her later writings.

Although the poem was written years before the inception of *The Bell Jar*, the themes are consistent with Plath's philosophy of the individual's struggle against societal sublimation and personal weakness. Plath purposefully has divided the poem into two parts. The first part is clearly a summary of the prologue in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but the second stanza, while it invokes Zarathustrian imagery, is decidedly Plath's unique voice expressing her own Nietzschean views of the world. Her first two lines are of course a description of the last man that Nietzsche excoriates in the prologue, who is antithetical to the Superman and representative of the herd mentality. By depicting the last man as a flea-like creature within a shrinking world, the first two lines of the poem establish the opposite value: that growth is good. However, the world has run counter to the goals of the Superman, diminishing in size. The rest of the first stanza is mainly a critique of the last man that is part of the "herd" from which Plath tried to separate herself. The prophet in line seven is of course Zarathustra, who is mocked for his warning of the weaknesses of society.

In the second part, the lines emphasize that "Today the bright jetplanes cry abroad / their whirlwind message: God is dead!", thus placing the message within her own life; her own society (9-10, emphasis mine). Lines 11-12 affirm the difficulty of the path of the Superman, who must resist the herd, or "flay the frail sheep in the flock" (line 13). Her final couplet, the most captivating of the poem, speaks to the importance of channeling inner chaos into creative expression. For Nietzsche and for Plath, life itself is a dance, a continual expression of will in the face of traditional mores and personal conflicts.

In spite of the highly developed thought within this poem, few critics recognize its importance beyond biographical significance. Edward Butscher and Robin Peel believe that even though Plath translated her philosophical convictions into this poem, they were limited and premature: false, or at best, undeveloped thoughts that had little connection to her later work. In *Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness*, the first complete book to be published on Sylvia Plath's life, Butscher acknowledges Nietzsche's impact on Plath in her college years, and he offers an analysis of "Notes on Zarathustra's Prologue", which he states "has at least the biographical value of defining Sylvia's personal reaction to Nietzsche's thought.... Structurally, too, the poem is lucid enough" (50). Interestingly, Butscher accepts the structure of Plath's poem, and he writes that Plath's portrayal of Zarathustra's despair is "distinct and insistent" (49). However, he takes issue with the "awkward images" of Plath's developing poetic voice, and he ultimately concludes that the poem is "too obviously constructed around reading," and "[its] remoteness from experience suggests that Sylvia still refused to regard art as a valid method of giving voice to either her father obsession or her inner rages" (51). While it is true that Plath was young when she wrote this poem, it does not follow that the philosophical lines need be accused of falsity. It is unlikely that Plath wrote these early poems only to impress her professors or mimic thoughts that were not truly her own, as Butscher argues.

In the same article that heralds the young Plath as "the master of the cultural critique," Peel also writes about "Notes on Zarathustra's Prologue," stating, "There is a seam of Nietzscheanism in much of Plath's writing, and it surfaces starkly here. On the other hand, when she wrote this poem she was only 22" (61). Perhaps it is because of Plath's youth that Peel goes on to state, "It is only after 1960 that we see the effective fusion of politics and art in, for example, such imaginative writing as *The Bell Jar* and the poems of 1962 and 1963" (61). Peel's insights are helpful here, though I would argue that as Plath's politics and philosophy began developing at the same time during her years at Smith College, it is reasonable to conclude that her philosophy continued to develop and present itself in her later works, particularly *The Bell Jar*.

It is clear from her journal and letters that Plath takes her poems seriously. While in college, she wrote to her mother, "A very nasty young don took this opportune moment for making a devastating and absolutely destructive attack on one of my poems by showing how 'hollow' it was compared to—guess who—John Donne!" (LH 316). Plath also writes, "I am so proud of my poems; each time I read them I get shivers" (LH 318). "Notes on Zarathustra", while clearly based on the prologue's exposition of Nietzsche's philosophy of the Superman, is also very much a part of Plath's own philosophical belief that one's will must endure and transform suffering in order to overcome itself.

Clark has written the most on Nietzsche's influence on Plath, stating that "Nietzsche's ideas about self-affirmation, or 'self-becoming,' dovetailed with Plath's" (33), and earlier in this paper, I noted Clark recognized that Nietzsche provided an ideology which enabled Plath to forge her own creative, strong-willed soul, liberating herself from the patriarchal norms of her time. However, Clark states later in

her argument that Plath eventually abandoned Nietzsche because he “seemed an embodiment of the patriarchal hegemony she now railed against for personal and political reasons”, citing Plath’s critique of war and fascism in “Lady Lazarus”, “Daddy” and her statement “Every woman adores a Fascist” as proof of her rejection (132). While I agree that Nietzsche helped Plath to develop a counter-cultural ideology for her own time, there seems to be no true evidence for Plath’s rejection of Nietzsche. Furthermore, Clark overlooks Plath’s interest in Nietzsche’s articulation of the creativity of the Superman, which made more of an impression on Plath than a violent expression of Nietzsche’s will to power. It is interesting then, that although Peel acknowledges Nietzsche as a dominant influence on Plath, and Clark affirms that Nietzsche’s concepts of the Superman and the will to power provided Plath with an ideological foundation, only two other critics, Butscher and Britzolakis, notice the Nietzschean themes in her writing, and no one approached *The Bell Jar* from a Nietzschean standpoint.

NIETZSCHE’S INFLUENCE ON PLATH’S PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

Indeed, during the time Plath read Nietzsche’s works, she was formulating her own philosophy as a writer and an individual. Plath learned from Nietzsche that the superior will, the *Übermensch*, overcomes hardship and undermines the restrictive standards of the herd, invoking language that resembles Nietzsche’s description of the Superman, who is described as being “the most solitary, the most concealed, the most divergent, the man beyond good and evil, the master of his virtues, the super-abundant of will” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 144). Her journals particularly provide a record of the progress of how she related to Nietzsche’s concepts of will, self-affirmation, and creativity. Perhaps one of her earliest expressions of enthusiastic acceptance of Nietzsche’s philosophy is the following entry in her journal:

I don’t believe that the meek will inherit the earth: The meek get ignored and trampled. They decompose in the bloody soil of war, of business, of *art*. . . It is the bold, the loud-mouthed, the cruel, the vital, the revolutionaries, the mighty in arms and will, who march over the soft patient flesh that lies beneath their cleated boots. (*Journals* 44, emphasis mine)

The above passage is certainly striking in its resemblance to Nietzsche’s disdain of the last man, or any individual who is motivated by *ressentiment* and does not assert himself or herself. Fortunately, for her less ambitious peers, Plath did not test this theory in practice, but this statement nevertheless is a formative acknowledgement of the importance of a strong will, not only in life, but in art.

Plath admits to her mother how difficult the process of becoming a strong soul is: “Oh mother, if you only knew how I am forging a soul! . . . I am fighting, fighting, and I am making a self, in great pain, often, as for a birth, but it is right that it should be so, and I am being refined in the fires of pain and love” (*LH* 223). In light of Clark’s assertion that Plath appropriated Nietzsche’s philosophy to use as an ideological background, it is interesting to note that Plath likens the struggle of a strong soul’s formation to childbirth, recalling Nietzsche’s imagery from Plath’s “favorite epigraph” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “One must still have chaos in one to give birth to a dancing star”. Plath’s use of feminine imagery to express the will to power may serve as one example for how Plath made Nietzsche’s philosophy her own. Finally, Plath’s effort to forge a soul leads to her rejection of social mores. Similar to Nietzsche’s critique of the herd mentality of his society’s morality, Plath writes about how she seems to have achieved an important difference from society: “But I know & feel & have lived so much: and am so wise, yes, in living for my age: having blasted through conventional morality, and come to my own morality” (269).

NIETZSCHE’S IMPACT ON PLATH’S ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

For Nietzsche and for Plath, artistic success is necessarily connected to the free expression of the Superman. In order to be able to artistically create, one must be able to have creativity out of struggle. In affirmation of this idea, Plath writes in the margins of Ortega’s *The Revolt of the Masses* the following response to his description of struggle: “My *own* philosophy—out of struggle, conflicts, hardship, comes a strong, vital, creative nature” (Peel 62).

Art cannot occur when the individual is imprisoned by society. In *The Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche connects artistic failure to the malady of history, stating, “For art flies away when you are rooting your deeds with the historical awning” (29). He further says that the man who is afflicted with the past “has lost or destroyed his instinct; he can no longer trust the ‘divine animal’ . . . His individuality is shaken, and . . . will never express itself externally” (29-30). Nietzsche significantly connects individuality with the facility for creative expression. A suppressant to the external expression of creativity is fretting over past occurrences as well as current challenges to the will.

Likewise, Plath continues Nietzsche’s struggle of “forging a soul” and asserting her individuality.

Her attempt to shake off the influence of history is also an effort to reach the freedom of expression. Plath states in one of her journal entries: "What I fear most, I think, is the death of imagination. It is that synthesizing spirit, that 'shaping force' which prolifically sprouts and makes up its own worlds with more inventiveness than God that I desire" (260). Of course, Plath desires the most ambitious expression of creation—to have more inventiveness than God would be an achievement of ultimate individuality. For Plath, imagination is the spirit, which endows her with transcendence more powerful than God. This is why she is so proud of all of her poems. They are expressive of her will to create, to be an imaginative, godlike artist who transforms worlds and creates new worlds with the power of her creative voice. It is understandable that she fears the death of imagination, because that death of creativity would also indicate a death of the true self. The imprisoned soul *cannot* express itself.

Plath's unique novel can be seen not only as an important expression of her creative philosophy, but also as a way of facing her inner demons. She states that *The Bell Jar* was an "autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past" (Ames 12). While it is important and thoroughly Nietzschean to seek to redeem the past through creativity, it was not Plath's only reason for writing the novel. Furthermore, Plath's aim was also to make Esther "the statement of a generation". This two-fold reason for writing the novel is congruent with Plath's philosophy of writing. For all of her writings, Plath states:

I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on (Orr 169-70).

In order to become the "statement of a generation," Plath had to surmount the pressures of conventional society. Similar to Nietzsche's critique of the herd mentality of his society's morality, Plath writes, "But I know & feel & have lived so much: and am so wise, yes, in living for my age: having blasted through conventional morality, and come to my *own* morality" (269). Creating her own moral standard is the challenge that Plath faced, and it is also the struggle that the protagonist of her first novel must try to overcome. In one of Plath's letters to her mother, she details the purpose of her writing: "Now I am making a shift. The world and the problems of an individual in this particular civilization are going to be forged into my discipline" (LH 222).

This is the Nietzschean struggle of individuation; as foremost Nietzsche scholar Leslie Thiele articulates: "The primary task of life is held to be the heroic struggle of individuation.... [Nietzsche's] works were written expressly to mark his own battles and victories, as milestones.... They illustrate not only a change, but continuity in change—an active and self-conscious growth into himself" (Thiele 3). Plath affirms this in her own evaluation of her writing style, which is "tough ... without any moral order other than that *growth is good*" (LH 315). Plath has the same goal for Esther as she did for herself: the goal of forging a soul. In the process of becoming, Plath portrays Esther's struggles against external and internal threats to her spirit: mainly, society's ever-present expectations of her gender to enter the domestic life, and her constant battle with depression and spiritual malaise.

Esther Greenwood's psychological journey in the novel is similar to the process of overcoming society that Plath recorded in her journals and that Nietzsche delineates in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It would be helpful at this point to consider Nietzsche's view of the individual's struggle in two forms: external and internal conflict. Nietzsche describes the process of overcoming as the "three metamorphoses of spirit" (26). In order to become a Superman, the spirit goes through three stages in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra's tripartite process of becoming serves as a helpful rhetorical analogy for the following analysis of Esther's struggles in the novel. First there is the metamorphosis of the camel, which must bear all the burden of an oppressive society. The next stage is a lion, which "conquers freedom" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 26). Zarathustra states, "To create new values—that even the lion cannot do; but the creation for oneself for new creation—that is within the power of the lion. The creature of freedom for oneself and a sacred 'No' even to duty" (27). The final stage is the child, who signifies "forgetfulness, a new beginning ... a holy Yea" (27).

Esther is faced with the same initial challenge that Zarathustra must overcome: external, societal conflicts of distortion and misapprehension. She is controlled by society and those close to her. In "*The Bell Jar* and Other Prose," Janet Badia observes, "From her relationship with Buddy Willard and her mother, to her experimentation with suicide methods, to her fight to escape the bell jar, nearly all the

plot episodes within the novel reveal Esther's struggles to gain control over her own life, to determine her own choices" (132). Marjorie Perloff also argues that Esther's struggle is her private psychosis in relation to society, stating:

For Sylvia Plath's focus in *The Bell Jar* is not on mental illness per se, but on the relationship of Esther's private psychosis to her larger social situation. Indeed, her dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject ("Ritual" 511).

Esther is haunted mainly by the expectations of her mother and her female mentors. Her mother pressures her to be sexually pure, and Esther also feels the burden of sexual activity leading to motherhood; as she says, "I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line" (*The Bell Jar* 221). Esther also feels controlled by "weird old women" who "all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them" (*BJ* 220). Women who have sold out to the morality of society present these conflicting expectations to Esther, pressuring her to conform to their image. To represent this in the novel, Plath uses mirror imagery as a way of emphasizing the societal pressure placed on Esther to resemble women who are considered to be healthy and well adjusted to society.

MIRROR IMAGERY IN PLATH'S WRITINGS

Before she began writing *The Bell Jar*, Plath demonstrated a deep interest in mirrors, as scholars have noted. In Susan Schwartz's article, "Sylvia Plath: A Split in the Mirror," she argues that the glass in Plath's poetry functions as a metaphor for the "struggle between the true and false self" (70). Because Plath's use of mirror imagery is connected with her complicated view of herself as a woman in a patriarchal society, mirrors are often cruel to the subject. In "The Mirror and the Shadow: Plath's Poetics of Self-Doubt," Steven Axelrod states, "Plath's mirror poems originate in her doubts about her creativity and then reinforce those doubts" (291). In his reading of Plath's poetry, he demonstrates how mirrors symbolize Plath's anxiety of authorship, which is also connected to her fears of failing to achieve true selfhood. In addition to Schwartz and Axelrod's insightful readings on the importance of creative expression and selfhood to Plath, I would further argue that Plath's negative mirror imagery has a philosophical antecedence that can be found throughout Nietzsche's early philosophy. Poems like "Mirror" (1961) and "In Plaster" (1961), which were published the same year Plath began writing *The Bell Jar*, can be viewed from this lens. For instance, in her poem "In Plaster", the speaker explicitly invokes Nietzsche's concept of the herd mentality when describing her mirror-self: "You could tell almost at once she had a slave mentality," Plath writes. She later evokes Nietzschean mirror imagery in the next stanza: "I didn't mind her waiting on me, and she adored it. / In the morning she woke me early, reflecting the sun" (*Collected Poems* 158, lines 21-23).

Plath's poem "Mirror" is a chilling poem about a mirror that consumes a young woman over time. The speaker of the poem, the mirror itself, professes that it is "not cruel, only truthful / The eye of a little god, four-cornered" (*Collected Poems* 173, lines 4-5). That the mirror has to assert that it is *not* cruel renders it suspect; indeed, by the end of the poem, the woman who gazes into the overpowering and tyrannical "little god" eventually drowns in its image, replaced by an old woman who looks like "a terrible fish" (*Collected Poems* 174, line 18). William Freedman argues, "The terrible fish is not simply the time-transformed identity of the young girl; it is the Hydeian alter-ego of the mirror or lake in whose depths it is shudderingly disclosed" (161). The mirror's true identity is embodied in a terrible, almost demonic fish form (it rises toward her menacingly, *like* "a terrible fish"). Perhaps it is because of the mirror's destructive effect on the woman—telling her what she *is*, concealing from her what she *could be*—that she succumbs to its cruelty. William Freedman affirms that the woman is "the personification—or reflection—of the mirror as passive servant" (161). This view encourages a Nietzschean reading of the absence of autonomy. For Plath, mirrors do not change anything, transform anything, or redeem anything; they are anti-creative and discourage creativity by merely presenting what is reflected.

Because the mirror challenges the creative impulse in the woman, she develops a type of slave mentality, seeking her identity in the reflecting glass. Freedman further states that for Plath, "Mirror" represents a kind of middle-ground between the extremes of passivity and action, numbing self-cancellation and aggressive self-assertion" (162). However, Plath does not seem to portray a "middle-ground." Instead, the poem depicts a battle between a passive individual and an aggressive, even destructive mirror that masters her. Freedman argues that "Much of Plath's poetry ... is a mirror of the male text as mirror, a replication of the passive images caught on its surface. Just as the mirror

can only *reflect* reality, the woman writer can only reflect male ideals and desire" (166). While I agree with Freedman that mirrors for Plath usually indicate passivity and societal "ideals", there are some exceptions to Freedman's assertion. Plath's poem "Childless Woman", for instance, offers a more positive interaction between the speaker and mirrors, indicating that mirrors are only good when the narrator "spins" or creates mirrors "loyal to [her] image" (lines 11, 12). One can then infer from Plath's complex and varied use of mirror imagery that mirrors are not always negative in her writing; rather, they symbolize the inner weakness or strength of the narrator. Much like Zarathustra, Plath's narrators cannot bear the distorted images of themselves that society imposes on them. The harmful influences within the poem ultimately represent threats to the inner strength and self-worth of Plath's female narrators, who are concerned with the exertion of their own will within society and the loss of their artistic ability in the process. The mirror, "exact", "unmistaken by love or dislike", and "truthful" (rather than poetic), is antithetical to the value Plath places on artistic creation (*Collected Poems* 173, lines 1, 3, 4).

From a Nietzschean perspective, "Mirror" is a dramatization of an objectified soul fighting the herd mentality with little success. The girl is objectified by her reflection. She has no autonomy; the fact that the mirror, and not the woman, narrates the poem suggests a reversal in power. The nameless girl, who drowns in the mirror, has no control over herself. Unlike the powerful Superman-like narrator in the other poem, who actively controls mirrors—*creates* mirrors that reflect her true and powerful and fully autonomous self, the girl in "Mirror" is *presque rien*—her existence is reduced to the mirror, much like the objective man in section 207 of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*: "[T]he objective man is in fact a mirror: accustomed to submitting to whatever wants to be known, lacking any other pleasure than that provided by knowledge" (126).

Unlike the Superman, or noble spirit, who "has reverence for itself" and lives "with tremendous and proud composure", the objective man "is accustomed to submit" (228). Nietzsche lists many other qualities of the objective man: he is afraid of being alone, he cannot face his own troubles, he gazes retrospectively and helplessly at the past, and he is "inauthentic, fragile, questionable" (127). The objective man is described by Nietzsche as a "mirror" with "no end in himself" (126). He is not an artist; rather, he is reduced to an artistic triumph (128). The woman who gazes repeatedly in the mirror is dependent on its reflection until she loses her identity. She becomes the artistic triumph of the mirror itself until her face becomes distorted and transformed into a grotesque fish.

Distortion is one of the central themes of *The Bell Jar*, and like the nameless woman in "Mirror", Zarathustra also suffers from mirror-distortion. He describes a dream in which a village child handed him a mirror, and states, "But when I looked in the mirror, I shrieked, and my heart throbbed: for not myself did I see therein, but a devil's grimace and derision" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 83). We can see in this passage that an external action, naturally, affected Zarathustra in a very personal way, and it is no coincidence that the mirror that distorts his image is the one that society gives to him. Esther is similarly tormented by society's mirror that is held up to her. She has no control over her reflection in mirrors that are presented to her throughout the novel.

In the novel, mirrors represent society's expectations of Esther. Throughout her narrative, she describes mirrors and reflections with either disgust or horror. In the beginning of the novel, she says, "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" (18). Although the connection may be coincidental, Plath's first mirror description in the novel is similar to the tone of Plath's poem "Mirror". Neither woman is in control of her reflection or self, and they are both horrified to see how used up and *old* they have become. The next time Esther gazes into the "gilt compact" with the side mirror, and "the face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell after a prolonged beating" (102). Later in the novel, she compares her reflection to "a sick Indian" that "ghosted over the landscape" (112). Her reflection looks "old" in the beginning of the novel, but at this point of the novel, she is practically non-existent. Esther's identity is symbolically diminished; she is trapped in these mirrors.

As the novel progresses, Esther becomes increasingly disenchanted with the world's expectations, and she realizes that she must exert her will in some way, or lose herself entirely. Pamela J. Annas observes that entrapment in Plath's work has to do with "what stands in the way of the possibility of rebirth for the self" (131). To symbolize the process of her break from society, Esther tries to commit suicide. Her suicide attempt, while completely against Nietzsche's philosophy of affirmation of life, is her first major assertion of will in the novel, a significant step in a process of becoming. Esther's survival enables her to continue and eventually affirm the process of overcoming external and internal threats to her will to life.

Mirrors represent society's expectations of Esther, and at various points throughout the novel, they signify distortion, alienation, or entrapment. Even in the hospital, Esther is still entrapped by

societal expectations. It is significant then, that when Esther stays in the hospital after her suicide attempt, she deliberately asks for a mirror from the nurse, grimaces at her reflection, and shatters it on the floor. Esther demands “to see a mirror”, but the nurse replies that she better not, because she “doesn’t look very pretty” (174). Eventually the nurse gives in and Esther gazes at her reflection: “At first I didn’t see what the trouble was. It wasn’t a mirror at all but a picture” (174). As evidenced by this statement, Esther’s reflection is so unrecognizable, she does not even identify herself in the mirror—it’s just a picture. Before she breaks the mirror, she smiles at her reflection: “The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin” (175). Esther lets the mirror crash on the floor because the effect of her smile is grotesque in the mirror. Much like Zarathustra, who shrieked at his visage in the mirror because “not myself did I see therein, but a devil’s grimace and derision”, Plath rejects the image that society has handed to her (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 83). She repeats the act of shattering reflections when she breaks the thermometer in the hospital, so that the “thermometer shards glittered, and balls of mercury trembled like celestial dew” (183). In this incident, Esther is pleased to have destroyed yet another glass object, and she smiles once more at the small silver ball of mercury from the thermometer. She knows that she has the power to destroy it, thinking, “If I dropped it[,] it would break into a million little replicas of itself.... I smiled and smiled at the small silver ball” (183).

If Esther feels continually burdened by society’s expectations, then the necessary action for this stage of overcoming is isolation from society. In the same way that Zarathustra leaves the townspeople after they show him his distorted image, Esther too must leave in order to heal and begin the process of forging a soul. It is of utmost importance for the Superman to overcome external conflicts before internal conflicts, and Esther does this by isolating herself from the herd. She leaves the hospital and Dr. Gordon, and moves to an asylum—a place for those who are rejected by society. Unfortunately, Esther is followed and tormented by one remaining mirror: Joan Gilling, who she describes as a “beaming double of my old best self” (205). The “old self” Esther mentions is the self shaped by the world that Esther has tried to overcome, and as another obstacle to her progress, Joan re-enters her life, “specially designed to follow and torment” Esther (205). Even Joan’s room is described as “a mirror image” of Plath’s own room (195). The reason Joan’s influence is at first so dangerous to Esther is because Joan “[marked] the gulf” between Esther and “the nearly well ones” (205). Joan prevents Esther from being able to surpass her old self, and she too must overcome that anxiety.

Esther begins to improve under the care of Dr. Nolan, who understands her, cares about her, and does not pressure Esther to resemble her in any way. Dr. Nolan reassures her that her mother’s argument for purity is “Propaganda!” and Esther begins to experience freedom; Joan’s presence ceases to bother her (222). Although there is no proof that Esther’s more positive experience with electroshock therapy was one of Plath’s experiences, the following statement from Plath may shed light on why this positive experience is so helpful to Esther. Plath describes the time she underwent electroshock therapy: “A time of darkness, despair, disillusion—so black only as the inferno of the human mind can be—symbolic death, and numb shock—then the painful agony of slow rebirth and psychic regeneration” (Ames 8). Similarly, the process of electroshock therapy, as overseen by Dr. Nolan, enables Esther to begin the slow process of rebirth and renewal. The following passage illustrates Esther’s improvement: “I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: ‘I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go ... *I was my own woman*’” (223, emphasis added).

Apart from the stifling climate of society’s herd values, the other obstacle Esther must overcome is her own inner chaos. Plath’s favorite epigraph was Nietzsche’s statement that one *must* have enough chaos to give birth to a dancing star. It is important that one is not overcome by chaos—instead, the woman who wishes to overcome must use her will to power and channel her creative energy constructively, triumphantly. In one of her journal entries, Plath describes her frustration regarding her inability to be a Superman and have the will to organize her personal chaos:

Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it is impossible for me to be God—or the universal woman-and-man—or anything much. I am what I feel and think and do. I want to express my being as fully as I can because I somewhere picked up the idea that I could justify my being alive that way. But if I am to express what I am, I must have a standard of life, a jumping-off place, a technique—to make arbitrary and temporary organization of my own personal and pathetic little chaos (*Journals* 45).

Likewise, Esther must make an organization of her personal chaos, for even though she is able to shatter society’s mirrors, she is still trapped within another glass construction—a distorting glass bell

jar. She is trapped there, "stewing in [her] own sour air" (185). Even if she separates herself from others, the bell jar remains, preventing rebirth: "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream" (237).

Luke Ferretter has observed in his study of the novel that babies in the novel have a greater metaphorical significance, stating: "There is a metaphoric chain in Plath's sensibility, in which the purity of a baby is the most desirable state and to which one returns by going back through or casting off the dirty self-images that make up one's personal history as an adult" (82). In the novel, Esther yearns to cast off the "dirty self-images," and from a Nietzschean perspective, this desire represents both a retrospective and future-oriented goal. The baby's purity is desirable because it is not yet aware of conventional morality or traditional social mores—in this sense it is a longing for the past. But the final stage of Nietzsche's process of becoming is, interestingly, represented by an infant. This makes sense, since the final stage is one of rebirth, and it is a necessary move for Esther to be free.

Esther's greatest personal struggles are her paralysis of will, and consequently, the paralysis of her creative expression, which leads to her inner despair of the soul. The metaphorical image that Esther uses to describe her paralyzed self is a fig tree:

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 ... 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 ... as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (77).

As an image, it is also correspondent to the fig trees mentioned in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra states, that he is "a north wind" to "ripe figs" (85). Because he enables them to fall from the trees before they spoil, "they are good and sweet" (85). For Esther, the figs do not represent Nietzsche's doctrines—they represent life plans. Plath illustrates the difficulty for a woman in Esther's position. Esther is faced with so many exclusive opportunities that would force her to reject her other plans the moment she chose to affirm one. Paralysis is a hold placed on the will to power, and Esther therefore needs a Nietzschean "north wind" to enable her to determine her future without fear and anxiety.

Though we have observed thus far many symptoms and causes of Esther's struggle, it is not until nearly the end of the novel when we realize the root of her depression. Esther's underlying fear is that she is losing her creative ability. She thinks to herself, "How could I write about my life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or even seen anyone die?" (121). Not surprisingly, her creative anxiety stems partly from some damaging comments made by her creative writing professor, who calls her short story "factitious," leading Esther to think "You'll never get anywhere like that" (147). Finally, when Mrs. Guinea, Esther's patron of sorts, expresses concern that Esther's depression is caused by a boy, her mother replies, "No, it is Esther's writing. She thinks she will never write again" (185). Her professor's critical judgment is yet another instance of society's destructive influence on Esther. It is worth bringing up once more Nietzsche's assertion in *The Use and Abuse of History* that "art flies away when you are rooting your deeds within the historical awning" (29). Esther's paralysis of creative expression is the greatest hindrance to her process self-healing and becoming.

At the end of the novel, the bell jar that stifled Esther for so many years finally lifts. Esther marks the change after she hangs up on Irwin: "I was perfectly free" (242). Although she has no idea whether or not the bell jar that she lifted would ever descend again (241), she at least recognizes that she is no longer under its oppressive influence. "Patched, approved, and ready for the road", Esther reflects with quiet bemusement: "There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice" (244). Nevertheless, this moment is imbued with magical significance for Esther, and she walks into the room repeating the old, affirming brag of her heart: "I am, I am, I am" (243). It is important that Esther repeats this simple, yet powerful phrase that is rooted in the present. The affirmation of her existence is a decided, philosophical "Yes" to life. Zarathustra states, "For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred 'Yes' is needed: the spirit now wills his own will, and he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world" (27). Similarly, Esther was lost to the world, conquered her anxiety, and is finally reborn.

Esther's "I am" offers no future assurance other than the fact that she exists, and will continue to exist, moment by moment. She is not "finished," but Plath portrays her as undergoing the painful but necessary continuity of change, the continual process of becoming by overcoming struggle. Allegedly, Plath was even planning to write a sequel that would show her world and "the people in it" through "the eyes of health," rather than the "distorting lens" of a bell jar (Ames 14). In *The Bell Jar*, Plath portrays the world of the last man that possesses the same herd-like mentality of her poem "Notes on Zarathustra's

Prologue,” as well as the Superman’s task to withstand and transform society. When Esther is approved to re-enter society, she guides herself in the room for her final interview, endowed with a magical philosophical thread of purpose, which is to continue to assert her will and to teach other women how they too can escape the bell jar. Esther, a name which means “star” in the Hebrew, is Nietzsche’s “dancing star”—both Superman, overcoming and affirming life like a new-born child, and Nietzschean artist, “willing to endure the pangs of the child-bearer” and prophesy her message of change to other women

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ELENI KAROUNOS REID is Ph.D. student, fourth year at Baylor University English Department.

UP AND UP AND UP THE STAIRS
The main staircase in Whitstead, where Sylvia Plath wrote “Pursuit” while a student at Newnham College, July 2015.
Credit: Cathleen Allyn Conway



WORKS CITED

- Ames, Lois. "The Bell Jar and the Life of Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note." *The Bell Jar*. 3-15
- Annas, Pamela J. *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Greenwood, 1988. Print.
- Axelrod, Steven Gould. "The Mirror And The Shadow: Plath's Poetics of Self-Doubt." *Contemporary Literature* 26.3 (1985): 286-301. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 6 Jan. 2015.
- Badia, Janet. "The Bell Jar and Other Prose." *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Ed. by Jo Gill. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006. 124-38. Print.
- Britzolakis, Christina. *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.
- Butscher, Edward. *Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness*. New York: Seabury, 1976. Print.
- Clark, Heather L. *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.
- Ferretter, Luke. *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study*. N.p.: Dinburgh UP, 2010. Print.
- Freedman, William. "Sylvia Plath's 'Mirror' Of Mirrors." *Papers on Language & Literature* 23.1 (1987): 56. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 7 Apr. 2013.
- Nelson, Deborah. "Plath, History and Politics" *Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Ed. by Jo Gill. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006. 21-35. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Walter Arnold. Kaufmann. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche: Translated and Edited, with Commentaries, by Walter Kaufmann*. New York: Modern Library, 1968. Print.
- . *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann. New York: Modern Library, 1995. Print.
- Orr, Peter. *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press and Ian Scott-Kilvert*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966. Print.
- Peel, Robin. "The Ideological Apprenticeship Of Sylvia Plath." *Journal of Modern Literature* 27.4 (2004): 59-72. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 7 Apr. 2013.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "A Ritual for Being Born Twice": Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Contemporary Literature*, 13.4, (1972): pp. 507-22.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005. Print.
- . "The Age of Anxiety and the Escape from Freedom" 27 May 1954. TS. MSS 11, Box 10. Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
- . "Cambridge Notes." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Print.
- . *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1981. Print.
- . "Notes on Zarathustra's prologue." 1950-1951. TS. MSS 11, Box 8, Folder 1. Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
- . *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor, 2000. Print.
- . Plath, Sylvia. *Letters Home*. London: Faber&Faber, 1975. Print.
- Richardson, Donna. "Plath's 'Mirror'." *Explicator* 49.3 (1991): 193-195. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 7 Apr. 2013.
- Schwartz, Susan E. "Sylvia Plath: A Split In The Mirror." *Plath Profiles: An International Journal of Studies on Sylvia Plath* 4.(2011): 55-76. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 6 Jan. 2015.
- Thiele, Leslie Paul. *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul: A Study of Heroic Individualism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990. Print.