# Searching for Connotations and Connections

## Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Paul Ricoeur, and the Language of Madness.

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Sylvia Plath's first novel *The Bell Jar* was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963 and released in England just weeks before she committed suicide in her London home (Ames 279). It was then published some eight years later in 1971 in the USA. The novel is a first-person account of Esther Greenwood; a nineteen-year-old aspiring writer who, while on a writing internship in New York, begins to feel that something is "wrong" with her. Upon returning home to the desultory suburbs of Boston, she discovers that she has not been accepted for a competitive summer writing course at Harvard. This news catalyses for Esther several suicide attempts and admissions to psychiatric wards. In short, *The Bell Jar* charts Esther's experience of madness.

This article will argue that in *The Bell Jar*, readers are forced to engage with uncertainties of language. Plath's writing brings words that do not share obvious connections into relation through implicit and explicit comparisons—that is through metaphor and simile. These comparisons produce a semantic tension that surprises the reader. "Surprise" occurs through the contradiction of readers' expectations and the uncovering of hidden relationships between disparate terms, which together leads to the development of a new "kind" of knowledge about Esther's subjective experience of madness. I will argue that ambiguity and semantic tension are positive attributes of Plath's writing because they reveal the extent to which readers can never be certain about what she is attempting to convey about Esther's experience. An inevitable, universal interpretation of her work is unattainable. The only interpretation readers can be certain of is their own, which is brought about through the conscious act of searching for unlikely connections and connotations amongst the plethora of implicit and explicit relations Plath draws between disparate terms. I will argue that this very act of searching for meaning in *The Bell Jar* invites

readers to negotiate new perspectives for understanding the experience of madness, and that this act of "working" to derive meaning from a highly idiosyncratic vocabulary has the capacity to aid the development of empathy in readers, precisely because it reveals a common difficulty we all face in using a predefined vocabulary to express complex thoughts, feelings and experiences.[1] Throughout this article, I will demonstrate that in contrast to the stabilised understandings of madness that the language of science, and for the purposes of this paper, of psychiatry, as laid out in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-fifth edition* (*The DSM-V*), Plath offers readers a powerful alternative that indirectly reveals the problems associated with using a scientific paradigm to describe and promote understanding into and about the experience of madness: a powerful alternative that reveals a common human vulnerability and therefore has the capacity to aid the development of empathy (Charon 898; Shapiro 478; Flynn 36 ) [2]

Throughout this article I have chosen, after considerable thought, discussion and research of primary source material, to use the general and more ambiguous term "madness" rather than "mental illness" when referring to Esther's experiences of psychological distress. The reason for this is three-fold. Firstly, in surveying Plath's journals, it is evident that the term she most frequently used to describe the types of stories she wanted to write were "mad stories." She writes in one entry, three years before the publication of *The Bell Jar* in September of 1958:

> How much life I have known: love, disillusion, madness, hatred, murderous passion. How to be honest. I see beginnings, flashes, yet how to organise them knowledgably, to finish them. I will write mad stories. But honest. I know the horror of primal feelings, obsessions (Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* 511-512).

She echoes this sentiment in a later entry on the fifteenth of November of the same year, wherein she writes, "I have experienced love, sorrow, madness, and if I cannot make these experiences meaningful, no new experience will help me" (530).
It therefore seems that it was Plath's intention in *The Bell Jar* and elsewhere in her writing, to depict "primal" and "mad" experiences as honestly and "meaningfully" as she possibly could.

Secondly, in conducting an extensive survey of the popular reviews written about *The Bell Jar* both after its publication in the United Kingdom in 1963 and in the United States of American in 1971, it is evident that reviewers tend to resist classifying the experience Plath depicts throughout

[1] I will discuss empathy in full in the third section of this article.

*The Bell Jar* as "mental illness." They instead construe it as "a reconstruction of a mind slipping away from its owner," (Petroski n.p) whilst acknowledging that "terms like *mad* and *sane* grow increasingly inadequate as *The Bell Jar* develops […] as by the time we learn how Esther got to be *psychotic* the word itself (or any diagnostic term) has ceased to be relevant" (Moss 73-75). While some reviewers, such as William Coe find the absence of diagnostic terminology an "inadequacy," (n.p) arguing that the "lack of psychological justification" (n.p) fails to make for a convincing depiction of a breakdown, others, such as Dero Coleman agree that "such deep penetration into the mysterious and harrowing corners of the mind is most unusual in any novel," (Coleman n.p) and that Plath's poetic prose draws the reader "into [Esther's] mental breakdown with such intensity that the insanity becomes real and even rational" (Coleman n.p).

Thirdly, this essay's objective is to argue that the deterministic or stabilised understandings of madness as articulated by *The DSM-V* are inadequate when it comes to learning about the idiosyncrasies that characterise an individual's experience. That is, diagnostic terminology fails us when seeking to know, "what is it like to be you?" To overlay Esther's experience with diagnostic terminology would only seek to reproduce a stabilised understanding of a lived experience that is anything but.

This article will be divided into three parts. To begin, I will outline French theorist Paul Ricoeur's non-reductive theory of metaphor and use it to clearly delineate simile from metaphor. Ricoeur will serve as the methodological frame needed to better understand what Plath's language is doing, and how it is doing it. In the third section of this article, I will attempt to define empathy, a prickly term and concept at best, and discuss the existing criticism that argues for the importance of literary depictions of madness like Plath's in clinical settings. In the final section, I will conduct a close textual analysis of Plath's writing in *The Bell Jar* using three of the key criteria as outlined in *The DSM-V* for "Major Depressive Disorder." I will conclude by advocating for, as others such as Charon and Shapiro have done, the importance of accounts like Plath's alongside the use of psychiatric manuals like *The DSM-V* in the training of health professionals and in the treatment of those experiencing psychological distress.

## Paul Ricoeur: A Non-Reductive Theory of Metaphor

Paul Ricoeur, in his non-reductionist theory of metaphor conceives of metaphor as a semantic event capable of expressing the "more" of experience and understanding whilst exploding meaning and breaking the text open to the life-world (McGaughey 418-421). For Ricoeur, it

is the tension generated in the metaphorical statement as well as the implicit connections made between two terms that enable nuances, insight and hidden connections to be revealed. Ricoeur argues that metaphor produces new knowledge and insight because it brings two terms into an implicit comparison and in doing so, generates in language a new relationship that is not explicitly articulated and is therefore capable of surprising the reader, contradicting their expectations, uncovering hidden connections and producing new knowledge (27-30). For Ricoeur metaphor teaches us something new by contributing to the opening up of field of reality of which ordinary language is not capable of laying bare (174). While Plath uses metaphor to describe Esther's experience of madness she also uses an abundance of similes for the same purpose. It is important that the two are clearly differentiated from one another, as there is a tendency in the existing criticism pertaining to *The Bell Jar* to conflate metaphor with simile and to not attend to the differences between the two. [3]

Ricoeur argues that simile occupies the field of metaphor; however, the two are distinct. Simile and metaphor are alike in that they both involve two relations, yet they differ in the explicit and implicit comparisons they make between two terms (27). Similes use "like" or "as" to draw direct comparisons between two terms while metaphor draws a more implicit comparison between two terms instead making a less direct attribution (27-29). For Ricoeur, simile makes deliberate comparisons to draw connections between two terms and in doing so reduces dynamism, dissipates surprise and fails to provoke inquiry in the same way that the implicit comparisons made in metaphor do (29). In short, simile is explicit where metaphor is implicit and for Ricoeur, it is the implicit connections drawn between two terms that leads to the apprehension of new knowledge, connections and relations.

In the discussion of empathy and the language of *The Bell Jar* to follow I also argue that the similes used throughout *The Bell Jar do* lead to the production of a new kind of knowledge when used to talk about the idiosyncratic, subjective experience of madness because they do not rely, as Ricoeur argues upon a perceived resemblance that already exists within the discourse and between terms (29-30). The comparisons that Plath makes using "like" or "as" are not simply facts of discourse waiting to be given a name, rather they are comparisons highly particular to Esther's idiosyncratic experience. They produce a new kind of knowledge about the lived

[3] For examples see Hunt and Carter, "Seeing Through *The Bell Jar*," 32-34; Smith, "Metaphors for Mental Distress: Looking through *The Bell Jar*," 355-359; Nora Sellei, "The Fig Tree and The Patent Leather Shoes: The Body and its Representation in *The Bell Jar*," 130; Diane Bonds, "The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's the Bell Jar," 49-64.

experience of madness because they are grounded in lived experience, not divorced from it (Flynn 39). Plath's language produces an alternative that enables a particularistic voice to be heard and for new dimensions of the experience of illness that are frequently absent from a psychiatric discourse to be voiced (Charon 898; Shapiro 476).

Before moving on to discuss Plath in further detail, I will briefly recount Ricoeur's theory of meaning within the metaphorical statement. This will support us in understanding why a vocabulary capable of revealing local and particular knowledge about Esther's individual experience of madness can aid the development of empathy in readers and is therefore essential if a gap is to be bridged between a logo-scientific understanding of madness and the lived experience of it.

Ricoeur distinguishes between literal or objective and spiritual or intellectual meaning. Objective meaning, he argues, is not opposed to spiritual or intellectual meaning but is the basic meaning of the proposition; the meaning that arises relative to the object to which it applies (57). The literal meaning of a proposition is that which is "borne by words taken letter by letter, by words understood the way they are accepted in common usage […] literal meaning therefore suggests itself immediately to those who understand the language" (56-57). For Ricoeur, the spiritual meaning of a proposition is the diverted or figurative meaning of a group of words; that which the literal meaning causes to be borne in the spirit by the means of the circumstances of the discourse, by the tone of voice or by expressed connections that exhibit unarticulated relationships (58). Tropological meaning can be extended further and understood as what arises when one steps into the breach where language lacks the words for a certain idea or experience (58). For Ricoeur, the "semantic collision" that occurs between tenor and vehicle force designation to give way to connotation, therefore giving rise to multiplicity of meaning and to surprising connections (112).[4] Ricoeur makes it clear that tropological meaning does not suggest itself immediately to readers. It requires concerted engagement and a willingness to step into the breach. In short, tropological meaning arises as readers come to acknowledge the difficulty inherent in making meaning of complex thoughts and feelings from a limited menu of words.

Throughout *The Bell Jar,* Plath repeatedly steps into what Ricoeur terms the breach, the space where tropological meaning arises, by

[4] The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines denotation as the term employed to describe a thing-to denote is to mark out or distinguish one thing from another. Connotation by contrast is that which is implied in a word in addition to the primary or essential meaning. A connotation is an additional layer of meaning beyond what the term primarily denotes.

consequence of one lacking the literal language to express inherently complex feelings and thoughts. That Plath is constantly stepping into this breach is further evidence of the limits the language of science has for expressing the nuanced subjectivity particular to the experience of madness.

We shall now move to a brief discussion of empathy. This discussion will reveal why a discourse that aids the development of empathy for the experience of madness and catalyses the emergence of new perspectives for understanding and describing it is critical in our current time and place.

## Empathy and Madness

*Empathy* is both a contentious term and a contentious concept. There is a general lack of consensus in both the scientific and philosophical literature as to what empathy is, and what it is not (Coplan 5-6; Prinz 212-213 Debes 219-222; de Vignemont and Singer 435-436). Empathy as a term is shown to have its roots in early twentieth century German aesthetic theory as the English translation of the German *Einfühlung* or, the act of "feeling one's way into the subjective experience of another" (Lipps 415-440; Keen 208-210). And as a concept, its history traces back as far, perhaps further than Aristotle who in *Nicomachean Ethics, Eudemian Ethics* and *Magna Moralia* wrote of synonymous concepts such as "friendly feeling," (*Eudemian* 1966) "goodwill," (*Nicomeachean* 1753) "pity" (Nicomeachean 1754) and "righteous indignation," (*Magna* 1886).

In popular discourse, one of the most common conceptions of empathy is what Amy Coplan terms, "self-orientated perspective taking," (9) and Peter Goldie terms "in his shoes perspective shifting" (302). It is the kind of quality Barack Obama emphasises in his often-cited commencement speech at Xavier University, New Orleans a year on from Hurricane Katrina in 2006 when he urges students to "put [themselves] in someone else's shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from [them] (Obama)."

In contemporary narrative theory, empathy is regarded as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect that can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, hearing about another's condition or even by reading" (Keen 208-210). For Suzanne Keen, author of *Empathy and the Novel,* empathy is both cognitive and affective in that it involves both feeling and thinking and is distinguished from sympathy which is considered to be the act of pitying the circumstances of someone we perceive to be in a worse situation to ourselves, or feeling a supportive emotion about their feelings, rather than essentially feeling what they feel (209). Keen argues that some feminist and postcolonial critics claim that empathy loses all legitimacy when it appeals to a notion of universal human emotions, or when empathy is taken to mean that "I know

what you feel" (223). In this article, it is important to emphasise that I do not wish to claim that empathic connection with Esther is akin to feeling the same *pain* as her. Rather, I am arguing that Plath invites readers to imaginatively reconstruct what it would be like to *be* Esther and that through this reconstruction, commonalities between reader and protagonist are revealed which in turn urges readers to regard Esther not as wholly other, but as irreducibly like themselves (Nussbaum 319). Empathy, for our purposes in reading and examining *The Bell Jar* could therefore manifest as a very basic recognition of a shared human vulnerability; a regarding of Esther as a human being with the same *capacity* for vulnerability, pain, and the like as readers. Plath's strenuous efforts at locating verbal equivalents for Esther's experience are in themselves an expression of vulnerability; an expression of the limits that language has for describing difficult and oftentimes complex thoughts and feelings. This in turn, serves as an implicit critique of the stabilised understandings of madness promoted by science through manuals such as *The DSM-V.*

Empathy's development is therefore made possible in readers of *The Bell Jar* as a result of the ambiguity and partiality that metaphor and simile create. This ambiguity and partiality presents readers with an invitation to invest themselves in making meaning from the unlikely connections that Plath draws between disparate terms. Through the act of searching for meaning and the exercising of a genuine curiosity to know "what it is like to be you {her}," the "vicarious and spontaneous sharing of affect," and the "imaginative reconstruction" that Keen and moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum respectively draw our attention to, may indeed begin to occur.

Social Worker Martin Smith argues that metaphor can act as a route to empathy; however, "eligibility" seems to have replaced "empathy" as the word for our times. He suggests that "the metaphor of the market place has replaced that of the community centre in the world of social work" (360). This is troubling because, as Smith attests, in a world of increasing bureaucracy and analysis where "service-users" are allocated to reductionist tick boxes to be deemed eligible or ineligible for clinical services, understanding has been reduced to categorisation and thus empathy is therefore never more important (360). Plath's writing, he argues, offers clinical professionals a powerful paradigm for understanding the experience of madness—one that fundamentally shifts the depth of the patient-clinician relationship to the extent that new perspectives and responses by those in the caring professions are made possible (361). Likewise, Johanna Shapiro argues that fictional accounts of madness enable empathy to enter the patient-clinician relationship as they enable differing points of view and particularistic

details about an individual's experience of madness to be brought to life (477-478). She describes that in her work teaching art and literature to medical students, fictional narratives depicting a character's experience of madness give voices that are often ignored or silenced by the medical hierarchy the opportunity to express an alternative story of illness: one that does not centre around a vulnerable person being diagnosed, objectified and treated by an authoritative clinician (477). Furthermore, Shapiro argues that fictional accounts of madness like Plath's are full of particularistic details that are frequently left out or deemed irrelevant to the patients' diagnosis or illness experience (478). She claims that Plath's novel exposes the gap between doctor and patient (between Esther and Dr Gordon) and argues that healing cannot take place in the absence of empathy (481-487). For Shapiro, immersion in the highly particularistic worldviews and experiences of a patient's illness enables clinicians and readers to recognise the patient or character not as wholly "other" but as sharing similarities and irreducible differences with themselves (478). In short, fictional accounts of madness may aid the development of empathy and the deepening of patient-clinician relationships that are predicated on mutual respect and shared commonalities.

While Shapiro and Smith discuss the importance of metaphor in increasing understanding and generating new insight into the nuanced particulars of an individual's experience of madness, they do not bring narrative theory to bear on these questions and therefore present an opportunity for me to do so. I would like to suggest that in directly comparing the language of Plath with the language of *The DSM-V*, informed by a non-reductive narrative theory of metaphor, we can come to better grasp how Plath's language is achieving an affect that is so radically different to the stabilised language of science, and therefore be better positioned to encourage the use of alternative vocabularies in the training of clinical professionals and the treatment of those experiencing madness. As I will show in the comparative analysis that follows, it is through Plath's elaborate similes and metaphorical descriptions, that she reveals how psychiatry's attempts at classifying, unifying and constraining experience into discrete units of measurement are thwarted as subjective experience will always consist of disparate and fragmentary thoughts and feelings that cannot be readily assimilated into objectively discernible criteria, sub criteria and numerical codes.

The remainder of the article will be devoted to a comparative analysis of the language of *The Bell Jar* with that of *The DSM-V*. This analysis will serve to underscore my contention that a psychiatric discourse is radically insufficient and incapable of both aiding the development of empathy

and promoting a greater depth of understanding into and about the idiosyncrasies inherent to an individual's experience of madness, as evidenced in *The Bell Jar.*

## Plath and *The DSM-V*: Observing the Differences

In this section I will directly contrast two of the criteria within *The DSM-V* for "Major Depressive Disorder" with the language used to describe Esther's experience of madness within *The Bell Jar*. I have chosen to situate Esther's experience alongside individual criteria from within *The DSM-V* to illustrate the extent to which Plath's metaphors and similes aid the development of empathy and produce a new kind of knowledge about the lived experience of madness. These qualities are best observed when the two discourses are viewed side by side. Through this direct comparison, a very human vulnerability is shown to underscore Esther's experience; a vulnerability that is not alien, foreign or unknowable to readers. In using metaphor and simile to represent and describe the experience of madness, Plath deepens her readers understanding of and empathy with the complexity inherent to expressing distressing thoughts and feelings from a limited vocabulary of words, whilst reducing the status of Esther as wholly "other" to a person sharing similarities and irreducible differences with readers (Shapiro 478). This direct comparison will also make evident the ways in which the diagnostic criteria of *The DSM-V* force and constrain the fragmented experience of madness into observable, discrete units of measurement.

Throughout *The Bell Jar,* there is no clear delineation between the different types of symptoms Esther experiences. Her experience is comprised of intersecting and divergent thoughts, feelings and behaviours. My choice of "symptoms" or examples from *The Bell Jar* to align with the criteria from *The DSM-V* is therefore arbitrary and in no way intends to diagnose or render Esther a case to be examined objectively. Such an analysis alongside *The DSM-V* that does not intend to diagnose Esther has, to date, not been performed in the existing critical literature.

*Criteria 4a: Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day*

The first criterion I will use to establish a contrast with the language of *The Bell Jar* is criteria 4a: "Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day" (The American Psychiatric Association 161). Esther's sleep starts to become increasingly disrupted when she returns home to Boston at the end of her internship. Upon receiving word from her mother that she didn't make the writing course that had been stretching out before her "like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer," (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 110) she is sent to psychiatrist Dr. Gordon wherein having "not slept for seven nights," (130) tells Dr Gordon of this but not of her inability to write. He

then makes the decision to send her for Electro Shock Therapy (ECT) at his private hospital in Walton. Prior to her first meeting with Dr Gordon, Esther tells her mother one night that she has a "terrible headache" and goes early to bed; an hour later her mother inches the door open, undresses and climbs into bed (117). Esther watches the "pin curls on her head glittering like a row of little bayonets," (118) before being engulfed by competing and conflicting plans that leap through her head "like a family of scatty rabbits" (118). To spend the summer writing a novel, reading *Finnegan's Wake*, writing her thesis, apprenticing herself to a pottery maker, working her way to Germany to become a bilingual waitress and never learning shorthand are but some of the ideas she conjures. Before long the room "blues [sic] into view," (118) and Esther feigns sleep until her mother has left for her teaching job. She then goes on to describe the experience of being unable to sleep:

> Even my eyelids didn't shut out the light. They hung the raw, red screen of their tiny vessels in front of me like a wound. I crawled between the mattress and the padded bedstead and let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone. It felt very dark and very safe under there, but the mattress was not heavy enough. I needed about a tonne more to make me sleep (118-119).

Through Plath's elaborate similes and metaphorical descriptions of the experience of insomnia, readers gain access to a highly subjective, nuanced understanding of Esther's particular experience – one that is otherwise reduced by the medical establishment to a tick box, providing readers (and clinicians) with no new knowledge or insight both about and into the felt experience of insomnia or hypersomnia, as well as the internal and external factors that generate it. One interpretation that can be gleaned from this excerpt is that Esther's inability to sleep does not derive from an insidious indwelling pathology, but is the result of a mounting mental chaos that concerns her relationship with her overbearing mother and the paralysis that extends from "wanting to shoot off in all directions like a fourth of July rocket" (79) while simultaneously feeling as though she has nothing to look forward to. Esther's insomnia is both internally and externally generated; the consequence of her inability to resolve personal and social contradictions in her waking hours. Such concerns permeate her mind night after night and prevent her from resting. Let us now look more closely at the figurative language employed in these examples to ascertain how Plath is extending meaning and producing new knowledge about Esther's experience of insomnia.

The direct comparison drawn between pin curls and glittering bayonets using the term 'like' enables readers to

glimpse new understanding about Esther's relationship with her mother. This explicit comparison generates a semantic tension that surprises and when glimpsed closely, reveals an insidious hidden nuance inherent to their relationship, one that could easily be cast aside. Bayonet denotes a very sharp sword like stabbing knife; a weapon to be used to defend oneself in hand-to-hand combat. The pairing of "glittering" with "bayonet" corrupts the original meaning of bayonet and of glittering and when explicitly paired with "pin curls" comes to connote superficiality, unpredictability; a superficial appearance that masquerades as approachable, yet beneath is violent, guarded, dangerous and deceitful. The semantic tension generated by these opposing connotations being at once attractive and benign yet violent and malevolent enables local and particular knowledge about Esther's experience to be revealed. The pin curls on Esther's mother's head, "glittering like a row of little bayonets," says more about Esther's relationship with her mother than an attempt at a purely literal exclamation, *my mother and I have a difficult relationship* ever could. This direct comparison and the tension it generates suggests that Esther's relationship with her mother *is* one of tension, of competing and contradictory feelings, attitudes and positions; one that is superficially benevolent, but beneath festers as malignant, tense, insincere and threatening. Furthermore, that Esther is sharing a bedroom with her mother suggests that even through sleep or what little Esther is achieving she cannot escape the tension inherent to their relationship; she cannot escape the glittering row of little bayonets and therefore her efforts at rest are greatly reduced.

The direct comparison between "the raw, red screen of their tiny vessels" that is her exhausted eyes and wound using the term 'like' produces new insight into Esther's experience of insomnia. Wound evokes connotations of vulnerability, pain and a kind of violent sensitivity (Bonds 51). Interestingly, the eyelids are also given agency over Esther within the simile, implied by "they hung" and "in front of me" (Plath 119). This agency afforded to her eyelids suggests that Esther feels detached, disconnected from and steered by a body that is acting of its own accord. Plath therefore extends meaning by attributing Esther's lack of sleep in part to the plans running through her mind like a family of scatty rabbits, to imply that Esther is no longer in control of or deciding the direction of her life. Readers can therefore appreciate with this new information about Esther's experience of insomnia, the extent to which insomnia for her is not simply difficulty sleeping or the inability to sleep but rather an experience that is comprised of fragments of pain, sensitivity, vulnerability, a lack of agency, control, dissociation and a tension that is the consequence of internal and external

conditions. Reducing the experience of insomnia to a solitary unit of measurement or a homogenous experience as *The DSM-V* would have us do, generates no new knowledge as to the human experience of it. The connotations that extend from this simile therefore expand the readers understanding into and about Esther's subjective experience of madness. These connotations and the act of searching for them helps readers to perceive Esther not as wholly other or the host of an insidious indwelling pathology, but rather a human person bearing similarities to their own experiences, that is, they succeed in revealing commonalities that can aid the development of empathy in readers for her predicament.

The final example in this discussion of criteria 4a that I will unpick in depth is the statement, "I crawled between the mattress and the padded bedstead and let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone" (119). The direct comparison made between the mattress and a tombstone using the term "like" in the above simile reveals an additional layer of nuance above and beyond those that have already been discussed in relation to Esther's subjective experience of insomnia.

The image of a tombstone connotes death, a grave, graveyard and a weathered, heavy and oftentimes illegible memory of a life. One's first inclination when reading this simile is to conflate tombstone with coffin or earth leading to a dissipation of surprise as this is an obvious connection; a resemblance that already exists within discourse. However, in burial it is not the tombstone that falls across the body or coffin, but dirt, sand and earth. To replace dirt, earth or sand with tombstone in this simile suggests that Esther feels as though she is already dead; she is already buried and the tombstone which would act as a beacon to the living, to denote the position of her body beneath the earth has fallen across the remains of her body, making the memory of her life to the living world invisible. Thus, one interpretation may be that Plath likens Esther's experience of insomnia to an invisible death. Through the direct comparison of mattress and tombstone Plath generates new knowledge about Esther's experience of insomnia and by extension of madness by creating new connections and relations that are not facts of discourse or obvious relations. What Plath achieves through drawing unlike terms into a direct comparison using the idiosyncratic vocabulary she affords to Esther is to make it clear that subjective experience will never be linear and uniform, but will always consist of disparate thoughts and feelings and be informed by internal and external conditions. In doing so she makes the development of empathy possible through the nuanced insight she generates into Esther's subjective worldview. Thus, to reduce subjective experience to criteria, sub criteria, numerical codes will, as long as *The DSM-V* pervades

and informs Western culture's common sense understanding of madness, thwart attempts to aid the development of empathy in those treating and caring for those living through madness. If we are to glimpse an understanding into the lived experience of madness, we need to engage with the inconsistent, ambiguous, nuanced vocabularies used by those enduring madness, not the rule stabilised language of psychiatry (Rowe 30).

*Criteria 9a: Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.*

The second and final criterion from *The DSM-V* that I will use to draw a direct comparison with Esther's subjective experience of madness and the idiosyncratic vocabulary she uses to describe it is 9a "Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide" (The American Psychiatric Association 161).

The intensity of Esther's preoccupation with suicide increases after she endures her first shock treatment at Dr Gordon's private hospital in Walton. In the days and weeks after this treatment she attempts suicide three times and remains preoccupied by death and dying until she is taken by Mrs Guinea, her scholarship donor, to a big "private state hospital in the country" (178). It is perhaps Esther's spontaneous trip to the beach at Deer Island where she grew up with her father until he passed away, where readers gain a particularly rich insight into the internal and external conditions that together motivate her desire for death.

After talking with a prison guard near the edge of the beach, Esther thinks to herself:

> If I'd had the sense to go on living in that old town I might have just met this prison guard in school and married him and had a parcel of kids by now. It would be nice, living up by the sea with piles of kids and pigs and chickens, wearing what my grandmother calls wash dresses, and sitting about in some kitchen with bright linoleum and fat arms, drinking pots of coffee (144).

This image of married life Esther conjures is antithetical to the desired identity where she is not someone's sweetheart, girlfriend, wife or mother, that she has envisaged and sought after for herself up until this point in the novel (Wagner 57). In chapter one of the novel, Esther makes the fierce claim after finding "fault after fault" in Buddy Willard that she hates the very thought of being married, exclaiming, "the last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow

shoots from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot of in all directions myself" (79). Readers can appreciate through the decidedly cynical evocation of married life Plath conjures, that for Esther such a life by the sea would be anything but "nice." Rather it would mute her hunger for change, excitement and personal autonomy. This imaginative exercise in envisaging married life whilst preparing to commit suicide also reveals how dominated her thinking is by the inevitable allotment of boredom, routine and domestic responsibility she is so desperate to resist. Thus, through this interpretation it is shown that Esther's numerous suicide attempts and ideations about death stem not from a wholly individual, indwelling pathology but from her difficulties at reconciling her subjective wants with a normalising cultural paradigm that deems her pathological for her deviation and opposition to it.

Whilst on the beach, Esther notices that she is the only girl in a skirt and high heels. She removes her patent leather shoes as they founder badly in the sand and as she walks down to the surf she reflects, "It pleased me to think that they would be perched there on a silver log, pointing out to sea, like a sort of soul compass after I was dead" (146). As her feet "wince in cowardice from such a death" (147) she decides not to go through with ending her life. She turns back and walks "over the cold stones" (147) to where her shoes "kept their vigil in the violet light" (147). Interestingly, what readers observe here again is Esther's experience of a loss of agency and control over her body. Esther's loss of control over her body is implied through the agency Plath affords to Esther's feet, as they "wince" in cowardice from such a death. The repeated emphasis afforded to Esther's lack or loss of personal agency and autonomy throughout the novel points to an important nuance about her wanting to end her life, as well as the symbolic significance inherent to the recurring motif of the patent leather shoes. It is to this nuance and the symbolic significance of the patent leather shoes and what they might reveal about Esther's subjective experience of madness that I will now turn my attention.

Esther's patent leather shoes feature repeatedly throughout *The Bell Jar*. It is in the first chapter however that their symbolic value is determined. In chapter one of the novel, Esther claims that fashion conscious, attention to detail impressed her, "it suggested a whole life of marvellous, elaborate decadence that attracted me like a magnet" (5). The black patent leather shoes from the onset of the novel symbolise what a college girl like Esther should aspire toward: to be beautiful, well-groomed and affable. However, for Esther the patent leather shoes also symbolise autonomy, independence and freedom. The patent leather shoes were bought by Esther with her own money from *Bloomingdale's* whilst on her lunch

break from her writing internship, that she herself secured as a result of her talent for writing and dedication to her studies. In short, the black patent leather shoes symbolise a freedom and autonomy that Esther cannot obtain from other persons, objects and even her own body; they symbolise her highest values and encapsulate her reasons for fervently resisting marrying someone and relinquishing her freedom. Her sentimental attachment to them throughout the novel reveals that despite Esther's dissociation from her body and lack of agency over it as she descends into madness, she remains tethered to her ideals of freedom and autonomy and by extension to the hope that one day she will be "all right again" (3) and regain the autonomy she had once lost. In short, the patent leather shoes remind her of her highest values and for that reason their recurrence is not ornamental. The direct comparison made between the patent leather shoes and a soul compass reveals hidden layers of meaning and produces new knowledge about Esther's subjective experience of suicidal ideation and the beliefs, attitudes and unrealised ideals that have led her to want to end her life. "Soul compass" denotes a direction or life path that is determined by something greater and bigger than oneself. It denotes a life path that is highly particular and idiosyncratic to the individual. Soul compass brings to bear connotations of inevitability, purpose, spirituality, guidance, autonomy and unconditional support. The semantic collision that results when the patent leather shoes and soul compass are brought into a direct comparison produces a new kind of knowledge about the internal and external conditions generating Esther's suicidal thoughts and feelings and the symbolic importance of the patent leather shoes. The patent leather shoes tether Esther to her values of independence and autonomy; the same values that enabled a girl from the country to buy a pair from *Bloomingdale's* with her own money on her lunch break. Likening the shoes to a soul compass may also suggest that Esther's decision to end her life is motivated by her desire to preserve her autonomy. Her dreams of pursuing a competitive writing course at university have been extinguished, she cannot read, sleep or write and feels imprisoned and frustrated by her mother's hawk like observations, deceitfulness and insistence that she visit a psychiatrist to rid her of inability to "behave" (169). Suicide therefore, in a climate where her decisions are not her own can be read as an attempt at reclaiming her personal autonomy: suicide represents for Esther the ultimate assertion of freedom. Therefore, by bringing the patent leather shoes and soul compass into a direct comparison a hidden relationship is uncovered about the internal and external conditions that are together motivating her desire for death. In short, this simile produces a new kind of knowledge about Esther's experience of madness that is derived

from experience, therefore offering the insight, depth and richness needed to humanise Esther and aid the development of empathy in readers.

The numerous symbolic and figurative references Plath employs to convey the motivations underpinning Esther's quest to end her own life, underscore the complexity inherent in making coherent meaning of subjective experience from a limited vocabulary of words, whilst introducing aspects of experience that are frequently absent from a psychiatric discourse. Therefore, to appreciate the nuance and personal significance for Esther in her quest for death and not deem it purely pathological or an expression of "bad behaviour," one must search for hidden connections and connotations. Readers must be prepared to step into the breach where language lacks the literal terms for a specific experience and to wait for hidden relationships to emerge. This requires patience and it is an exercise that may aid the development of empathy.

The language of *The DSM-V* in regards to "recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide," tells us nothing nuanced about the subjective human experience of suicidal ideation and what drives, sustains and motivates a person's desire to end their life (The American Psychiatric Association 161). Criteria 9a tells us nothing that will aid empathy and the development of new perspectives into and about the subjective experience of the individual enduring such thoughts. What this language does succeed in, however, is to imply that recurring thoughts of suicide are abnormal. In short, criteria 9a renders suicidal ideation a dangerous pathology. The danger in reducing suicidal thinking to a pathology that must be urgently remedied is that little curiosity, patience and empathy are exercised to reveal the central motivations underpinning one's desire for death. It is these highly particular insights, however, that are necessary to aid the development of empathy and in turn to offer effective care and support to another to enable them to get well.

This interpretation made of Plath's writing is an attempt at foregrounding the human vulnerabilities and complexity inherent to Esther's preoccupation with death and dying. This interpretation is by no means definitive. What it does suggest is that it is Esther's inability to reconcile her inner subjective wants and desires, for autonomy, freedom and independence with the cultural norms that deem her deviant for wanting such things that underpins her desire for death. For Esther, suicide represents the ultimate assertion of personal freedom. Plath, by employing a vocabulary that is highly particular to Esther's idiosyncratic experience of madness, resists

pathologising the experience of suicidal ideation. Rather she succeeds to aid the development of empathy in her readers by rendering Esther not as wholly other but as a person at a loss to reconcile social and personal contradictions.

## Conclusion

The metaphors and similes Plath uses to describe Esther's experience of madness illustrate that a stabilised, scientific vocabulary stifles the development of empathy because it dehumanises the very human experiences to which it refers. It is through metaphor and simile in *The Bell Jar* that Plath gives sought-after words and nuanced meaning to difficult thoughts, feelings and subjective experiences, which in turn, enables highly nuanced details about illness that are frequently absent from the psychiatric paradigm to be voiced.

Plath reveals through her metaphors and elaborate similes that what *The DSM-V* would delineate as discrete behaviours and experiences, when lived out consist of complex, intersecting and divergent layers of disparate thoughts, feelings and behaviours. As we have seen insomnia can be both internally and externally generated and sustained by pervasive indecision and a distrust in those closest to us and suicidal ideation can be motivated by an insatiable hunger for autonomy and freedom. Forcing a conglomeration of experiences into unifying criteria or denoting such with numerical codes therefore seems incongruous with what Plath's figurative discourse reveals about lived experience.

The tension that Plath's writing generates enables her to convey something very precise about madness and the difficulties we face in our cultural and political lives (Rose 10). Her precision lies in her imprecision. That is, through Plath's prolific use of simile and metaphor, she precisely reveals the limits language has for expressing human vulnerability and in doing so exposes the pitfalls inherent in striving for a vocabulary that masquerades as precise, objective or stable because it is grounded in science. For Plath, this is simply not realisable, nor may it be desirable as it perverts the elucidation of the very vulnerability necessary for human connection and empathy. Plath enables readers to acknowledge that so long as we attempt to contain, classify and determine the existence of madness through objective measures alone, we will thwart our ability to cultivate the insight and empathy needed to heal those in crisis.

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