

"Funny and Tender and Not a Desperate Woman:" Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and Therapeutic Laughter

Andrea Krafft

Fifty years after their initial publications in 1963 by two graduates of Smith College, both Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* continue to speak to young women who strain against domestic pressures. Numerous scholars, such as Elaine Connell, Jo Gill, and Laurie F. Leach have observed commonalities between Plath and Friedan, frequently noting how the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, struggles to understand her place in a world defined by motherhood and media images of passive femininity. The fact that Plath modeled her protagonist after her own experiences as a *Mademoiselle* guest editor during the summer of 1953 demonstrates her deep investment in interrogating how postwar popular culture defined womanhood.¹ While many critics have linked Plath to the broad crisis affecting American women during the 1950s, they frequently tend to frame her writing within a discourse of rage rather than considering the humor that characterizes much of *The Bell Jar*. This downplaying of humor may stem from a justifiable desire to present her work as serious in light of critics such as Harold Bloom, who proclaimed that Plath's skills as a writer are "grossly exaggerated" (1).² Now that Plath's place within the literary canon is well-established, we can reconsider how humor is central to her artistic project, as she wrote in her journals that "I want to write funny and tender women's stories," in order to avoid becoming "a desperate woman, like mother" (412).

Some feminist critics accuse domestic comediennes of insensitivity, arguing that their humor betrays its intended audience by presenting women's problems as petty or easily solved. Betty Friedan in particular attacks the group that she labels "Housewife Writers," claiming that their humor does not provide its audience with the promised escape from "their frustrated abilities and their limited lives" (57). Her complaint is that writers such as Shirley Jackson,

¹ Garry Leonard discusses this issue more thoroughly in "'The Woman is Perfected. Her Dead Body Wears the Smile of Accomplishment': Sylvia Plath and *Mademoiselle* Magazine" (1992. Rpt. In McCann 305-337).

² Regina Barreca notes a similar tendency among early feminist theorists to avoid discussing humor because of a fear that "conservative critics . . . found feminist theory comic in and of itself" (4).

Phyllis McGinley, and Jean Kerr find professional satisfaction in the activity of writing, but "the joke is not on *them*," but rather comes at the expense of readers who remain ensconced in domestic spaces (Friedan 57). However, Plath's combined emphasis on humor and tenderness indicates her understanding that her comedy must not grate against her readers, but instead work to unite them in a common affective bond that will help to undercut the feminine mystique.³ In this respect, we can consider Plath in light of Nancy Walker's defense of women's humor, as she claims that comedy offers "one of the few available senses of community among women" ("Solidarity" 78). The female community that emerges in and around *The Bell Jar* works to counteract the pressures that, according to Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, present women with false choices and threaten to paralyze them. Humor and laughter in this novel provide a potential way to deal with the cultural constraints on American womanhood, offering a solution to the psychological problems that stem from domestic containment.

Unnamed Problems: The Effects of Cultural Constraints on 1950s American Women

Prior to understanding how humor can function as a unifying force within *The Bell Jar*, we should consider how the feminine mystique effectively divides the female community between those individuals who embrace the vision of the domestic goddess and resistant women (such as Esther Greenwood) who view housewifery as something that looms threateningly on the horizon. As Friedan defines it, the United States in the fifteen years following the Second World War cultivated an image of the ideal woman as someone who "was healthy, beautiful, educated, [and] concerned only about her husband, her children, [and] her home" (18). Yet, Esther is unable to "find her place in a society with expectations of 'femininity' with which she cannot identify," as she repeatedly feels isolated from women around her who represent satisfied wives and mothers (Pinke 4). For example, sitting in a gynecologist's office, Esther notices a mother and child, jealously observing that "the baby's mother smiled and smiled, holding that baby as if it were the first wonder of the world" (*The Bell Jar* 222). In this moment, Esther believes that she is in some way deficient, as she feels "unmaternal and apart" in comparison with the serene mother (222). Esther frequently toys with the possibility of joining the maternal secret circle in order to feel more included, as she fantasizes about a potential future in which she might get married and have

³ For further discussion of the female community that emerges from Plath's writing see Janet Badia's *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

"a parcel of kids" (150). The power of the feminine mystique at this moment lies in the fact that it makes childbearing and housekeeping seem like the norm, positioned against the uncertainty that comes with the vast terrain of "other goals and purposes in life" (Friedan 183).

Esther Greenwood's growing dissatisfaction and sense of isolation from those women who happily immerse themselves into the roles of wife and mother recalls "the problem that has no name," a psychological condition that Friedan lays out in the first chapter of *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 19).⁴ The exact nature of this problem is difficult to define, but Friedan describes it as "a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction" that "each suburban wife struggled with . . . alone" (15). Because they believed that other women were happy and settled in their domestic roles, these suffering women perceived their frustration as a unique problem, even though numerous women attested to feeling a "terrible tiredness" (Friedan 31). Esther likewise notices that some of her fellow guest editors "looked awfully bored," suggesting that they might all be manifesting symptoms of the same cultural condition that shapes young women (Plath 4). Despite this brief moment of recognition, Esther still feels alone in her suffering because both her psychoanalyst and her mother "made it sound as if nothing was *really* wrong, I only *thought* it was wrong" (*The Bell Jar* 130). Isolation thus marks much of the beginning of the novel, as Mrs. Greenwood insists that her daughter can simply decide "to be all right again," suggesting that she is unusual despite the fact that her problem is a common one (146).

The paradox at the heart of both *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Bell Jar* is that the woman who appears to be "all right" actually consigns herself to an unhealthy life, a catch-22 that clearly emerges in Plath's images of enclosure. Naturally, the central image of Esther "sitting under the same glass bell jar" encapsulates her feelings of immobility (185). Esther similarly compares her personal condition to being "stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out," suggesting her hopeless confinement in a world without movement or change (129). Her inability to change or move forward becomes most evident in the oft-discussed fig tree scene, in which Esther envisions her life as a green fig tree in which "from the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked" (77). Confronted with what Nora Sellei calls the "pressure of choice," she is unable to pick any of these futures, and Esther imagines herself "starving to death" (347; *The Bell Jar* 77). In some ways, her

⁴ While Elaine Connell notes that "Plath's *Bell Jar* reads like an individual's experience of this problem," she does not examine the novel's connection with Friedan in any extended fashion (54).

indecisiveness echoes Friedan's sentiment that women should not have to limit themselves to "a half-life, instead of a share in the whole of human destiny" (Friedan 67). However, as her potential futures wither around her, Esther's total immobility suggests a more sinister problem: she cannot latch onto a future image of herself. Esther repeatedly notes that she "had nothing to look forward to" and cannot see her life "beyond the nineteenth" year (*The Bell Jar* 117, 123). Society's preferred future (i.e. marriage) obscures Esther's vision of an alternative life, not only constraining her choices but also affecting her mental health in profoundly damaging ways.

While Esther appears unable to choose her future, her subsequent medical institutionalization represents how she and her fellow "broken" women seemingly lose their ability to speak back to a society that silences their unorthodox roles. Esther's neighbor in Caplan (one of the buildings of the mental hospital), Miss Norris, is a prime example of this voicelessness, as she appears literally unable to speak and moves with mechanical awkwardness. Esther notices that "in all my hours of vigil Miss Norris hadn't said a word" and that she "jerked into motion like a doll on wheels," signifying her evacuated willpower (193). Similarly, Doctor Gordon's mental patients look like "shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life" (142). Stan Smith describes this scene as "a parody of normality," as the mental patients repetitively imitate reality, thus "isolating and exposing its strangeness" (43). The apparent artificiality of the mental patients indicates that something is amiss about the so-called normal institutions that mark them as insane or dangerous. Another Belsize patient, Valerie, marks the sinister influence of "normalization," as she undergoes an apparently voluntary lobotomy, sacrificing her agency in order to spend all of her days absorbing the feminine mystique, "reading her tatty copy of *Vogue* with intense interest" (188).

The strange presence of *Vogue* in the mental institution marks how the influence of the popular media helped to propagate fantasies of correct social behavior, as women's magazines in particular were complicit in supporting the fantasy of "happy housewife heroines" (Friedan 44). In "Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising" (2002), Marsha Bryant notes that postwar magazine advertisements "prove as crucial as psychological contexts in understanding Plath's construction of domesticity" (182). Likewise, David Halberstam observes in his extended study of the 1950s that women's magazines such as "*Ladies' Home Journal*, *Redbook*, *McCall's* and *Mademoiselle*" were particularly influential in guiding the opinions of suburban women, who turned to magazines because they offered a sense of community via readership. Unlike some

other readers, however, Esther does not passively absorb the mystique, but sometimes acts as an apostle for the media image of femininity in her position as one of the twelve guest editors for *Ladies' Day*.⁵ Her involvement in spreading the popular image of the satisfied housewife still does not make her immune to this image's effects. *Ladies' Day* encourages its editors to participate in the social elevation of femininity, showering them with "ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair stylings at famous expensive salons" (3). While the magazine does present the guest editors with some professional opportunities, it overwhelmingly emphasizes fashion and beauty and turns future career girls toward a warping and confining domesticity. This potentially explains why Esther describes the revolving door of the magazine's New York office as a deadly "glass eggbeater," as the magazine becomes another space of domestic confinement rather than a zone of individual expression as she had hoped it would be (41).

The power that the mystique holds over Esther becomes evident in those moments when she responds to newspaper and magazine images of women, which apparently blur together rather than recognizing distinct personalities. When examining a snapshot of herself, for example, she identifies her own image with that of a dead starlet, noticing that they "matched, mouth for mouth, nose for nose" (146). As Sally Bayley argues, Esther recognizes that "one female is very much like another" because the culture of the mystique views women as interchangeable commodities rather than as individual agents (203). Esther's own photographic self haunts her, as popular newspapers and *Ladies' Day* transform her into a stereotyped representation of mass-media femininity. Joan Gilling, a young woman who uncritically consumes these images, showers Esther with newspaper clippings that both sensationalize her attempted suicide and elevate her as a representative of the "SCHOLARSHIP GIRL" (*The Bell Jar* 198). The newspaper emphasizes Esther's beauty, printing what she describes as a "tarty picture" in which she wears "Bloomingdale earrings and the Bloomingdale necklace," making her resemble a fashion advertisement (198). When confronted with a photograph of herself in an actual fashion magazine, Esther divorces herself from the image of the "girl in a strapless evening dress of fuzzy white stuff, grinning fit to split," claiming that the photograph is "somebody else" (207). Yet, she cannot deny that she has played into the position of the feminine mystique and personally profited from transforming herself into a commodity.

⁵ Friedan also wrote for women's magazines, recognizing that she was complicit in creating "the picture of the modern American housewife" (34).

Even Esther is susceptible to a widespread cultural demand for women's "increasing mindlessness" that Friedan warns about in *The Feminine Mystique* (65). No one exemplifies the evacuation of consciousness better than Hilda, a fellow guest editor of *Ladies' Day* who moves "like a mannequin," speaks as if possessed by a dybbuk, and continually preens herself in shop windows "as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to exist" (*The Bell Jar* 99-100).⁶ Hilda relies on this repeated affirmation of her external appearance because she apparently lacks internality, at least when represented from Esther's point of view. Behind Hilda's "pale orange mouth" lies "a large darkness," as Esther depicts her as a "blind cave" who does nothing more than echo the messages of the society that surrounds her (100). While Hilda remains unaware of her true voicelessness, the horror of Esther's own condition is that she is conscious of a splitting within herself, as she develops a separate and rebellious "zombie voice" that speaks for her (119). As she describes it, "my voice sounded strange and hollow in my ears" (118). Esther literally envisions her internal conflict between the feminine mystique and her career goals as this zombie voice choking her from within.

In addition to feeling dissociated from her voice, Esther perceives her body as rebellious, describing it in terms that make it sound as if it is not subject to her control. For example, she notes how, reaching for the telephone, her "hand advanced a few inches, then retreated and fell limp" (118). She seems unable to make her body carry out her commands, especially at those moments when, attempting to kill herself, her "hands go limp at the crucial second" (159). Esther's unruly body, which prevents her from completing disruptive actions, reflects the way in which the feminine mystique encourages women to replace their personal desires with fantasies of motherhood and domesticity. Like the robotically silent Miss Norris or the lobotomized Valerie, Esther envisions herself as a machine that "bumped from my hotel to work and to parties . . . like a numb trolleybus" (3). In fact, objects themselves seem to have more agency than the female subject, as Esther envisions her clothes as having "a separate, mulish identity of their own" (104). This tension between agency and objectification marks larger cultural tensions that shaped Plath's world, as she is not alone in pointing toward women's mechanization in the face of the media image of femininity.⁷

⁶ Lynda K. Bundtzen connects Hilda to a larger pattern in *The Bell Jar*, claiming that "Esther is surrounded by women like dolls, zombies, and mannequins" (127).

⁷ See also Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1974).

Mocking the Mystique: Laughing at Flat Femininity and Finding Slapstick in Passivity

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood begins writing as a potential way to reclaim her voice from the silencing effects of the feminine mystique, as she attempts to write an autobiographical novel in which "my heroine would be myself, only in disguise" (120). Likewise, Sylvia Plath's autobiographical imperative behind her novel and her confessional poetry is well-documented, so much so that studies of Plath's biography have dominated scholarship about her work. However, *The Bell Jar* is not simply a personal confession or a copied diary, as Plath herself stated that "personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience" but "should be generally relevant" (qtd. in Smith 33). In a letter to her mother, Plath similarly discusses how she aimed to "streamline" her stories "for a particular market," indicating her desire to speak to a broad group of women readers (*Letters* 107; also qtd. in Bronfen 101). In choosing to write a self-described "pot boiler" for a popular marketplace under a pseudonym (Victoria Lucas), rather than to trying to please an intellectual or scholarly crowd, Plath created a novel that was accessible to an audience of housewives (qtd. in Ames 14). This deliberate consciousness about her audience suggests that her moments of humor work to critique women's social constrictions, a pattern in women's writing that recent feminist scholars, especially Nancy Walker and Regina Barreca, have discussed. Specifically, I will build on Elisabeth Bronfen's observation that Plath works "to dismantle the very discursive formations whose regulative law she also finds herself unable to abandon fully" (113). In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath turns to laughter in order to chip away at social constraints that define postwar womanhood, revealing the absurdity of domestic containment. Yet, her humor also demonstrates her characteristic ambivalence about the ideals of domesticity and motherhood, preventing us from interpreting humor in the novel as purely feminist or anti-patriarchal.

The critical edge of Plath's humor becomes evident in the way that she targets women who appear to perpetuate the feminine mystique, encouraging the reader to laugh at their exaggerated flatness of character. This recalls Zita Dresner's claim in "Domestic Comic Writers" (1991) about women's humor that aims to "demonstrate the irrationality" of apparently normal models of femininity (99). Doreen and Betsy are the main targets of this kind of humor, as they are hyperbolic representations of the "bad girl" and the "good girl" aspects of the popular image of American womanhood. Esther mockingly undercuts Doreen by comparing her "bright white

hair" to "cotton candy fluff," which parallels Friedan's description of the woman who is so "fluffy and feminine" that she is "almost childlike" (Plath 4; Friedan 36). Although she mocks Doreen at one moment, she recognizes her appeal as well, acknowledging that "Doreen looked terrific" (*The Bell Jar* 7). A similar case occurs with Betsy, as Esther mocks her extreme innocence and jokes about her farm girl personality. For example, Esther scathingly critiques Betsy for pitching a show to a TV producer about anthropomorphic corn, and we laugh at Betsy for getting "so excited about that damn corn" (6). Although Esther mocks Betsy, she also identifies with this image of essential innocence and grinningly observes her own later transformation into "Pollyanna Cowgirl" (112). Both Doreen and Betsy are fair game for Esther's jokes. But, the fact that she wavers between mockery and identification suggests her inability to completely shatter the feminine stereotypes that they each represent.

This same kind of ambivalent humor occurs when Esther scrutinizes the representatives of excessive motherhood. This occurs most clearly in the case of Dodo Conway, a grotesque figure whose main features are her "protruding stomach" and her excessive serenity (116). With six children in tow and a seventh on the way, her childbearing abilities warp her into an absurd image, as she looks "like a sparrow egg perched on a duck egg," all fertility and no agency (116). Esther also recalls the earlier figure of Mrs. Tomolillo, a woman whose "enormous spider-fat stomach" obscures her face and transforms the pregnant woman into something more animal than human (65). Mrs. Tomolillo's "unhuman whoooing noise" is both terrifying and darkly comic, as it undercuts the expected glorification of childbirth (66). Despite Dodo's and Mrs. Tomolillo's ridiculousness, Esther still has domestic fantasies about childbearing and finds herself strangely drawn to such figures.⁸ This constant tension between laughter and identification may appear to do little to ease Esther's feeling of enclosure within a mystique that encourages female beauty and maternity. However, her recognitions of absurdity, however brief, provide her with a starting point for a necessary "flexibility in deviating from the impossible cultural standard" (Dresner 99).

While Esther frequently mocks other women in *The Bell Jar*, she also becomes a key target for laughter in those moments when she herself becomes too immersed in the feminine mystique. She cynically reflects on how her experience with *Ladies' Day* flattens her into the

⁸ In *Sylvia Plath: Killing the Angel in the House* (1993), Elaine Connell argues that Esther "is deeply attracted to motherhood" (52).

popular magazine's stereotype of femininity, reducing her to an unrecognizable girl "in a skimpy, imitation silver-lamé bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle" (*The Bell Jar* 2). Similarly to the fluffy Doreen, Esther becomes excessively glamorous, drawing our attention to the gap between reality and the construction of the magazine's fantasy world. Esther's wry comment that "everybody would think I must be having a real whirl" highlights the shortcomings of this superficially glamorous moment (2). Just as Esther sometimes mocks Doreen and Betsy, she distinguishes between her role as a character and her judgmental narrative voice. Nancy Walker describes this splitting as a feature of "ironic autobiography," in which the narrator recounts her own story, yet "stands apart and comments, often quite humorously," as if she was fully distinct from the main character of her story's action ("Ironic" 204). Esther's ability to mock herself, as if she was someone else, helps her to distance herself from the model of womanhood that she (sometimes unknowingly) imitates.

Furthermore, Esther's cynical separation from her past self transforms her apparently tragic loss of agency into a source of dark humor within the novel. Though she feels that she has no control over her rebellious body, she narrates these moments of physical helplessness in a slapstick style. This occurs most frequently during her flouted suicide attempts, such as when she tries to drown and "each time popped up like a cork" (*The Bell Jar* 161).⁹ In his definition of slapstick comedy, Alan Dale argues that the ironic power of this genre stems from the fact "that the hero's body itself comes between him and the satisfaction of his *physical* desires" (14). Likewise, Esther's failures are funny because she continually slips up, as she innocuously bobs up and down instead of achieving her romanticized image of self-destruction. A similar moment of frustration occurs when Esther tries to hang herself: she fails at making knots, cannot find a good rafter in the house, and even chooses the wrong material for the task (a silk bathrobe cord). Esther's "bewilderment, determination, [and] exasperation" at this moment are again key emotions of the slapstick comedian (Dale 10). By turning Esther's frustration into a source of comedy, Plath provides readers with an outlet for their own feelings of passivity and helplessness.

"The Laughter Should Have Warned Me:" Humor and Aggressive Impulses

⁹ In passing, Elizabeth Bronfen notes that Esther's thoughts about suicide contain elements of "black humour" (120).

While humor provides Esther Greenwood and the readers of *The Bell Jar* with some crucial distance from the feminine mystique, laughing women in the novel, through their very disruptiveness, potentially resist the power structures that threaten to silence them. Such women break with social expectations of feminine passivity, as their laughter often stands in for their feelings of aggression. As H  len   Cixous argues in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), women can "smash everything . . . shatter the framework of institutions" and "break up the 'truth' with laughter" (888). Likewise, Regina Barreca emphasizes that there is a fine line between "comedy and anger," as she alludes to the theory "that laughter and smiling arose out of a primitive response to anger and fear; the baring of teeth to the enemy" (7-8). While the rage that bubbles beneath Plath's writing has been a subject of long discussion, few scholars have considered how laughter can also demonstrate such anger. The laughing women of *The Bell Jar* have much in common with "the persona who rages through the poetry of *Ariel*," although they are not as obviously threatening as the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" who eats "men like air" (Butscher xii; Plath 84).

The women who laugh in *The Bell Jar* are socially marginalized individuals who attain at least a small degree of destabilizing and threatening agency by means of their dark smiles. According to H  len   Cixous and Catherine Cl  ment, laughter is naturally "allied with the monstrous" because it "breaks up, breaks out, [and] splashes over," coming from women who feel excluded (33). It is not surprising that the women who most frequently laugh in Plath's novel are the inhabitants of the mental institution. For example, Esther describes DeeDee, a fellow patient at Belsize as a shadowy figure characterized by "a low giggle" (*The Bell Jar* 218). Though DeeDee often appears to be a well-adjusted and passive woman, this moment of dark laughter suggests her capacity for aggression, or, at the worst, a nihilistic turn toward self-destruction. Esther also laughs prior to moments of violence, most memorably before her nearly successful suicide attempt. Similarly, Esther "cracked into a grin" before smashing a mirror following this suicide attempt, signifying the potential bitterness and shattering impulse of the laughing and smiling woman (175). Some critics might view this laugh as a sign of frustration at feelings of impotence, as Friedan observes that "a bitter laugh was beginning to be heard from American women" in response to their lack of fulfillment (26). However, this laugh seems to be a first step toward reclaiming agency and rage, especially when women come up against the confining influence of the feminine mystique.

Although laughter provides women with a means of recovering their silenced voices, *The Bell Jar* illustrates how laughter can also serve a normalizing or constraining purpose, as the men who place women in submissive positions in the text usually do so with a smile. While humor can interrupt normative social constructions, it can also keep rebellious individuals in line with the ideals of the group. Henri Bergson argues that "our laughter is always the laughter of the group," as people use jokes in order to "correct men's manners" (6, 17). In this model of humor, laughter is malicious and painful, as its core purpose is "to humiliate" the comic butt (Bergson 197). Freud similarly describes joking as an aggressive activity that is intended to make "our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic" (103). While women certainly engage in this kind of laughter, Plath shows how men in particular turn to laughter in its corrective function. In fact, Esther, when flipping through magazines, notes that President Eisenhower "beamed up" at her from the pages (*The Bell Jar* 89). This benevolent façade is a thin mask for the man who violently condemned Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, with whom Esther sympathizes. Furthermore, he reflects a larger pattern of male behavior in *The Bell Jar*. It appears that a number of male characters smile and laugh at those moments when they belittle the women around them, and that this laughter precedes acts of male violence.

The first instance of the dangerous laughing man in the novel is Lenny Shepherd, the disc-jockey whom Esther associates with a seemingly permanent grin that "must have been natural for him" (9). What unsettles Esther is Lenny's closeness with a group of laughing men, as she believes that their "laughter should have warned" her, although it is unclear what exactly she fears from them (8). At this moment, the "low, know-it-all snicker" of the male group masks their apparently vicious intentions (8). Part of Lenny's danger is that his apparently positive affect allows him to assert a sort of gentle dominance over Doreen. Doreen becomes silent in his presence, aside from her occasional giggles, and he begins to speak for her. Yet, this relationship quickly breaks down into a gruesomely violent scenario, as Doreen, out of nowhere, bites "on to Lenny's left earlobe with her teeth" and he calls her a "bitch" (17). While Doreen and Lenny turn this violence into a strange, drunken game and "they both started to laugh," the smiling disc-jockey clearly endangers female agency (17). Doreen becomes complicit in his laughter, perhaps explaining why Esther later rejects the girl that she initially admired.

Like Lenny Shepherd, Buddy Willard uses a smile to cover his aggressive impulse and a desire for control, as he constantly demeans Esther through jokes. He mocks her as a writer and

ignores her attempts to resist a domestic future, suggesting that he perceives her agency, quite literally, as a joke. Buddy's favorite target for mockery is poetry, as Esther recalls that "he smiled at me and said, 'Do you know what a poem is, Esther? . . . A piece of dust.'" (56). Esther notices at this moment that Buddy "had very long, strong white teeth," an observation that seems odd until one recalls that smiles potentially stem from the aggressive act of baring your teeth at an enemy (56). In fact, Buddy later performs a kind of metaphorical violence against Esther's profession when he publishes his own poor-quality poem in "a thin, gray magazine" (92). As Esther reads his "dreadful" images, Buddy looks at her with "an odd, pigeony smile" (92). Buddy's grin suggests his self-satisfied belief that he has in some way proven to Esther that he can succeed at creative writing and thus take away her sense of artistic superiority.

In addition to his devaluation of poetic language, Buddy smilingly ignores Esther's attempts to envision a future in which she is not his wife. For example, when Esther tells Buddy, "I'm never going to get married," his face brightens and he suggests, "you'll change your mind" (93). Even as Esther protests that her decision is final, Buddy disregards her objections to marriage, as he mentally paves over the possibility of Esther's rejection of domesticity. His adamant desire to contain Esther in the role of wife and mother becomes evident when he delights in an injury that forces her to wear "a cast for months" (98). After Esther breaks her leg on the ski slopes, "a queer, satisfied expression came over Buddy's face" (98). He smiles at this moment, and, as Allison Wilkins observes, "seems to take some pleasure in the harm that is inflicted on Esther" (42-43). His happiness no doubt relates to the fact that this injury consigns Esther to the home and temporarily prevents her from exploring alternate possibilities for her future.

While Buddy Willard's grin masks his desire to control Esther, Doctor Gordon's laughter signals a similar diminishment of female significance, as his jovial attitude suggests that his patient's problem is not a serious one. In his first meeting with Esther, Doctor Gordon does not comment on her problems so much as laughingly remember his experience at Esther's college during the war. Esther's problem not only has no name, but also does not enter the discussion at all. The medical students at the city hospital similarly put on "bright, artificial smiles," but interrupt Esther when she begins to describe her mental state (*The Bell Jar* 177). The figure of the happy medical professional suggests that the woman who suffers a mental illness simply needs to look on the bright side or adjust her attitude. The apparently beneficent psychoanalyst is

also the keeper of electroshock therapy, a treatment that Esther describes as jolting her until she feels that her "bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant" (143). Doctor Gordon's treatment not only violently disrupts Esther's body but also makes her feel that she is at fault, that she is being punished for some "terrible thing it was that I had done" (143). Paired with his normalizing smile, Doctor Gordon puts the onus of Esther's neurosis entirely on her, eliding the possibility that her condition might be part of a widespread problem afflicting American women during the 1950s.

Although men's aggressive smiles and laughter threaten to consign Esther to a passive or domestic position, *The Bell Jar* suggests that women can reclaim language and laughter for their own purposes. At some points in the novel, Esther successfully manages "to invent for herself a language to get inside of" (Cixous 887). This occurs most clearly when Esther recalls how she tricks her science teacher, Mr. Manzi, in order to avoid taking chemistry. Although she understands scientific concepts, she describes the language of physics as shrinking "everything into letters and numbers," concepts that E. Miller Budick describes as "the universe's masculine principles" (*The Bell Jar* 35; Budick 203). Esther escapes her confinement to these principles by volunteering to attend the class out of a supposed delight for science rather than for a grade or college credit. In her victory over Mr. Manzi's scientific discourse, Esther "had to laugh" triumphantly, as she mocks her teacher's naïve belief that she was actually interested in his class (*The Bell Jar* 36-37). Esther's subsequent turn toward creative writing, as she produces "page after page of villanelles and sonnets," prefigures Cixous's discussion of women's language as something unbounded, like the "laughs [that] exude from our mouths" (37; Cixous 878). Language that contains and limits expression to the smallest common denominator, like Mr. Manzi's scientific discourse, or Mrs. Greenwood's shorthand, grates against Esther's desire for expressive fullness.

Humor occupies a central role in Esther's reclamation of linguistic and personal completeness, as she targets Buddy Willard as the object of her aggressive laughter. As Freud observes in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), the undercutting of "persons in exalted positions" liberates the joker (105). While it is unclear exactly how liberated Esther can become, she does successfully distance herself from Buddy in a number of instances that make him the unconscious butt of her jokes. A major moment that undercuts Buddy's power is when he displays his naked body to Esther in an awkward, almost clinical way, a scene that Emily Toth

identifies as "the roots of new feminist humor" (98). In this moment, devoid of romance and sexual excitement, Esther compares Buddy's genitals to a "turkey neck and turkey gizzards" (*The Bell Jar* 69). Not only does she find his body to be unimpressive, but she also refuses to offer herself to the man whom she had initially found so desirable. While Buddy clearly expects sexual excitation, Esther imagines that her stripping down would be akin to having her "Posture Picture taken at college" (69). Esther similarly flouts Buddy's romantic expectations when he proposes to her and she has "an awful impulse to laugh" (93). Although she keeps some of her laughter to herself, Esther's response is incongruous with Buddy's romantic vision of the future, and she opens him up for easy mockery.

Esther's final rejection of Buddy signifies how she might regain her agency through laughter, particularly when that laughter is at the expense of the aggressively smiling man. This occurs when, after digging Buddy's car out of a snow drift, she openly laughs at him. Caroline King Barnard Hall interprets this spontaneous laughter as a healthy expression of "outward-directed" mirth, contrasting this with Esther's previous self-critical impulses (37). In expressing this positive affect and becoming emotionally uncontained, Esther denies Buddy's attempt to constrain her to the limiting role of wife and mother. A reversal of power appears to take place through laughter: while Esther mocks Buddy, "his face was grave" (*The Bell Jar* 239). Esther observes that Buddy no longer wears "the old, sure smile" that appeared so frequently at other moments throughout the novel (239). She appears to deflate his aggressive agency, at least in this one instance, suggesting that Esther and the other women of *The Bell Jar* might be able to resist the male agents of the feminine mystique. Furthermore, Esther refuses to blame her mental illness on Buddy when he asks her, "Do you think there's something in me that *drives* women crazy?" (239). In denying that he is responsible for her institutionalization, she simultaneously denies the secondary meaning of his question, as he is no longer a figure of romantic or personal interest for Esther. Esther's momentary refusal to define herself in relation to a man suggests a step forward toward both a self-determined identity and an understanding of herself within a female community.

"Tossing Back and Forth These Private Jokes:" Communal Women's Humor

Just as aggressive laughter offers a chance for the reclamation of female agency in *The Bell Jar*, humor can also serve an important communal function, unifying women in such a way that they

might be able to share "a feeling of common humanity that is necessary to work for full liberation" (Walker, "Solidarity" 7). Even though she sometimes stands apart from other women and describes herself as alienated, Esther Greenwood participates in moments of in-group laughter. For example, when Esther is recovering in the hospital from ptomaine poisoning (which occurs as the result of a botched *Ladies' Day* banquet), Doreen comes to care for her and temporarily sheds her stereotyped bombshell identity. In this moment of sisterly alliance, Esther and Doreen "both burst out laughing" about the gifts that they have received from *Ladies' Day* (*The Bell Jar* 49). Though Esther mocks Doreen at other times in the novel, this instance of healthy laughter allows them to recognize their shared relationship to the culture of female beauty that the magazine stands for. A similar case of bonding laughter occurs in Belsize, as Esther notes that these women "kept tossing back and forth these private jokes" (205). Although Esther feels excluded from this circle of friends, she observes how DeeDee and Loubelle join together by cracking jokes at their husbands' expense. In joking about their common problems, DeeDee and Loubelle form a miniature community around what Nancy Walker calls "the power of consensus among themselves" ("Solidarity" 66).

This development of community helps the Belsize women to recognize that their mental illness might stem from a larger crisis in femininity, and not simply from their own deficiencies. In fact, Betty Friedan notes how the key to recognizing "the problem that has no name" lies in housewives gathering to talk with one another (19). Humor is a central genre for the development of these kinds of groups, as it allows women to begin to feel "less alone in their bewilderment about their roles and responsibilities" (Dresner 97). In this respect, Doctor Nolan is integral to Esther's recovery, not simply because of her role as a psychiatrist but because, with her supportive smile, she fulfills a function similar to the community of laughing women. Doctor Nolan notably does not critique Esther or downplay her mental illness, but offers her the kind of "tenderness" that "women see in other women" (*The Bell Jar* 219).¹⁰

Even when women do not appear entirely tender toward one another, they can still form this sense of solidarity. Although Esther frequently mocks other women and even highlights her own shortcomings, her goal is not to belittle women or to make jokes at their expense. Rather, she turns to humor in an attempt to excise the influence of the feminine mystique, as she

¹⁰ Laurie F. Leach argues that Dr. Nolan is essentially responsible for Esther's recovery, and that she is "the only positive woman character in the novel" (36).

repeatedly emphasizes that imitating media stereotypes evacuates women of their agency. Likewise, when she transforms her feelings of passivity into slapstick comedy, she draws attention to the way in which American women feel "brainwashed" and "numb" (85). In stepping back from her own experience and treating herself as a primary target for laughter, Esther Greenwood demonstrates how "self-deprecating humor may be evidence of strength rather than weakness," as she becomes conscious of how thoroughly the feminine mystique shapes her existence (Walker, "Solidarity" 62).

Conclusion: Opening the Bell Jar

While laughter helps women to construct a community and provides them with a sense of mutual recognition, it remains unclear to what extent Esther Greenwood is able to cast off the demands facing postwar American women. At the novel's end, she remains uncertain about her future and even seems slightly concerned about the fact that she doesn't know "who would marry me now" (*The Bell Jar* 241). Lynda K. Bundtzen in *Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process* (1983) goes so far as to claim that Esther does not grow as a human being and gains no maturity or perspective on her situation, remaining "as hostile at the end as she was at the beginning" (112). It is indeed hard to see Esther as a changed woman when we know that, following the events of her narrative, she has a baby and perhaps consigns herself to the cult of motherhood.¹¹ However, becoming a mother and, presumably, a wife, does not preclude Esther from having a critical perspective about the feminine mystique. Betty Friedan, in fact, notes with pride that she herself is "a wife and mother of three small children" (9). It could be that Esther Greenwood has developed the "new life plan" that Friedan envisions for women, balancing her family with a career (Friedan 342). The simple fact is that we know virtually nothing about the mature Esther who narrates the story, so we cannot say with certainty whether she has conformed to the mystique or found a new model of domesticity.

What we do know is that laughter provides, at the very least, some temporary relief from the constraints of the feminine mystique. Plath's humor often does not have the explosive power of Cixous's laughing Medusa, but is more akin to the domestic comedy that Zita Dresner describes, presenting its readers with a coping mechanism with which to work through "negative

¹¹ Esther acknowledges her role as a mother when she describes how she turns a *Ladies' Day* sunglasses case into a toy "for the baby to play with" (Plath 3).

feelings about themselves and their lives" (95). To suggest that Esther could simply step away from the feminine mystique altogether ignores her characteristic ambivalence about social expectations of American womanhood. The approved roles for women are both destructive and attractive, but humor offers a way to negotiate them and avoid the threat of utter passivity and voicelessness. Because the bell jar remains "suspended," rather than shattered, and can possibly "descend again" at the end of the novel, humor becomes a necessary habit in which Esther must continually engage (*The Bell Jar* 215, 241). This is not to suggest that Plath's message is that Esther should simply grin and bear it. Rather, the critical distance that humor provides might allow her to continue to lift the bell jar, just as Dresner envisions domestic humor as helping women to gradually "enlarge the boundaries of their lives" (113).

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