

Taking on a Mourning Her Mother Never Bothered With: Esther's Anguished Memory and Her Resistance to a Domestic Life in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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"I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in." -Virginia Woolf

The memory of Esther Greenwood's father plays a prominent part in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* with regards to her resistance to cultural conditioning and the role of domesticity. In Esther's case, a memory was born when her father's premature death transpired, but never ceased to settle; hence, the memory insisted on gradually closing her mind until it was locked in a state of containment. The word "containment" will be used as the theoretical basis of this analysis, and it will be adapted to contemporary mourning theory.¹ Moreover, one could adapt William Watkin's contemporary mourning theory from his book *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* to the notion of containment from his argument that, "To remember means to give a permanent materiality to someone or something that has been lost. The purpose of this is not only to preserve that lost, beloved thing, but also to lay groundwork for our own survival beyond the grave" (9). With that said, Esther illustrates the complex boundaries one's memory can give a young woman who abstains from the assumed roles of domesticity. The memory of Esther's father resurfaces multiple times in the novel to demonstrate how his death possesses a tight hold on her, which relates to her resistance to a normative domestic lifestyle and contributes to her mental illness; however, when she experiences a rebirth she lets go of his memory and has a second chance to attempt at living a normative life.

Esther Greenwood is a talented writer, a proficient student, and a young woman in possession of a generous scholarship to a prestigious university. For a young woman just entering adulthood, what more could a girl ask for? These achievements are plenty to be happy

¹ v. To keep (a hostile nation, ideology, etc.) within limits; to prevent expansion or encroachment into new territory. This term relates to the rise of Soviet power and communism during the Cold War which had to be 'contained.' *Oxford English Dictionary*. Second edition, 1989; online version November 2010. <<http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/40041>>; accessed 28 January 2011. Earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1893.



about; however, they do not bring her complete happiness. Esther resists fitting into the social norms around her, especially the dreaded idea of domesticity. Her resistance to a normative lifestyle, the catalyst which develops into her mental illness, traces back to Esther's memory of her father. The moment the reader learns about Esther's mental illness it becomes increasingly apparent that she links her emptiness to the death of her father. This paper will analyze Esther in terms of Cold War domesticity, family relationships and also, to some degree, as a portrayal of Plath herself.

Similarly to Plath, whose father died when she was eight, Esther's father died when she was nine years old and neither she nor her mother were perceived to have grieved over their loss. The grieving process represents a necessary psychological part of coping with a death and without it one could suffer from depression just as Esther does. In a 1976 *Chicago Tribune* article entitled "Thirty Years of Preparation for Three Months of Glory," Anne Larsen writes about Plath's relationship with her father by saying that "[H]e became 'the central obsession from the beginning to the end of her life.' She had both loved and hated the man" (6). Furthermore, it can be concluded that she admired him so much that she detests the inextricable memory he has left in her mind; therefore, she hates that she loves him so much and feels that the only way to join him again is by dying.²

The beginning of Esther's depression causes her to lose touch with language, which stands as an important part of her unique identity and demonstrates her resistance to normative domesticity. While discussing languages in New York with her boss, Jay Cee, Esther references her father for the first time. She thinks to herself, "[M]y German-speaking father, dead since I was nine, came from some manic-depressive hamlet..." (Plath 33). Ironically, she describes her father as a manic- depressive, which reflects her own character and serves as an augury of her depression that occurs later on in the novel. The quandary introduced by this statement proposes that Esther establishes a pattern in her attempt to learn German and represents her disassociation with that language throughout her depression. Since she links the German language with her father, she distances herself from his memory even more by avoiding or trying to learn it. For instance, the reader is exposed to her intuitive thoughts in the following excerpt: "What I didn't say was that each time I picked up a German book, the very sight of those dense, black, barbed-

² See Freud, Sigmund "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psycho Analytic Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans and ed. James Strachey. (London: Hogarth Press, Print, 1955), 237-58.



wire letters made my mind shut like a clam" (33). This passage corroborates that Esther never really knew her father on a deep level; therefore, she shuts herself off to anything that reminds her of him. Additionally, she describes the language as "black, barbed-wire letters," suggesting the issue of containment that she feels by remembering him. The image of containment echoes the Cold War Era and serves, as well, as a critique of domestic ideology. Barbed wire works as a trope for the entrapment and starvation she feels from the lack of familial attention. This can further be classified as containment because the only reason an intelligent and keen girl such as herself cannot learn German results in the simple fact that it reminds her of him. When she says "my mind shut like a clam," this indicates her resistance from learning and her disassociation from the German language. In a scholarly article discussing the feminist discourse throughout this novel, E. Miller Budick states that Esther's "[R]esponses are converted into an independent aesthetic sufficiently strong not only to withstand the pressures of the dominant male language, but finally able to reestablish relations with the male world, from which female writing must take its own birth" (873). For example, when Esther's mother strongly encourages her to learn shorthand because it would make her more marketable among men and more compatible to a domestic role, Esther does not agree. In response Esther contemplates that, "The trouble was, [she] hated the idea of serving men in any way. [She] wanted to dictate [her] own thrilling letters" (Plath 76). With close examination, it can be concluded that male authority has dominance over language. As a result, Esther withdraws herself from the language and the toxic mentality of the male world consisting of men such as her father. Once she lets go of his memory, she is able to identify with language again and her writing is re-established.

Moreover, Esther really begins to question her happiness when she goes to the United Nations with Constatin. The fact that Esther does experience a moment of happiness with Constatin may suggest that his disposition resembles that of her father's. She describes him the following way: "Constatin won't mind if I'm too tall and don't know any languages and haven't been to Europe, he'll see through all that stuff to what I really am" (74). She describes him as a person who does not judge and this suggests that Constatin is like her father, who would not be judgmental of her either. However, the lifestyle that she resists to fit into constantly judges her for not knowing more than one language, or not traveling to the most desirable of places. Both the cultural atmosphere of New York and her mother constantly try to mold Esther to fit a specific image that she resents and continually resists fitting into. This image consists of fancy



clothes, eloquent vocabulary, and normative sexuality. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that she relates Constatin to her father because during that same exact moment when she feels joy in the car ride, she also reflects on a vivid and important memory of her father: "I felt happier than I had been since I was about nine and running along the hot white beaches with my father the summer before he died" (74-75). Significantly, Esther illustrates her moments of happiness with "hot" and "white" imagery; however, she illustrates her depressing memories as "black" and "dense," indicating a transition in emotion. The importance of these images prove that Esther felt blithe and free running along the warm beach with her father in the summertime. Yet, after he died, she felt contained and trapped by his memory as suggested by the earlier description of the "black, barbed wire" German letters. It is not until she meets Constatin that she realizes, "I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old" (75). Surely enough, this evidently proves that the death of her father not only had a severe impact on her, but also that it traps her in a sphere of independence. Until she realizes that her father's memory confines her, she cannot learn what she needs to do to let her guard down.

Without a father figure in Esther's life, growing up seemed empty without him, and the emptiness has made a home in her heart. It is clear that she continued to grow up without a father, but what about her mother?³ She still had one of her parents around to raise her, but somehow her mother could never replace the relationship (or that which) she had with her father. It becomes obvious when the reader realizes that Esther's mother did not have a very appealing influence on her because she associates her mother with domesticity, one of the main normative labels she resists. Esther recalls the following memory of her mother not too long after her father had died: "In spite of the Girl Scouts, the piano lessons and the water-color lessons and the dancing lessons and the sailing camp, all of which my mother scrimped to give me ... I had never been really happy again" (75). This passage suggests that her mother obsessed over Esther's image as a woman, even though she was still only a little girl. Furthermore, she signed her up for all of these typical female activities so that she could live out a well-rounded childhood. Her mother projects her own domesticity onto Esther and plans the path that she will take and shapes her to fit a cookie cutter image of an ideal woman.

³ The lack of a father figure reflects Plath's own life.



As a result, Esther prevented herself from finding happiness and tortures herself in her sorrows; therefore, her lack of a relationship with her only living parent offers another critique of domesticity and Cold War rhetoric.⁴ According to Betty Friedan, "[The] high rate of emotional distress and breakdown among women in their twenties is usually attributed to this 'role crisis'" (75). Without her father around, Esther has only her mother as a role model and consequently her mother sets a role that Esther has no desire to follow. Esther reasons with herself that, "[M]aybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed" (Plath 85). Evidently, it appears that Esther feels that any domestic woman sacrifices her passions and her identity, leaving no room for her own personal image. It is possible that Esther would have had more freedom to create her own image if her father was around because with a father figure she could learn more than just how to be domestic. Therefore, her father's death contributes to her resistance to fitting a specified role. Esther states, "I thought that if my father hadn't died, he would have taught me all about insects, which was his specialty at the university. He would have taught me German and Greek and Latin, which he knew;" therefore, suggesting that she would have preferred to grow up in her father's image instead of her mother's (165). She can picture an image of his identity outside of being her father, but her mother does not possess an image apart of being just her mother. The image that Esther constructs of her father demonstrates Watkin's mourning theory where Esther creates a "permanent materiality" to compensate for his death and disappearance from her life (9). Furthermore, Larsen writes the following in her *Chicago Tribune* article: "When he did die, she felt abandoned, both guilty and betrayed" (7). This statement confirms that Esther's mental illness does not solely depend on missing her father, but it also links to the betrayal that she feels by him leaving her. Larsen also writes that, "Her mother's 'bourgeois' influence was perhaps as strong as the influence of her father: it was she who pushed her daughter to perform -- to achieve in every conceivable way" (7). Consequently, her mother's conventional attitude and officious attempts to mold Esther into a domestic role backfired. Instead, if her mother had acknowledged the death of her father and if both of them were able to connect on that level, then Esther may have possibly felt a maternal bond with her.

When Esther undergoes her first electro-shock session with Dr. Gordon she flashes back to another memory of her father. This connection once again links her illness to the memory of

⁴ To better understand Cold War tensions in regard to domestic containment and the way in which Esther distances herself from becoming "bound to the home," like her mother, refer to Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, p. 207.



her father and suggests that her happiness still lies within her childhood. Although this moment of nostalgia may not seem to be the happiest, because she recalls it at a time when she endures pain, this makes it important. When Dr. Gordon asks Esther how she feels from the shock treatment, Esther intuitively expresses the following: "An old metal floor lamp surfaced in my mind. One of the few relics of my father's study... something leapt out of the lamp in a blue flash and shook me till my teeth rattled, and I tried to pull my hands off, but they were stuck, and I screamed, but heard it soar and quaver in the air like a violently disembodied spirit" (Plath 144). This memory parallels the experience she had with electro-shock therapy. When she grasps the lamp as a young girl, she unexpectedly undergoes shock and feels as though her soul has left her body. Similarly, when she goes in for her treatment of electro-shock therapy, she does not expect the following to occur: "[S]omething bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world... [t]hrough an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break..." (143). The unexpected feeling of being shocked and feeling "disembodied" because of it, provides enough information for the reader to connect Esther's weakness and pain to the memory of her father. The reoccurring image of pain serves as a rupture in her childhood and parallels with the underlying aesthetic of Cold War rhetoric.⁵ Moreover, the pain ultimately makes her feel alive, which traces back to the most memorable moments of her life when her father was still alive. The lamp and the electro-shock therapy both symbolize her resistance to letting go of his memory.

After several thoughts of suicide, Esther finally decides to visit her father's grave for the first time. Once she gets to the grave she comes to the following realization: "I thought it odd that in all the time my father had been buried in this graveyard, none of us had ever visited him. My mother hadn't let us come to his funeral because we were only children then, and he had died in the hospital, so the graveyard and even his death had always seemed unreal to me" (165). When she describes him being buried in the graveyard for all those years, it parallels with the way Esther has buried her emotions since his death. His death seems unreal because she has never taken the time to mourn for him, and the fact that she visits his grave for the first time is foreign because now she will release all of the emotions that she has buried over the years. The moment she gets there, she nervously breaks down and all of her built-up emotions are finally

⁵ See Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, p. 207 for more detail regarding domestic containment as a result of influential Cold War tension.



released while she thinks the following: "I couldn't understand why I was crying so hard. Then I remembered that I had never cried for my father's death" (167). After she visits the grave and grieves over his death for the first time, she decides that she will kill herself the next day. It seems that mourning for her father reassured how much she misses him and how incomplete her life feels. Her emotions are real when it comes to remembering her father and she gains a sense of clarity at his grave, which ultimately brings Esther to the nadir of her suffering. Along with being trapped by her father's memory, she also experiences containment from the ideology of Cold War domesticity, disallowing her from any clear direction except to metaphorically lock herself up. Esther takes on the role of mourning in the following statement: "I had a great yearning, lately, to pay my father back for all the years of neglect, and start tending his grave. I had always been my father's favorite, and it seemed fitting I should take on a mourning my mother never bothered with" (167). While at the grave still, she comes to the following realization: "[M]y mother hadn't cried either. She had just smiled and said what a merciful thing it was for him he had died, because if he had lived he would have been crippled and an invalid for life, and he couldn't have stood that, he would have rather died than had that happen. I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain" (165). The choice of words that her mother utilizes, such as being a "cripple" and an "invalid for life" are current parallels with the way Esther feels in her mental illness. The fact that she says "he would rather have died than have that happen" justifies Esther's own thoughts of suicide because if her father felt that way, according to her mother, then she must also be an invalid for life and should die rather than being condemned to a life of madness.

The turning point in the novel is Esther's overdose on sleeping pills; however, to her dismay, she survives and her benefactress, Philomena Guinea, who "[h]ad interested herself in [Esther's] case..." admits Esther into a private mental hospital (184). Moreover, because she makes this suicide attempt directly after mourning over his death for the first time, it can be concluded that she wants to repossess his love. In a study on suicide in literature A. Alvarez claims the following: "[B]ecause this impossible payment involved also the fantasy of joining or regaining her beloved dead father, it was a passionate act, instinct as much with love as with hatred and despair" (19). Esther's emotions have inundated her mind to the point that she can no longer bifurcate joy from sorrow. However, now that the reader understands that Esther visiting her father's grave triggered her final decision to commit suicide, one can conclude that her



survival from the attempt is associated with overcoming the resistance to social norms that she has felt since her father died. Esther's survival symbolizes rebirth, and she has a second chance to fight against living a normative domestic lifestyle. Once Esther experiences a rebirth, no further mention of her father's memory resurfaces, indicating that he no longer lingers in her mind. Furthermore, her resistance to a normative domestic life specifically refers to what she calls "the bell jar." Evidence of Esther overcoming the containment of the hovering bell jar over her can be examined when she states: "How did I know that someday- at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere- the bell jar, with its stifling distortions wouldn't descend again?" (Plath, 241). The bell jar exists only in her mind just as the memory of her father does, but in her recovery she makes the decision to attempt to let go. Furthermore, when she attempted to kill herself, she also killed the memory of her father. When Esther enters into the private mental hospital, she is reborn and can reinvent herself in order to let go of the previous resistance that shut her off from social norms before her rebirth.

In conclusion, Esther's memory of her father initially prevents her from capitulating to social norms which are represented by normative domestic lifestyles influenced by ideological language of domesticity during the Cold War Era. Her mother represents this domestic lifestyle in the novel and Esther wants to be nothing like her mother, but instead admires the permanent materiality of her father. When Esther loses her connection with male language, this demonstrates her resistance against male authority. As a result, once she escapes the memory of her father, Esther has the ability to reestablish relations with the male world while her very own female language emerges. This suggests that the female sphere must overcome the pressures of male dominance in order to escape the bell jar. Furthermore, when Esther is admitted into the private mental hospital, she attempts to resist getting well, but this fails and the mental hospital symbolizes a space that cures her at least enough to where she does not feel the containment of the bell jar. Esther does not begin to improve until she grieves over her father's death and ultimately kills the memory of him which mainly contributed to her resistance to a normative society. Once she is reborn, her resistance decreases and she can attempt to live normally again, outside of the pressures of male authority. When Esther begins to escape from the memory of her father, she escapes from the bell jar, and the novel makes its turning point. Her escape from the bell jar may only be temporary, but her desire to live a new life after "being born twice" exceeds any resistance or containment she may have endured before (244).



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