

Alienation and Renewal in *The Bell Jar*

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Sylvia Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), tells a story of social alienation and renewal. The story is a complex one, in that the protagonist's alienation includes a latent wish for reconnection and her renewal is clouded over by the possibility of future estrangement. Written in the first person, as were so many post World War II novels, *The Bell Jar* focuses on the struggles of a particular individual, Esther Greenwood, as she undergoes a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood without any rules to guide her. Images of repulsion and aspiration suffuse her prose, and as a result the novel's figurative texture becomes as crucial as the plot to its literary meaning. Beyond being Esther's personal story, the novel posits a dynamic of alienation, reconnection, and renewal at the core of American culture—a motif especially pervasive in the 1950s, and particularly for women in that era. *The Bell Jar* thus concerns an individual character, her confrontation with society, her style of self-expression, and, more generally, the difficult crossing from juvenile subordination to adult autonomy.

Esther Greenwood initially tries to adapt herself to the strange world of status and power she encounters on her first extended time away from home or school. A nineteen-year-old college junior, she has won a summer guest editorship at a New York fashion magazine called *Ladies' Day*, modeled on such actual magazines as *The Ladies' Home Journal* and *Mademoiselle*. Plath actually did serve as guest editor at *Mademoiselle* one summer while still a student at Smith College, and she used her experiences as the basis for much of the detail in this autobiographical novel (Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath* 96-111, 185-87). Although Esther tries to conform to the sophisticated, urban world into which she has been inserted, she remains essentially withdrawn from it—and, more significantly, from herself. She finds herself increasingly apathetic about the writing and editing career she thought she wanted and from the life of success and privilege she thought she was pursuing. Isolated from the professional world unfolding around her, and from the mainstream of American life, she is also exiled from her own feelings and desires. She had come to New York City behaving as what David Riesman called an "other-directed" person (19-22), a conformist who sees through the eyes of others, whose highest goal is to fit in. But in New York she begins to discover a contrary wish: to become an "autonomous" person (Riesman 242), capable of seeing through her own eyes even while



relating to others. This inner division ultimately leads to a fissuring of her identity, a diversion from normal functioning to mental derangement. The novel shows us her progressive self-fragmentation and her partial recovery.

Despite Esther's superficial attempt to adapt to society's success ethic, she initially views everything she encounters with a reflexive contempt and suspicion. Alienating as well as alienated, this world view makes her seem unlikable to many readers; yet it also convinces many of those same readers, especially those going through a similar rite of passage, that her way of seeing and feeling corresponds to their own, at least at some private, vulnerable level. Like some of Jane Austen's most memorable protagonists, Esther invites in the reader an uneasy mixture of dislike and sympathy, distance and identification.

Through Esther's inability to coexist harmoniously with the people and scenes swirling around her, she constructs a landscape of radical alienation that we can understand in two different ways. First, the world of competition, conformity, consumerism, and commodification deserves derision. As in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which is *The Bell Jar's* most immediate precursor, post-World War II American society is shown to be phony and bewildering. But second, Esther herself is off-kilter, able to see only what is false because she is false to herself. Her inner estrangement parallels that of *Catcher's* Holden Caulfield. Yet whereas Holden's derangement only becomes clear at the end of that novel, Esther's is apparent from the beginning—and her efforts at a cure are delineated, while his are not. Moreover, Esther must combat the additional alienation of being an aspiring woman in an era of strict limitations for women. Although *The Bell Jar* echoes the alienated ethos of *The Catcher in the Rye* and such other Cold War era narratives as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956), and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), it swerves from them in focusing on female experience and in detailing the process of renewal that can rescue the alienated soul.

On the surface, Esther is an unlikely and unlikable heroine. She is "jealous" (Plath 4), snobbish, and hostile—the kind of person who steps on as many feet as she can as she exits a theater (43). She incessantly complains about others in a way that implies she is morally superior. Much of the time, she seems to lack empathy. Yet Esther is also sensitive, intelligent, and honest (even about her own negative qualities). Like her early progenitor, Huck Finn in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), she is obsessed with telling the truth, while inhabiting a culture shot through with lies. The social world makes contradictory demands

on her but provides her with no useful guidance, no helpful mentors. She is lonely, unloved, and at a loss.

In the opening chapters, Esther repeatedly reveals her alienation from herself and society. She writes that "I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs" (Plath 2). Esther identifies herself with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, sentenced to death by electric chair for passing American nuclear secrets to the Soviets—a crime of which Julius was almost certainly guilty and his wife Ethel almost certainly innocent. Esther here empathizes with people excluded and sacrificed by American law, "killed because they have broken a cultural rule" (Wagner-Martin, *Bell Jar* 23). Although the elimination of the Rosenbergs, in what René Girard would call a "sacrificial crisis" (Girard 78), is intended to strengthen the bonds among community members who remain, it has the opposite effect on Esther, who identifies herself with the couple's transgression and pain. Ironically, Esther will later undergo electroconvulsive treatment as a result of her own inability to adapt to societal norms—a pale echo of the Rosenbergs' electrocutions.

Socially estranged, Esther is self-estranged as well. She admits that "all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue" (2); her own achievements seem trivial when compared to the glossy professionalism on Madison Avenue. If the prospect of a high-powered career suddenly seems implausible, the alternative of marriage and motherhood seems dull. Observing young women on the marriage track, Esther thinks they look "awfully bored" (4). Later, she asks of herself, "Why was I so unmaternal and apart?" (222). Esther has been pursuing external goals—a prestigious career or an advantageous marriage—while ignoring her internal needs. Given an opportunity to face herself in New York, she questions both goals. In pursuing them unthinkingly, she had simply interiorized society's norms for women. She now looks at those norms critically, and as a result she becomes a stranger in society and to herself. Her guest editorship in New York, which was intended to integrate her into adult society, has disintegrated her instead.

Esther feels split between a fabricated public self and a truer, more elusive hidden self. When Jay Cee, an editor at *Ladies' Day*, asks her what she intends to do after graduation, she hears herself say that she does not know. Although she immediately attempts to recover her "old, bright salesmanship" (33), Esther realizes with a shock that her admission of uncertainty was



true. It is ironic that Esther stops believing in her advertisements for herself in the center of American advertising, Madison Avenue. She makes her time in New York into what Erik Erikson would call a "psychosocial moratorium" between late adolescence and adulthood (Erikson 199-200). She expresses her inner division by inventing alter-egos such as "Elly Higginbottom" (11) and a fictional heroine named "Elaine" (120)—just as Plath invented a fictional double of herself in Esther (Axelrod 10-13, 121-24). Esther feels as if she has "a split personality or something" (21). She also projects her interior split onto others. For example, she thinks of Betsy and Doreen, her new acquaintances, as opposed aspects of herself. Doreen embodies Esther's dark side—satirical, cynical, wild—and everything Doreen says is "like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones" (7). Betsy, conversely, is a "Pollyanna Cowgirl" (6), a pretty conformist who corresponds to Esther's "bright salesmanship" self. Although Esther regards Doreen as "testimony to my own dirty nature" (23), she decides that "deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy" (19). She tries to convince herself that "it was Betsy I resembled at heart" (19).

Another, more important "double" for Esther emerges later in the novel in her old friend, Joan Gilling (205). Each young woman has had a suicidal breakdown, and they find themselves recovering in the same mental institution. Fascinated by Joan's similar crisis but naïvely shocked by her same-sex desire, Esther asks Dr. Nolan, her female psychiatrist, "What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?" (219). Dr. Nolan responds, "Tenderness." "That shut me up," Esther reports (219).

Esther regards Joan with a mixture of rejection and identification. Although she frequently scorns her friend, she also admits, "I would always treasure Joan. It was as if we had been forced together by some overwhelming circumstance, like war or plague, and shared a world of our own" (215). Perhaps Joan represents the excluded margin of Esther, the road not taken. As Tracy Brain has suggested, she may be the counterpart of Sally Seton in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, functioning "as Esther's alter ego and potential lesbian lover" (Brain 149). Soon after the conversation with her psychiatrist, Esther initiates herself into heterosexual experience with a mathematician she barely knows, discovering the exact opposite of tenderness. While Esther loses her virginity in an effort to become "my own woman" (223), Joan's despair deepens and she commits suicide. At the funeral, Esther wonders "what I thought I was burying"

(242). The reader may wonder the same thing. Is it her own suicidal urge, or is it the tenderness of same-sex desire?

Esther's alienation has multiple causes, including Cold War tensions and the era's "domestic containment" of women (May xxv). Esther's domineering boyfriend, Buddy Willard, tells her that "what a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security" and "what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from" (72). Esther reacts negatively to such gender clichés: "The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (83). Buddy learned his clichés from his mother, who once spent weeks braiding a beautiful multicolored rug but then used it as a kitchen mat, "and in a few days it was soiled and dull" (85). Esther comes to believe that, despite the romantic thrill of courtship, a man secretly wanted his wife "to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (85). She recalls Buddy saying "in a sinister, knowing way" that after she had children she "wouldn't want to write poems any more" (85). Such a marriage would doom her creative desire. She begins to fear that "when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (85).

Another cause of Esther's alienation is her fraught relationship with her parents. Her mother, though superficially caring and picture perfect, functions as a subtle force of control and reproach. She resembles the domineering mother in *Now, Voyager* (1941), a popular novel written by Plath's mentor, Olive Higgins Prouty. Esther's mother insists that her daughter channel herself into socially acceptable directions without paying attention to her own needs. As a result, Esther makes a point of "never living in the same house with my mother for more than a week" (118). When she does live with her mother after returning from New York, she adopts a "hollow voice" that becomes a "zombie voice" as her crisis worsens (118-19). Breaking down, Esther overdoses on sleeping pills and crawls into a basement covert to die. Yet she survives, with only a scar on her face to mark her encounter with death. Recovering in a mental hospital with the help of Dr. Nolan, Esther makes a startling discovery about her relationship with her mother: "'I hate her,' I said, and waited for the blow to fall" (203). But Dr. Nolan only smiles; she recognizes that Esther has identified a root cause of her alienation.



Esther's memories of her father are equally vexed. Her father died when Esther was nine, and she was forbidden to mourn his passing. Her ambivalent grief, thus short circuited, went underground and contaminated every other relationship she had. As her mental crisis intensifies, Esther confronts this loss for the first time. In her conscious yearning to "pay my father back for all the years of neglect" (165), one detects mixed feelings toward this remote, intimidating man. On the one hand, she feels guilty for not mourning his death; on the other, she wants revenge for his neglect of *her*—both while she was alive and through his premature death. Visiting his grave just before her suicide attempt, she howls her loss, and nature matches her grief with a "cold salt rain" (167).

In the chapters leading up to and surrounding Esther's suicide attempt (Chapters 1-15), the style of *The Bell Jar* composes a fabric of alienation to match the narrator's world view. Instead of feeling in harmony with the observed world—as Huck Finn does in watching "the daylight come" over the Mississippi (Twain 108)—she draws back in repulsion. Images of ugliness predominate. Alone and apart, Esther experiences her landscape as menacing rather than sheltering. At the outset, she describes New York as a "sultry," unhealthful jungle (1), much as it is in Bellow's similarly anguished *The Victim* (1947). The "tropical, stale heat" hits Esther in the face "like a last insult" (17), while occasional rain drops, like ones "they must have in Brazil," strike the hot sidewalks "with a hiss" (41). Even Esther's hotel is called "the Amazon" (4). Despite the oppressive humidity, the air is filled with "dry, cindery dust" (1), reminiscent of Eliot's brown fog and Fitzgerald's ash heaps. A variety of grotesque body images supplement these metaphors of an urban jungle or waste land. On the first pages, Esther refers to the "fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway" (1); the Rosenbergs "being burned alive" along their nerves (1); the dust blowing in her "eyes" and down her "throat" (1); the memory of a cadaver that resembled "some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar" (2), and the sight of her new clothes "hanging limp as fish in my closet" (2).

Thus, *The Bell Jar* evokes a fearful world of yawning monsters, fish on hangers, reeking corpses, and people burned alive. As the novel progresses, Esther encounters additional disturbing sights, ranging from Doreen's "brown vomit" (22) to Buddy's genitals, which make her think of "turkey neck and turkey gizzards" (69). Esther's images for herself, though often more salubrious, suggest an abiding sense of otherness. She describes herself as a "smudgy-eyed Chinese woman" (18), "the blade of a knife" (98), a "sick Indian" (112), and an "orphan" from

Chicago (132). Such portrayals suggest both her blurred self-image (she may be either a sick woman or a dangerous weapon) and her margin envy (she figures herself as a woman of color and a parentless child, subject positions on the far borders of 1950s culture).

Esther's anguished imagination transforms the outside world, other people, and Esther herself. The novel is stylistically brilliant as it creates a vivid, figurative reality cut off from stable referents. This world of words provides an arena of experimental self-reflexivity within the novel's frame of realist conventions, with the trope of the bell jar holds the verbal wildness together. A bell jar is a bell-shaped glass laboratory vessel designed to cover objects or to contain gasses or a vacuum. The image neatly condenses Esther's feelings about her condition. She sees herself as a specimen in a jar—distorted from view, preserved against her will, acted upon by others. The metaphor suggests suffocation, immobility, and separation. Trapped in her social and psychological crisis, Esther finds herself "stewing" in her own "sour air" (185). She reflects that "to the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is [a] bad dream" (237).

As Esther recovers from her paralyzing depression, the bell jar begins to lift. As she regains access to "the circulating air" (215), the alienated imagery of her narrative yields to a more harmonious imagery, in which self and other achieve a reciprocal—rather than hostile—relation. Expressions of affection appear for the first time: "I liked Dr. Nolan, I loved her" (211). Images of freedom and autonomy appear as well: "I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person" (223). Although the universe no longer terrifies Esther, it remains a confusing place of "question marks" (243). She cannot know if "the bell jar, with its stifling distortions" will someday descend again (241). Indeed, there are indications that it may do so.

Although Esther has claimed that she would "go mad" if she had to "wait on a baby all day" (222), she also reveals that the week before beginning to write her book, she has been caring for "the baby" (3). She implies not only that she is a mother but that she is a wife, imprisoned in the domestic ideology of her era. She thereby hints that at some time after the narrative officially ends she may break under the weight of maternal and marital conventions, in the manner of Edna Pontellier, the doomed protagonist of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Nevertheless, at the end of *The Bell Jar* proper, a renewed Esther pictures herself as either a "patched, retreaded" tire (244) or a child taking her first steps into an "anxious and unsettling



world" (222). Vacillating between the objectified self-image of a used wheel rolling through space and the humanized self-image of a child learning to walk, she *guides herself* into her final interview (244), her verb suggesting a measure of agency and autonomy that she previously lacked.

The Bell Jar has roots in several overlapping novelistic forms: the picaresque (a rogue's movement through geographical space, exposing the follies of others); the *Bildungsroman* (a young initiate's social education); the *Künstlerroman* (an artist's development); and the feminist novel of awakening (a woman's self-discovery and recovery of agency). The novel adapts traditionally male-centered motifs of mobility, satire, and aspiration to a female protagonist, who creates herself as both a woman and a writer. Thus, several plots proceed simultaneously in this book: the ostensible plot of Esther's breakdown and recovery; the verbal plot of alienated imagery yielding to more complex images; and the compositional plot of a young woman inscribing her story and thereby proving herself a literary artist. All of these plots involve a complicated rite of passage.

Esther Greenwood, as her last name implies, is young and green. She suffers from her culture's lack of initiation rituals to sustain her in her transformation from child to adult. Esther experiences discordant pressures, both internal and external, but she lacks communal structures to help her move safely through them. She feels compelled to attempt suicide as a result of this lack of support. Paradoxically, her attempt itself turns into an ad-hoc ritual of symbolic death (of the frustrated child) and rebirth (of an independent, creative adult). This "ritual of being born twice" (244) is consolidated by the creative act of narrating it. The transition to sexually active adulthood appears to be successful, in that we learn that Esther has presumably married and had a "baby" (3), though given the troubled way the novel represents marriage and motherhood, we cannot be sure if they indicate a turn to normality or a return to crisis. The creative, vocational achievement seems more assured, in that Esther has fictively written *The Bell Jar*, an enduring work of art.

Esther's passage resembles those in such contemporaneous novels as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956), and Joyce Carol Oates's *Them* (1969), in which the protagonists, unable to make the leap to adult autonomy and intimacy, attempt a symbolic death and rebirth. Bellow's Tommy Wilhelm, however, is not depicted as reborn, and Oates's Maureen Wendall is reborn into a false consciousness or pseudo-adulthood. The

reemergence of Ellison's Invisible Man is intimated, as he appears to us as a writer—as do Melville's Ishmael (in *Moby Dick*), Dickens' Pip (in *Great Expectations*), Twain's Huck Finn, and Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway (in *The Great Gatsby*). *The Bell Jar*, particularly if we divorce it from our knowledge of Plath's suicide, aligns itself with the more hopeful of these analogous texts. Like the stories spun by Ishmael, Huck, and the Invisible Man, her tale suggests her enduring position on the social margins (her identification with orphans, minority group members, and children taking baby steps). Yet her self-conceived marginality is precisely what gives her insight into the condition of others—all those who sit "under bell jars of a sort" (238). Like the Invisible Man, Esther tries to speak "on the lower frequencies" for us (Ellison 581).

Why exactly does Esther Greenwood construct her autobiographical narrative in *The Bell Jar*, a narrative so poignantly similar to Plath's own? Is Esther seeking to relive her estrangement in order to re-experience her cure? Is Esther's narrative a way for her to ward off pain in her present domestic life? The alienation that sets the novel in motion is manifest, but the renewal that concludes it remains tentative and elusive. It is unclear whether Esther has experienced a meaningful rebirth or has wiped "the slate clean only to prepare it for the same exact message" (Macpherson 96). Although Esther can finally say, "I am, I am, I am" (243), she also knows that "somewhere, anywhere" the bell jar might "descend again" (241).



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