

The Female Predicament in *The Bell Jar* and *St. Mawr*

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The Bell Jar has been described as a "female rite-of-passage novel" (Plath xii). Arielle Greenberg in a "critical conversation" with Becca Klaver echoes Frances McCullough's description, asking "How is it that we've come to see loving Plath as a shameful rite of passage?" (186). While all three of these critics may be conceptualizing the notion of a rite of passage in different ways, they all imply the idea that the experiences of Esther Greenwood (and by inference Plath's own) are common to many young-adult women. It is not argued that many young-adult women deal or cope with the feelings that Esther undergoes in the same way, only that they experience those same feelings of anxiety, depression, alienation and isolation, in a word: *discontent*. If so, how ought we to regard the experience so vividly described by Plath in *The Bell Jar*, particularly if it is recognized as a common one?

In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* we are faced immediately in the novel with one of Esther's perennial preoccupations: death, more specifically the many ways in which she imagines there are to die. She thinks "it must be the worst thing in the world" to die by electrocution, "being burned alive all along your nerves" (1). But why, we wonder, is she so concerned with death and dying? It is fundamentally because of her utter discontent with life. For example, Esther scolds herself as "stupid" for buying "uncomfortable, expensive clothes" and supposing that during her time in New York she should "be having the time of my life" (2). She confesses that her trip to New York is the "envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America" (2). But what was expected to be a "real whirl" turns out to make her feel "numb"; "I felt very still and very empty," she explains (2-3). These feelings are not limited to Esther, as she observes that her eleven other female companions "looked awfully bored;" in their attempts to play their socially ascribed roles, painting their nails and keeping up their tans while living it up in America's center of culture and commerce, of finance and fashion, and a leader in entertainment, with such nicknames as "The City that Never Sleeps," "The Capital of the World," or just "The City," these girls "seemed bored as hell" (4).

It is this fundamental boredom, or ennui, that is at the heart of their experience. Discontent and ennui is also at the heart of another novel that very likely had influence over Plath, by one of her most admired artists: D. H. Lawrence. Lou Witt, the heroine in *St. Mawr*, is



in search of a passionate vitality that will abrogate the same feelings that plague Esther. Lou and Esther have a number of similarities that are more significant than passing. They have both tried the majority of their lives to fit the role they have been ascribed. They are fundamentally dissatisfied and frustrated with those roles. And they both seek out ways to will themselves out of their discontent. While Plath does not give Esther (or her reader) any real regenerative hope, Lawrence, through the horse, St. Mawr, and the American landscape, allows Lou some solace from her disappointment with life in western civilization.

To understand the two heroines' predicament, we must look closely at the how they feel. Esther says "My drink was wet and depressing. Each time I took another sip it tasted more and more like dead water" (Plath 16). She later describes silence as depressing. Life itself depresses her. Anything that exists for the sake of entertainment or comfort, from friends and alcohol to silence and solitude, has a depressing effect on her. The only thing that saves her, initially, from her first bout of depression within the novel, is a hot bath: "I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath" (20). However, there is a neurotic tint that mars this temporary salvation: "I felt myself growing *pure* again" (20; my emphasis). Esther has a profound obsession with the idea of purity. Through the purportedly cleansing effects of the waters, she feels as though her friends are dissolving. "New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter anymore. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure" (20). Throughout the course of her life, it seems, Esther comes to see that the only good in the world is that which is clean or pure. Her admiration of Buddy Willard, for example, the young man she presumably has always imagined herself marrying, comes primarily from his cleanliness and purity. "I thought he was the most wonderful boy I'd ever seen," she confesses; "I'd adored him from a distance...and then...I discovered quite by accident what an awful hypocrite he was, and now he wanted me to marry him and I hated his guts" (52). Buddy's fall from grace comes after his confession that he had slept with another woman. Realizing that he was not pure in reality, devastates her. Later in the novel, the probable cause of her obsession is hinted at: "All I'd heard about, really, was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for" (68). What served as the impetus for her purity obsession is not a religious code, per se, or the imposing influence of an authoritarian father or mother so much as it was the general social-ethos of 1950's America.

Esther's values are: keep yourself clean and pure and you may find a man who is also

clean and pure and then you will be happy. The value of purity which Esther holds so dearly is shattered when she finds out how impure (in terms of the ideal) he is. When she asks Buddy if he has ever had an affair, she expects him to respond by saying "No, I have been saving myself for when I get married to somebody pure and a virgin like you" (69). In this scene, we see the collapse of her entire worldview. This is no exaggeration. She tries feebly to convince herself that he was not at fault, that he was seduced, and that despite a slip in his character, he was still quite clean if not altogether pure. But she realizes how completely he differed from her ideal Buddy, and in a sigh of disappointment declares "And that's how Buddy had lost his pureness and his virginity;" more importantly, this revelation triggers her spiral of discontent, the revelation that he was at least as complicit in his act of impurity as the waitress who Esther imagined could have seduced him when Buddy confesses that he did not only have sex with the waitress once, allowing himself to be seduced and fall from grace in one instance, but that he continued the affair "a couple of times a week for the rest of the summer." "After that," she exclaims, "something in me just froze" (70-71). That freezing inside her should not be read as a description of a momentary reaction to hearing something about which she was merely surprised; indeed, it is a freezing of something deep inside her that never thaws.

Buddy's confession is perhaps the second most traumatic event in her young life, the first being her father's death. And while other traumatic events befall Esther, including her rejection from a summer writing class, her first experience with electro-shock therapy, the loss of her own virginity, and (on a smaller scale) the dealings of the day to day push and pull of her life, none has a greater influence upon her descent into anxiety, distress, and depression as Buddy's confession. As the walls of her world come crashing down around her, Esther finds herself in an ocean of disappointment and misery. In her attempt to keep herself from drowning, being swallowed whole in the wake of the collapse of her little boat of *purity* which had at least heretofore kept her above water, she searches for alternatives. She seeks rescue in other ideas like *career* as Betsy and Jay Cee do, *matron* like Mrs. Willard, and even considers *decadence* as Doreen does; ultimately, however, the limited options she finds are still further disappointments. Esther's disappointment is the disappointment of many American women who recognize that their own ideals are as false as Esther's vision of Buddy's supposed purity.

Esther seeks fulfillment through a number of ways, which, as the novel shows it, is to be understood as typical of American women. She finds no real satisfaction from her prize-winnings



and scholarship awards. "I felt very low" she confesses; "After nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race" (29). Still, underscoring her ennui, Esther muses one morning in New York why she can no longer "go the whole way [...]. This made [her] sad and tired. [She] wondered why [she] couldn't go the whole way doing what she shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made [her] even sadder and more tired" (30). Again, her idea of success along with her career-oriented accomplishments leave her feeling quite unfulfilled. Having always imagined herself to be able to succeed in whatever she set her mind to, whether she decided to continue with school, to study in Europe, to become a professor, to establish herself as an editor of a magazine like *Time*, or to write books of poetry, she had felt confident in her abilities and in her interest which would allow her to make a living doing what she loved to do. But, after having been disillusioned with Buddy and with the internship in New York, having felt the deep discontent of the "successful" life of an American girl, she "felt a deep shock" as she realized that she did not have a real interest in making a career. It was all sham and emptiness (32). Likewise, her mother encourages her to learn shorthand, but this only depresses Esther more. "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way," she announces. "Besides, those little shorthand symbols...seemed just as bad as let *t* equal time" (76) in reference to learning physics which she describes: "The day I went into physics class it was death...and my mind went dead" (34).

Marriage life was appallingly unappealing to Esther. "This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's," she says, "but I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook, and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night" (84). She innocently considers becoming a nun, hoping to be able to devote herself fully to something. However, she comically comes to realize that she did not believe either in the Pope, in life after death, or the virgin birth, and ultimately she gives up on the idea because what she is looking for (a cause to which she can give herself completely over, that can absorb her completely, mind, body, and soul) a convent would not be able to offer: "the Catholic Church didn't take up the whole of your life. No matter how much you knelt and prayed, you still had to eat three meals a day and have a job and live in the world" (164).

And finally, her attempt even at decadence is thwarted as well. Her decision to lose her virginity to Irwin, the professor of mathematics, is a traumatic nullity. She says, "I lay, rapt and

naked, on Irwin's rough blanket, waiting for the miraculous change to make itself felt" (229). At this point, she *decides* to lose virginity to a man whom she describes as intelligent, someone she could respect, which is only another ideal. What she received for her decision was a "startlingly bad pain" and a sexual "wound" (229-30). Imagining herself to have been mortally wounded in the act of sex, she suspects herself of dying from the extreme loss of blood. As the doctor tells her that she's one in a million--the irony not lost on her--the scene ends with her having been wounded and about to be "fixed." Presumably, she heals; however, she is not transformed by her sexual experience, and the next time she speaks with Irwin she tells him never to call her again. She seems cut off from any emotional reaction or connection that one might normally expect from a first sexual experience. What hope there was for decadence, or sexuality, proves, for Esther, to be just as bland, dull, and boring an experience as working in an office or cooking, cleaning, and washing for the rest of her life. The reality of her life continually stuffs her attempts to actualize any of the well-constructed fairy-tales that she thinks are potential possibilities for her life. These well-constructed fairy-tales are the stock in trade of mainstream American media. In her eyes, this American life, the status quo for women, is contemptible.

In a similar fashion, Lawrence exposes traditional life for women as entirely meaningless. Lou is utterly disappointed with life, the way that people around her are living it. However, she does not fully realize the depth of her discontent until she meets St. Mawr: "She laid her hand on his side...and she was startled to feel the vivid heat of his life come through to her...vivid, hot life!" and in that touch "an ancient understanding seemed to flood in" (13). The horse shocks her into an awareness of her life, and the awareness of "another world." The awareness "forbade her to be her ordinary commonplace self" (15). And after this awakening, this first glimpse of another, more powerful, world, she becomes utterly discontent. "She felt almost always a little bit dazed, as if she could not see clear or feel clear [sic]. A curious deadness upon her, like the first touch of death. And through this cloud of numbness, or deadness, came all her muted experiences" (25). As Jack F. Stewart argues, St. Mawr is a "vital creature" who is seen as "demonic in the eyes of a repressive society"¹ (84). Lou and Esther, in some ways, have not fully repressed their instincts, but that which has been repressed--in contrast to the demonic aliveness--causes numbness and deadness. Both Plath and Lawrence even use the same words to describe

¹ Stewart, in "Totem and Symbol in *The Fox* and *St. Mawr*," continues: "In his attack on [a repressive] society and its false values, Lawrence focuses on the otherness of animal consciousness, its fullness, its oneness with the source, its phallic aliveness."



the experiences of their heroines: *numb* and *dead*. And what are Esther's experiences if not *muted*, in Lawrence's sense of the word?

However, the key difference in these two novels is that Esther never realizes what ultimately causes her discontent while Lou is kicked in the gut repeatedly (as are we, the readers) by what Wayne Burns calls the novel's "Panzaic reality."² St. Mawr functions *panzaically* by serving to undercut Lou's ideals, how she thinks life ought to be. While Esther's ideals are also undercut by Panzaic reality, there is no regenerative hope in Plath's novel. St. Mawr, on the other hand, reveals to Lou the emptiness of her life and her relationships. In doing so, and by having Lou see the dark vitality that she lacks and he possesses, Lawrence gives the reader at least a vague sense of regenerative hope.

Lou's discontent comes, in part, from the burden of the performance of various social roles. She is constantly in a half-latent struggle with her mother and Rico. There "was always an unspoken, unconscious battle of wills, which was gradually numbing and paralyzing her" (25). There was always a tension between herself and those closest to her, in the struggle to fulfill their expectations of her. She wanted to rid herself of the tension, to become "unwound," and to be free from the constant battle of wills, and "only St. Mawr gave her some hint of the possibility" (26). And here we see Lou's predicament as identical to that of Esther's: "People, all the people she knew, seemed so entirely contained within their cardboard let's-be-happy world. Their wills were fixed like machines on happiness, or fun, or the-best-ever. This ghastly cheery-o! touch, that made all her blood go numb" (27). Lawrence's description of Lou's social world could have been a description of Esther's social world, particularly while she was in New York. The world Esther inhabits is not at all unlike the world Lou sees in England: "it all seemed far more bodiless and, in a strange way, wraithlike, than any fairy-story" (27). Lou and Esther feel empty, numb, dead, in a word, unfulfilled; this deadness and numbness are the fruits of supposed *happiness* and *fun*.

But why do Lou and Esther feel this way? What is so different about them from the other girls around them? They are both young and intelligent, but so are the other girls, in their own right. Lou and Esther have a certain vigor (at least initially), but Betsy and Doreen and Mrs. Witt

² See Wayne Burns' *A Panzaic Theory of the Novel*, (Seattle: The Howe Street Press), 2009. The Panzaic Principle states that in genuine novels, there is always a conflict between the "real" and the "ideal," and that "it is an axiom or principle of the novel that [the real is] always right, that the senses of even a fool can give the lie to even the most profound abstractions of the noblest thinker."

also have their own sort of vigor. Ultimately, the qualitative difference between both Lou and Esther and the other girls is this: an inquisitiveness, a natural and genuine curiosity to explore and examine life *and* a deep emotional honesty to accept what they find. Lou finds that all of her social relationships are barren; her only recourse is to seek out the dark vitality of which she finds the best expression in a horse, and to a lesser extent, the two horse grooms, Phoenix and Lewis. In the clear realization that her social relationships are barren of any meaning or fulfillment, she is left only with the choice to abandon those relationships and withdraw from the social world altogether. Esther, in seeing that same barren wasteland not just of her social life but, with a few inadequate exceptions, the entirety of American life, of the modern world, comes to the belief that life, as a whole, is not worth living. This is her truth, in *The Bell Jar*, and the reader's as well. Esther's acceptance of this truth testifies to her deep emotional honesty; she and Lou, in Nietzsche's words, show "courage for the forbidden." In the face of their discoveries, which are both harsh and devastating, they neither give themselves completely over to the cynical stances of Mrs. Witt or Doreen, nor do they refuse to acknowledge their discoveries, and in that process deny their feelings as the majority of the other characters, such as Buddy and Rico, Betsy and Flora, do.

Freud, in *General Psychological Theory*, in a paper entitled "Repression," argues that there are two mechanisms that provide strong resistance against instincts which when they are active give rise to a conflict in the ego. These mechanisms serve to make the instinctual impulse inoperative. The first mechanism is *repression*; the second mechanism is *condemnation*. He further argues that in the process of repression, satisfaction of an instinctual impulse "is pleasurable in itself, but it is irreconcilable with other claims and purposes; it therefore causes pleasure in one part of the mind and 'pain' in another" (105). Within this conflict arising in the individual's ego, two general forces are present which act upon the ego; first, there is the instinctual impulse, searching for an outlet of expression (producing pleasure); second, there is the countervailing force from external stimuli (social origins) or from the super-ego (which is the internalization of social forces). In the conflict between these two forces, the individual is in many ways a victim. However, Freud is always on the side of the individual, and being on the side of the individual he argues *for* the expression of the instincts. Social conventions, morals, taboos, any and all social interferences are in the last analysis like invading armies who have no substantial justification for their intrusion into the psychological life of the individual. In the



hindering and inhibitive process, the instincts are not simply blocked and dissolved into nothingness. Rather, they search for new modes of expression (106). Being once thwarted, the instinct "develops in a more unchecked and luxuriant fashion if it is withdrawn by repression from conscious influence. It ramifies like a fungus, so to speak, in the dark and takes on extreme forms of expression," and in the individual whose instincts are being hindered, the new modes of expression are "bound not merely to seem alien to him, but to terrify him by the way in which they reflect an extraordinary and dangerous strength of instinct" (107). Whether the impediment comes from repression proper, repressive behaviors, suppression of thoughts, or social judgment and condemnation (wholly independent of their secular or religious origin), all hindrances to instinctual expression are to be understood necessarily as tragic forces to the psychological life of the individual.

Rico Carrington is the clear illustration of one whose thwarted instincts cause his feelings and actions to become alien to him and which cause him to feel terrible danger. Rico is, at first, described as being "handsome" and "elegant," but is "anxious for his future, and anxious for his place in the world" (Lawrence 4). Then, in his relationship with Lou, which echoes Freud's description of a repressed individual, we are shown more clearly what is amiss: "it was a strange vibration of the nerves, rather than of the blood. A nervous attachment, rather than a sexual love. A curious tension of the will, rather than a spontaneous passion" (6). Lawrence's language is key; he uses descriptive words like *blood*, *sexual love*, and *spontaneous passion* to depict the part played by the instincts and uses description like *nerves/nervousness* and *tension of will* to depict the effect of instinctual impediment. Later, Rico becomes angry with Lou, and Lawrence compares him to a dog that may angrily bare his teeth but dare not bite. "And that was Rico. He daren't quite bite. Not that he was really afraid of the others. He was afraid of himself, once he let himself go. He might rip up in an eruption of lifelong anger [...but] for the time, he was good, very good, dangerously good" (10). It is Rico's surface *goodness* that is one of the most telling symptoms of his denial of his *self*. His "danger," the possible eruption of lifelong anger, comes not from giving in to his anger-instincts but from denying them. "Rico was so handsome, and he was so self-controlled...but...after all, it was a bluff, an attitude.... [Lou] realized that, with men and women, everything is an attitude only when something else is lacking. Something else is lacking and they are thrown back on their own devices" (15-16). That which is lacking in Rico and people like him is a "real" self, an *un-denied self*. In contrast, St. Mawr is described as

having a "black fiery glow" in his eyes that was not "attitude": "It was something much more terrifying, and real, the only thing that was real" (16).

There is a significant difference between Rico's dangerous goodness and St. Mawr's terrifying realness. Rico is revealed to have two significantly different selves. It is as if, "at the depths of him, Rico were always angry, though he seemed so 'happy' on top. [He and Mrs. Witt] were like a couple of bombs, timed to explode some day, but ticking on like two ordinary time-pieces in the meanwhile" (26). Both of his selves are "unnatural." His deeper self, that which is "always angry," is like Freud's fungus that ramifies in the dark. His particular anger is not *natural*; neither is his goodness nor his happiness. His surface self, that which exhibits supposed happiness and goodness, is a deflection. Everything about him, from his personality to his attire is outfitted for appearances. His face, his hair, all seemed "as well-made as his clothing, and as perpetually presentable. You could not imagine his face dirty, or scrubby and unshaven, or bearded, or even moustached. It was perfectly prepared for social purposes" (18). These two false selves are what make Rico an outright tragedy. Rico's tragic figure represents the danger we face in losing our real and genuine selves, the selves that Wayne Burns defends passionately in his *The Vanishing Individual*.³ St Mawr represents the Rico-antithesis. St. Mawr's terrifying-ness comes from his realness. Lou sees this: "Almost like a god looking at her terribly out of the everlasting dark.... He was some splendid demon, and she must worship him" (14). His terror is a dark, beautiful danger. It comes from his *self*. And when that self is threatened, he protects it with the power and thrust of all his instinctual being. Lewis understands this; Lou asks him "Is he quiet?" And he responds: "Why--yes--my Lady! He's quiet, with those that know how to handle him...and a bit of a ruffian with those that don't. Isn't that the ticket, eh, St. Mawr?" (11). Lewis goes on to say "A high-bred animal like St. Mawr needs understanding, and I don't know as anybody has quite got the hang of him" (12). This is the tragedy of St. Mawr. Lawrence implies that we the readers, precisely like the characters in the novel, do not quite have the hang of our own instincts. We tend to fear them, and react, as Rico, Dean Vyner, and Flora do, in a way that denies them or that tries to cut them off, symbolized by castrating St. Mawr. Lou cannot stand the thought of having St. Mawr turned into a gelding because she recognizes the beauty of

³ Burns argues that social forces are responsible for undermining our individual selves, which then impedes our ability to achieve self-fulfillment. For more on this subject, see Burns' *The Vanishing Individual: A Voice from the Dustheap of History Or How to be Happy Without Being Hopeful*, published as *Recovering Literature*, edited by Gerald J. Butler and Evelyn A Butler, (Alpine: Recovering Literature), 1995.



a *real* self.

Moreover, as Lou is drawn toward the horse because of their shared devotion to the life of the instincts, Flora Manby is drawn to Rico for their shared respect of appearances, implying that she, too, shares his denial of the instincts. The instincts are synonymous with life. Lou, in relation to the mystery of the land and of human ancestry, exclaims "All these millions of ancestors have used up all the life. We're not really alive, in the sense that they were alive" (64). Lou's lamentation refers to the out-and-out lack of vitality in the contemporary human race. Flora defends the present age of humanity by proclaiming "these days are the best ever, especially for girls.... And anyhow, they're our own days, so I don't jolly well see the use in crying them down" (64). She then turns to H.G. Wells' history as evidence that women used to have to be subservient to old, dull, domineering men. Lawrence's satire might be lost here on any who fail to recognize that the benefit of coming out of the dominion of dull, old men came at the cost of a complete loss of vitality, of the *only* thing, in Lou's eyes, that makes life worth living. In addition to her own obvious lack of life-force, it is Flora's denial of the importance of vitality, in preference of "enjoying" herself, that implies her denial of the instincts and alludes to her own repressed state (65). She has become servile to social conventions. She is Rico's true counterpart: his destined partner. Neither Rico nor Flora are wholly victims of social forces. While, with Freud's implication that the ego is often acted upon by the powerful energy of the *id* and of the *superego*, specifically by social conventions, mores, taboos, codes, laws, and condemnation, Rico and Flora have chosen to conform to those forces, sacrificing their instincts for social gains, while Lou (and Esther in her own way) contends with those forces.

Esther sees the emptiness in the socially given meaning of women's life. And almost none of the other characters around her do, with the possible exception of Doreen. Betsy, Jay Cee, and Mrs. Willard are all one with the status quo, particularly that part which signifies femininity. Kathleen Lant, in "The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," makes the observation that Plath saw femininity as "suffocating and inhibiting" (620). These characters are both victims as well as supporters of the feminine status quo, and Plath exposes them as tragic, pitiable figures. Plath writes, "They imported Betsy straight from Kansas with her bouncy blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile" (6). Betsy's apparent sweetness and sincerity are of no significance to Esther because they are still empty; they are merely visible; she portrays the prototypical American girl so much that the beauty editor made

Betsy a cover girl (6). Despite Betsy's sweetness and sympathy for Esther, her superficial happiness indicates her lifelessness. For example, the brief account of how Betsy and the other girls had made scarves symbolized the inherent domesticity of their way of life, and the spiritual deficiency of domesticity. To emphasize the pure superficiality of Betsy's way of life, Plath describes a movie-going experience. The movie was in "Technicolor," which Esther criticizes as tawdry showiness. Then, in the middle of the movie, she could see that "the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and...all the rows of rapt little heads...looked like nothing more or less than a lot of stupid moonbrains" (42). Then, after wondering if the impulse to vomit came from the content in the movie or from the caviar she had eaten, she looked over at Betsy who "was staring at the screen with deadly concentration" (43). This scene, with its critique of Hollywood endings and entertainment technology (including the movie-endings and technologies of today), indicts them with siphoning off vital human energy and turning movie-going audiences into brainwashed zombies, or comically, "moonbrains." The novel also exposes a number of other characters, not just Betsy, as mere shadows of human beings.

Comparable to Rico in his denial of the instincts, Buddy Willard is both the product of and impetus for American life, with its emphasis on female domesticity and its preservation of the status quo. We see part of his deficiency early in the novel. Esther says "Buddy Willard went to Yale, but now I thought of it, what was wrong with him was that he was stupid. Oh, he'd managed to get good marks all right...but he didn't have one speck of intuition" (7). Buddy, similar to Rico, is the outwardly appearing all-American young man: intelligent, well-kept, aspiring and ambitious, respected, and high-minded. It is all these qualities which propel him into social success and which also make him look fatuous to Esther, and tiresome in the end. The implication in the novel is that those who are ambitious, aspiring, successful, and respectable repress, suppress, and condemn their instinctual energies and refocus those energies into social channels, allowing none to be expressed through vital/sexual outlets. And it is Buddy's inability to satisfy Esther's sexual instincts that proves to be his deepest flaw.

The process of channeling one's libidinal energy into social channels is a tragic sublimation; it is in this vein that Lawrence laments that man is the only animal who has tamed itself. After Esther and Buddy share their first kiss, Buddy is filled with a kind of awe, while she is disappointed with the experience: "'Wow!' he said. 'Wow what?' I said surprised. It had been a dry, uninspiring little kiss" (61). His sexual prowess is wanting. He is rather clumsy, and



approaches sex systematically. He follows a model of cliché images in regard to sexuality. The place that he takes Esther to is supposed to have a "beautiful view...and sure enough...you could see the lights of a couple houses" (61). Not only was his attempt a cliché, with the lights gleaming over the town at night, it turns out to be quite laughable, as well. With a similar passionless drive, he asks Esther if she has ever seen a man naked; when she says no, he offers to show himself to her. Buddy undresses in a routine manner, as though performing a medical school assignment, removing his pants and folding them on the chair; "his underpants [...] were made of something like nylon fishnet. 'They're cool,' he explained, 'and my mother says they wash easily'" (69). Plath piercingly satirizes Buddy's sexual incompetence. Esther describes the scene: "Then he just stood there in front of me and I kept on staring at him. The only thing I could think of was a turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed" (69). He is thoroughly unable to inspire or arouse her. In one view, this could be explained as a deficiency in her ability to respond sexually to a man; however, given the details of this particular situation, it is more his failure to be a sexually potent man, to stir her sexual feelings. "Now let me see you," he replies; she responds, "But undressing in front of Buddy suddenly appealed to me about as much as having my Posture Picture taken at college" (69). Buddy's attempt to initiate a sexual experience proved fruitless because he was technical, cold and clinical, instinct-less; she could not respond to sex in that way. Additionally, he speaks to her in a starchy tone: "Now let me see you." His approach to sex is like a business transaction, routine, customary, and ceremonial without even the sacredness of a ritual.

Eric, the young man whom Esther meets in a coffee shop and with whom they talk of love and marriage, is perhaps the one character who exhibits more contempt and ineptitude for passion than Buddy. He is disgusted by what he sees as the promiscuity of college girls, "necking madly" where anyone passing could see them; "A million years of evolution, Eric said bitterly, and what are we? Animals" (79). The men in *The Bell Jar* are already castrated, figuratively speaking, with perhaps the exception of the men Doreen finds. In recounting his first sexual encounter, Eric describes the experience as an initiation rite, not an act of desire; he did it only because it was expected of him by his friends; still, "it was nothing like it was cracked up to be. It was boring as going to the toilet" (79). To be sure, it is no coincidence that in Eric's eyes sex is comparable to urination, or even defecation. The "animal" in men and women disgusts him so much, this "bitter, hawk-nosed Southerner from Yale," that he declares that "if he loved anybody

he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business" (78-79). And he is in earnest in his assumption that he is doing his future wife a favor in refusing to go to bed with her. Admitting he could see Esther as a potential love-interest, and saying she is "surprisingly like his older sister," he reveals an obvious incestuous perversion in his view of women and sexuality that clearly obstructs his sexual powers, effectively turning him into a gelding.

The status quo in *The Bell Jar* and *St. Mawr*, as represented in the characters Rico, Flora, Buddy, Betsy, and Eric, is exposed as empty, hollow, and unfulfilling. Despite all their attempts to appear happy and to have fun, they are the objects of satire and are revealed as lifeless, even zombie-like. A few characters in both novels, however, do not fall into this category, but still do not make the profound realizations like those of Lou and Esther. While they may not have the deep emotional honesty essential to see what is necessary for self-fulfillment, they have two weapons against zombie lifelessness.

Doreen and Mrs. Witt both exhibit a certain amount of intuition and cynicism that keep them from becoming lifeless. After Esther criticizes Buddy for not having "one speck of intuition," she says "Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones" (7). Doreen rejects the proclivities of the other girls in New York, often mocking them behind closed doors, and Esther bonds to Doreen because of her sardonic humor. While at a luncheon, Esther tires of the other girls' meaningless banter and confesses: "I missed Doreen. She would have murmured some fine, scalding remark about Hilda's miraculous furpiece to cheer me up" (29) and "being with Doreen," she says, "made me forget my worries. I felt wise and cynical as all hell" (8). Doreen's chief value is pleasure; yet it differs from the other girls' and from Buddy's conception of happiness/fun in that she does not harbor the illusions that they do. However, Doreen's pleasure extends to excess. Her sexual energy crosses over into the sadistic as when she is dancing with her newly acquainted man; Esther sits up to hear Lenny yelling and sees that "Doreen was hanging on to Lenny's earlobe with her teeth" (17). In the next few passages, we are uncertain whether what is happening is a spontaneous act of domestic violence or a wild outburst of fierce foreplay. But, it is revealed as foreplay--and what a contrast to Buddy's and Esther experiences. More emphatically to the point, Doreen shows up drunk at Esther's door, and Esther swears off Doreen as a true potential friend. Her attitude is much more favorable to Esther than any other character's, but still Doreen's excess of mordant energy is not a



viable option for the young, sensitive heroine.

Similarly, in *St. Mawr*, Mrs. Witt also has a mordant energy. We laugh because of Mrs. Witt's scathing tongue, especially at Rico's expense. And while her mockery is comical, it is symptomatic of her intensely cynical attitude. "Examining herself, she had long ago decided that her nature was a destructive force. But then, she justified herself, she had only destroyed that which was destructible;" she was always destroying, and ironically "She really wanted to be defeated, in her own eyes. And nobody had ever defeated her" (Lawrence 95). In Mrs. Witt we see some resistance against the death-like meaninglessness that we see in Rico and Flora; nevertheless, it is a destructive force. That battle of wills which numbs and paralyzes Lou, thrills Mrs. Witt. But it only thrills; it thrills like a roller-coaster, her battle with "men with mind;" it brings no sense of self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment requires a creative force, even if it must destroy in order to create, a kind of reforming of the old in order to invent something new, something current and vital. Lou seeks a creative, revitalizing force but Mrs. Witt's energy cannot be creative. Even Lewis recognizes Mrs. Witt's purely destructive force. When she hypothetically proposes to him, he turns her down. "No Mam. I couldn't give my body to any woman who didn't respect it.' 'But I do respect it, I do!'... 'No, mam. Not as I mean it'" (107). Her disrespectful cynicism knows no bounds in its constant contempt; nothing is sacred, not even "mind," which when she meets it, she must subject it to her will, and in subjection is contempt. Lewis explains why he would not marry her: "'Nothing in the world,' he said, 'would make me feel such shame as to have a woman shouting at me, or mocking at me, as I see women mocking and despising the men they marry. No woman shall mock and despise me. No woman'" (108). In response, Mrs. Witt declares that all men deserve to be mocked once-in-while, to which Lewis counters: "'No. Not this man. Not by the woman I touch with my body'" (108). His refusal is protective of his own, personal creative revitalization. And, so despite Doreen's and Mrs. Witt's intuition, their lives prove *unregenerative* for Lou and Esther.

For Esther, she has but one option left. Rather than suffer through the wasteland of misery that is her American life, she chooses suicide. There are two primary causes of her misery: 1.) the inadequacy of any of the traditional avenues of American life to provide fulfillment and 2.) her quixotic imaginings of how life ought to be coupled with the subsequent disappointment of what is real. In order to deal with the first, she comes off as a neurotic. She is dissatisfied with any one particular avenue and wants to travel them all. "If neurotic is wanting

two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days," she confesses (Plath 94). The core of Esther's predicament is the appeal of any number of mutually exclusive avenues with the probability that none will bring fulfillment. One avenue is "a husband and a happy home and children;" another is "a famous poet;" yet another is "a brilliant professor;" and still others include traveling the world, taking lover after lover in a series of sexual encounters, and still undiscovered avenues (77). However, every time she begins to venture down any avenue, it results in disappointment. Allegorically, the scene in which she pitches her clothes from the top of the Amazon symbolizes her defeat: "The wind made an effort, but failed.... Piece by piece. I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the grey scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York" (111). All her efforts for self-fulfillment are frustrated, and the reward for her life of struggling, striving, and straining is discontent.

In addition to the disappointment with the given avenues for self-fulfillment, Esther never fully understands the root cause of her misery: her imagination. Again and again she imagines what a particular scenario will be like, filled with naïve hope, and the reality dreadfully disillusioned her. In love, she always wanted a pure man, and Buddy cannot live up to the idea. In comparison, Constantin, she imagines, "won't mind if I'm too tall and don't know enough languages and haven't been to Europe, he'll see through all that stuff to what I really am" (74). To have the expectation that someone will "see through all that stuff, (especially to expect it of a man she has never met) is idealistic. She realizes only half of the problem, the frequent occurrence of disappointment, but never its cause: "The same thing happened over and over: I would catch sight of some flawless man off in the distance, but as soon as he moved closer I immediately saw he wouldn't do at all" (83). She is disillusioned by the experience but does not grasp the tragedy of imagination. She can see through the Hollywood endings in movies for their naïve romantic optimism but cannot perceive the damage that her own happy visions cause in her life. She is constantly imagining a better life, and the novel shows that this is her undoing. For example, she envisions a better life in Chicago where she would be so much happier, where she could marry a "garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway" (133). Likewise, she says: "If I'd had the sense to go on living in that old town I might just have met this prison guard in school and married him and had a parcel of kids by now. It would be nice



living by the sea with piles of little kids..." (150). And again: "I thought that if my father hadn't died he would have taught me...German and Greek and Latin, which he knew, and perhaps I would be a Lutheran" (165). Through the myriad of if's, the novel uncovers her vivid imagination and desire for what she does not and cannot have as equally complicit to her predicament--her imagination and the lack of vitality in conventional American life. And so she yearns for death: "I would have to ambush [my body] with whatever sense I had left, or it would trap me in its stupid cage for fifty years without any sense at all," for her case, as she saw it, was "incurable" (159).

Given the difficult wisdom of the novel, that a life empty of real avenues for self-fulfillment is not worth living, how are we to judge her apparent "salvation"? Her time "recovering" from her mental breakdown is not, as Peter Lowe, in "'Full Fathom Five': The Dead Father in Sylvia Plath's Seascapes," sees it, calling it "a purgatorial healing process" of her desperate emotional state (21); it is instead an attempt by social forces to beat her into conformity. It is even worse than how Sheldon Lieberman, in "Still Crazy After All These Years: Madness in Modern Fiction," describes it: "a scene of pain and humiliation" (398). The status quo, irrespective of any particular society or culture, is founded on the assumption that the present way of life (from its own perspective) is not only better than other ways of life, but that all who are living within the status quo essentially agree that it is the best. Therefore, social institutions from religious to education based organizations exist to effect a high degree of conformity; other institutions, then, such as mental hospitals, can be seen in this light to exist in order to bring back to the fold those who have deserted. Esther's suicide attempt is comparable to a soldier's going AWOL as a result of refusing to continue to fight any longer. Her "recovery"--or rather the double entendre of "being institutionalized" is more appropriate--is analogous to a soldier's having been captured by the army he deserts and tortured until he submits to fight once again. The electro-convulsive therapy is an apt example of this torture. While her first experience is awful and painful, as she wonders what she did to deserve it, her second experience, though free from pain, serves to begin to numb her to all the inadequacies of the status quo. In describing the second round of electro-shock therapy she says it was like waking from a "deep, drenched sleep;" she continues, "All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace" (215). The deep sleep, purgation of fear, and subsequent feeling of peace are what one would expect from an emotional anesthetic. And that is precisely what the electro-shock therapy

is for Esther, as much as the movie is for Betsy and the alcohol is for Doreen. Dr. Nolan, Esther's doctor, tells her that the treatments will continue three times per week; after being asked for how long they will continue for, Dr. Nolan responds, "That depends...on you and me" (216).

Lawrence Stevens, an opponent of some psychiatric practices, argues that electro-shock therapy "causes brain damage, memory loss, and diminished intelligence." Moreover, Stevens quotes psychiatrist Lee Coleman, M.D., who argues that electro-convulsive therapy works by "damaging the brain." The individual, he asserts, becomes "confused and disoriented" and subsequently cannot "appreciate current problems." After the treatment is carried on for weeks, the brain is damaged sufficiently so that the patient will not remember or appreciate past problems, at least for several months. "The greater the brain damage, the more likely that certain memories and abilities will never return." Therefore, memory loss is not simply a side-effect of the treatment but the intended effect produced upon the patient whereby "families (perhaps unwittingly) and psychiatrists sometimes choose to deal with troubled and troublesome persons." Finally, Dr. Coleman stresses that we must seriously question "such a dubious means of obliterating, rather than dealing with, emotional distress."

Esther's apparent rehabilitation, therefore, is really a corrosive and inhumane process that disintegrates her emotional life by anesthetizing her sensitivities to desire for a vital life. This treatment's cure is to obliterate gradually and to deaden thoroughly the individual's sense of life. Instead of recognizing the insufficiency of conventional social avenues for fulfillment, the treatment simply destroys the awareness in the individual that his or her deepest needs are not being met. Plath's depiction of the anesthetizing effects of American social life and treatments in the mental hospital is her vision. "Vision," Wayne Burns writes in *A Panzaic Theory of the Novel*, "is what makes a novel genuine. Vision is what cuts through readers' ideas and ideals to show them who they are and what they're up against in the real world. In Kafka's words, it is 'the axe for the frozen sea inside us'"⁴ (2). Plath's presentation of Esther's treatment cuts through the readers' ideals of human compassion and trust in medical authorities by exposing the deceptive and pernicious way in which the therapy actually affects her.

Esther, however, only slowly succumbs to this therapy, but never fully. She had always recognized the scarcity of vitality and life in her normal life, but recognizes a lifeless similarity between life outside the hospital and that within it. She observes, early in her stay at the hospital,

⁴ This is number nine of Burns' "basic critical premises which underlie" his *Panzaic* theory of the novel.



"the figures around me weren't people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life" (Plath 141-42). And still, after having been in treatment for some time, she asks rhetorically: "What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort" (238). Eliminating the tenuous line between sanity and "depression," between the "normal" happy girls outside the hospital in American colleges all over the country and the clinically-depressed girls inside the hospital, Esther's observation implies that the "treatments" (entertainment, alcohol, social conformity, etc.) for girls outside the hospital are simply more successful in their anesthetizing effects than they were on the girls inside. Conformity is perhaps the most conventional mode of emotional anesthesia. But Esther is no true conformist (though she plays the part just fine). She ponders, "Why did I attract these weird old women?" She goes on to list various women who "all wanted to adopt [her] in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have [her] resemble them" (220). But Esther could not conform; there was a piece of her that was unregenerate. She was an individual, despite being lost in the welter of social forces, beset from every side by conformity, emotional depravity, cliché images and stock responses, repressed friends, self-righteous philanthropists, incompetent and sadistic lovers, and even science and medicine. These are the characters that populate Esther's world; they are *empty selves* who fill themselves up only with socially set ideas and beliefs, reducing, as Allen Finkelkraut writes, their intellectual activity "to the terrible and mocking encounter between the fanatic and the zombie" (qtd. in Burns, *The Vanishing Individual* 59). Eric is a fanatic against sexuality, Buddy a fanatic for ambition and success, and Betsy a sweet and innocent zombie. Esther, trapped inexorably between the fanatic and the zombie, makes a sane choice for suicide.

Lou in *St. Mawr*, similarly assailed, considers death as an option, but her life is only slightly less bleak in its lifelessness. A number of times she declares that death is better than the ghastliness of life, the zombie-like, lifeless living. "It is terrible when the life-flow dies out of one, and everything is like cardboard, and oneself is like cardboard. I'm sure it is worse than being dead.... I knew how deadened I was" (Lawrence 111-12). Completely disillusioned by the popular philosophy of hopefulness, she admits to Rico: "A sort of hatred for people has come over me. I hate their ways and their bunk, and I feel like kicking them in the face, as St. Mawr did that young man" (115). She heard the voice of the Prophet, Lawrence himself, decrying the

cruelty of the world. He claims that the world says: "Believe in nothing, care about nothing: but keep the surface easy, and have a good time" (70). This is the lie that St. Mawr exposes to her, the mere superficiality of mankind's happiness, its purely deceptive joy. He cries out satirically: "The surface of life must remain unruptured" (71). It is easy to see that Lawrence's social-criticism is true of Dr. Nolan, "therapy," and electro-shock therapy. The message of electro-shock therapy is: Do not seek self-fulfillment; simply let the surface hide the individual's discontent. And still, Lawrence answers: "What's to be done? Generally speaking, nothing" (71). He has no hope for a social revolution to come to the aid of an individual in search for self-fulfillment. But he points in a direction toward deliverance: "The individual can depart from the mass and try to cleanse himself. Try to hold fast to the living thing, which destroys as it goes, but remains sweet" (72). Lawrence believes in life and only life as the vital and essential value of human existence. And so, when that essential quality or value is threatened he urges the individual to "fight, fight, fight to preserve that which is life in him from the ghastly kisses and poison-bites of the myriad evil ones.... But in his soul adhere to that which is life itself [...and] with itself, is strong and at peace" (72). Lou, herself, repeats this possibility to her mother towards the end of novel. She escapes, as the Prophet decreed, to the vital wilderness of the American south. However, as Kingsley Widmer points out in his survey of Lawrence's works in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, it seems the ending is "a pyrrhic victory, with the heroic woman withdrawn from the social world and left nearly isolated; but as Lawrence viewed it, she has achieved through her vitalistic nihilism an intensely regenerative awareness and being" (36). While there is a possibility only to save oneself, it comes solely from a rejection of the values of the social world, and one is left with the doubt, at *St. Mawr's* close, whether even Lawrence's brand of deliverance is possible. That the novel fails to leave the reader with any hope should not be seen as a failure of the novel. Nor should the reader attempt to explain away the seriousness of the predicament that Lou--and the readers as well--find themselves in. Burns warns that "Some capable readers, usually sophisticated critics, will acknowledge that a novel conflicts with their ideals but will then proceed to downplay the significance of the conflict [...so that] moral idealism can prevail" (2). The power of genuine novels lies in exposing the subtle conflicts in life, as well as what forces are working against our deeper, more important selves (as opposed to our social selves), in order for the reader to see more and more clearly who they are and what they are up against; he or she must have the same deep, emotional honesty that both Lou and



Esther demonstrate as well as some courage for the forbidden that rebels against the social grain.

Likewise, we the readers at the close of *The Bell Jar* are left uncertain about Esther's fate. In her hopes that the electro-shock therapy will cast at least Esther's awareness of her life's lack of fulfillment into oblivion, Mrs. Greenwood says, "with her sweet martyr's smile, [...] 'We'll act as if all this were a bad dream'" (237). Mrs. Greenwood's attempt to suppress Esther's experience reflects society's chief route to deflect its awareness of discontent: forgetfulness. Esther muses, "A bad dream. To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream. A bad dream. I remembered everything" (237). She lists the things she remembers from Buddy's cadavers to Marco's (the women hater's) diamond, as well as Doreen and the sailor on the Common, and she grieves in the realization: "Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover them. But they were part of me. They were my landscape" (237). While she acknowledges a peculiar mercy in not remembering, she refuses to forget, even willfully takes pride in her own private suffering. And despite her apparent desire to live, attested by the "old brag of [her] heart. I am I am I am" (243), she still sees the world as a bad dream and that persistent feeling will not perish.

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⁵ For information and availability email howestreetpress@gmail.com