

The Missing Sequel: Sylvia Plath and Psychiatry

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On Saturday, June 13, 1959, Sylvia Plath wrote in her journal:

Read COSMOPOLITAN from cover to cover. Two mental-health articles. I must write one about a college girl suicide. THE DAY I DIED. And a story, a novel even. Must get out SNAKE PIT. There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive, recreate it.¹

Less than two years later, Plath began writing *The Bell Jar*, her novel about a “college girl suicide.” Drawing on Plath’s own summer internship and subsequent suicide attempt in 1953, *The Bell Jar* tells the story of Esther Greenwood, a college student who serves as a guest editor at a New York women’s magazine and returns to her home in the Boston suburbs depressed and suicidal. The novel follows Esther through her treatment at a mental hospital after her suicide attempt and is told from the perspective of an older Esther who has since become a mother and “all right again.”

Plath’s own life complicates our understanding of *The Bell Jar*’s reception, given that the novel was published in England under a pseudonym in January 1963 and did not appear in America under Plath’s own name until 1971, long after she committed suicide. Plath’s death in February 1963, at age thirty, occurred just weeks after the British publication of the novel. Though Plath biographies are rife with references to her struggle with depression, scholars have only recently started to write about how Plath herself participated in a larger cultural conversation about medicine and mental health.² Plath, however, recognized these topics to be major influences: “The medical profession has always intrigued me most of all, & the hospital & doctors & nurses are central in all my work,” she wrote to her mother. The medical establishment also responded to Plath’s work: physiotherapists wrote to her asking for copies of her poem about living in a plaster cast to read to their patients and an Australian gynecologist

¹ This paper contains both literary analysis and historiography. To prevent excessive footnoting, I will use MLA parenthetical citations for literary sources. All other quotations will be noted in Chicago-style footnotes. Kukil, *Unabridged Journals*, 495.

² On this subject, see Maria Farland, “Sylvia Plath’s Anti-Psychiatry,” *the minnesota review* 55-7 (Fall 2000 & Spring/Fall 2001): 245-256 and Luke Ferretter, “‘Just Like the Sort of Drug a Man Would Invent’: *The Bell Jar* and the Feminist Critique of Women’s Health Care” *Plath Profiles* 1 (Summer 2008): 136-158.



wrote to her in appreciation of a poem she wrote about being in a maternity ward. Plath was “thrilled” by such requests.³ My analysis of *The Bell Jar* and Plath’s decision to write the novel will provide a special lens for understanding how writing about breakdowns in the 1950s and 1960s could be as much a commercial undertaking as an act of protest against certain practices in psychiatry.

Plath in Her Time

Plath was neither a bohemian nor a feminist, but a product of our 1950s White American middle-class. She was a woman torn between her own desire to pursue a career and pressure to become a stay-at-home wife and mother.⁴ Though Plath’s mother Aurelia raised Sylvia and her younger brother Warren alone, after the children’s father Otto died of untreated diabetes when Sylvia was eight, Plath did not perceive her mother to be an example of a woman who successfully balanced career and family. Aurelia taught stenography classes at Boston University, but money for the family was always tight. She also transferred her own interests and ambitions onto her children, placing a kind of vicarious pressure on them that Plath grew to loathe.

Plath, nonetheless, was an excellent student and precocious talent. Her poems and stories were accepted for publication in magazines like *Seventeen* while she was still in high school. But Plath was not merely a grind: she spent her free time reading *Ladies’ Home Journal*—a special favorite of hers—and enjoyed going on dates with many boys. She was admitted to

³ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, November 19, 1962?, Plath mss. II, 1932-1977, Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library, Indiana University-Bloomington. While many of my citations come from materials encountered during a research trip to the Plath archives at the Lilly Library, some of Plath’s correspondence has been published and therefore some of my citations may also be found in works such as Aurelia Schober Plath, ed., *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) or in Christopher Reid, ed., *Letters of Ted Hughes* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

⁴ Plath’s indecision is clear in a letter written to her mother during the spring of her freshman year at Smith:

Sometimes I wonder whether or not I should “go into social work.” If I did that, I could earn my own living... or if you could get me started secretarially next summer I might lay in summer experience for that “U.N. job”. [sic] The question is – shall I plan for a career? (ugh! I hate the word.) Or should I major in Eng. & art & have a “free-lance” career if I ever catch a man who can put up with the idea of having a wife who likes to be alone and working artistically now & then? I would like to start thinking about where I’ll put the emphasis for the rest of my brief life.

See Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, April 18, 1951. Plath mss. II, 1932-1977, Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library.

Smith College, a prestigious women's college in Northampton, Massachusetts, and matriculated there in 1950, thanks to her mother's careful budgeting and a scholarship established by the author Olive Higgins Prouty.

The Smith girl of the 1950s, according to a classmate of Plath, "was a conformist, like thousands of undergraduates there and elsewhere, before and since....She was eager to be recognized as a college girl and she was careful to wear the proper uniform, in this case Bermuda shorts, knee socks, and [a] button-down-collar shirt. Her hair was casually but precisely styled."⁵ Plath herself deviated little from such a description: she was tall, attractive, and occasionally dyed her light brown hair blonde. At Smith, she continued to achieve the academic success she had known at her Wellesley high school. But she also had many problems, including chronic sinus infections, insomnia, and frequent bouts of depression and lethargy. And sometimes events that Plath counted on becoming her best successes turned out to be her worst experiences, such as when she spent a month in New York City, living the life of a magazine editor.

During the spring of her junior year in 1953, Plath won the opportunity to work as a guest editor for *Mademoiselle* as part of a program in which college women helped to create and edit the magazine's August college issue. During the program, Plath and the other college guest editors were given a whirlwind tour of New York City that included numerous banquets and evening events. Plath, who was susceptible to overwork, pushed herself beyond her limits that previous spring and found her month-long stay in New York overwhelming. In addition to the constant social activity, Plath had the second-most-important job at the magazine as guest managing editor. The experience left her exhausted: "I have been very ecstatic, horribly depressed, shocked, elated, enlightened, and enervated...all of which goes to make up living very hard and newly," she wrote in a letter to her brother near the end of the program.⁶

Plath returned home to Wellesley expecting to be admitted to a Harvard Summer School writing course by Frank O'Connor. But to her great disappointment, she was not accepted and was left instead scrambling to come up with new plans. She decided to spend the summer at home, intending to learn shorthand and begin researching for her thesis. But Plath by and large considered her summer to be a failure, having been so set upon studying at Harvard. Exhausted

⁵ Nancy Hunter Steiner, *A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1973), 35.

⁶ Sylvia Plath to Warren Plath, June 21, 1953. Plath mss. II, 1932-1977, Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library.



by her spring semester work and overwhelmed from her time at *Mademoiselle*, she found it difficult and then impossible to focus on shorthand or her thesis work. As her depression worsened, she began receiving painful electroshock treatments from doctors she intensely disliked. The experience of these treatments pushed her over the edge, as she later related to Eddie Cohen, a young man from Chicago who was a pen-pal of sorts:

I underwent a rather brief and traumatic experience of badly-given shock treatments on an outpatient basis. Pretty soon, the only doubt in my mind was the precise time and method of committing suicide. The only alternative I could see was an eternity of hell for the rest of my life in a mental hospital, and I was going to make use of my last ounce of free choice and choose a quick clean ending.⁷

On August 24, Plath left a note for her mother telling her that she was “taking a long hike” and would “be back tomorrow.”⁸ Aurelia, knowing that her daughter was disturbed—Sylvia had earlier admitted cutting herself on the leg “to see if I had the guts”—called the police.⁹ Search parties of volunteers and Boy Scout troops were dispatched to canvass the nearby woods. Everyone feared the worst when Plath’s prescription of sleeping pills were discovered missing. Newspapers across the region ran the story of the search for this “beautiful girl.”¹⁰

Though Plath had attempted to kill herself, she took too many sleeping pills, causing her to vomit them up. She had hidden under a crawl space under her family’s home and came to consciousness two days later “in a dark hell banging my head repeatedly [sic] on the ragged rocks of the cellar in futile attempts to sit up and, instinctively, call for help.”¹¹ Her grandmother heard these groans when she did the family’s laundry, and Warren soon discovered his sister.

Plath first received treatment locally but was transferred to the highly-regarded McLean psychiatric hospital once her benefactress at Smith, the well-known author Olive Higgins Prouty, learned of Plath’s situation and volunteered to pay for her care.¹² Plath stayed at McLean through the winter, receiving therapy from a young female psychiatrist with whom she felt an

⁷ Sylvia Plath to Edward M. Cohen, December 28, 1953. Plath mss. II, 1932-1977, Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library.

⁸ “Beautiful Smith Girl Missing at Wellesley,” *Boston Globe*, August 25, 1953.

⁹ Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Viking, 1991), 118.

¹⁰ Plath’s disappearance made the front page of *The Boston Globe* and also received coverage in the *Boston Herald*, *Boston Post*, *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, and Wellesley’s *The Townsman*.

¹¹ Plath to Cohen, December 28, 1953. Plath mss. II, 1932-1977, Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library.

¹² Prouty herself had recovered from a breakdown twenty-five years earlier and therefore took a special interest in Plath’s illness and treatment, going so far as to pay for her medical care and correspond personally with Plath’s doctors. See Alexander, *Rough Magic*, 126-27, 129-30.

immediate rapport. Plath also began receiving electroshock treatment again. Though she always hated the treatment, Plath found that it gave her significant relief when administered properly, as it was at McLean. When Plath returned to Smith that winter, she continued to receive some counseling while her letters to her mother regained their earlier chirpy effusiveness:

Am still chatting with Dr. Booth once a week...mostly just friendly conversations as I really feel I am basically an extremely happy and well-adjusted buoyant person at heart...continually happy in a steady fashion, not ricochet from depths to heights, although I do hit heights now and then...¹³

But Plath's friend Eddie was unconvinced that she could simply will herself back to health and pressed her to think through her recovery:

As best as I can interpret between the rather spacious gaps in your letters of last year, you decided just at a time when life should have been at a peak that it wasn't worth bothering with. Why? What brought about this fit of depression? What sort of stresses was your personality subjected to? And why did you decide on the particular means you did to solve your problems? What was the diagnosis of whomever you were in the hands of? And what sort of therapy were you given and how did you react to the whole process?¹⁴

Plath's responses to Eddie's letters are not a part of her archive at the Lilly Library, so it is unclear whether she ever answered his questions. She did eventually write *The Bell Jar*, however, and its autobiographical resonance may provide some missing answers.

Cosmopolitan Motivations

When Plath read *Cosmopolitan* "cover to cover" in June 1959, she was living in an apartment in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of Boston with her husband, Ted Hughes, before their permanent move to England later that year. She had graduated from Smith summa cum laude four years earlier, in 1955. Adlai Stevenson, whom Plath supported, was the speaker at her commencement. He told the graduating women that the purpose of their education was to

¹³ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, April 19, 1954. Plath mss. II, 1932-1977, Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library.

¹⁴ Cohen to Plath, April 28, 1954. Plath mss. II, 1932-1977, Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library.



prepare them for their “primary task of making homes.” Their place in society, according to Stevenson, was to raise children who would embrace “the rational values of freedom, tolerance, charity and free inquiry.”¹⁵ Plath’s friend Nancy Steiner described the speech as “eloquent and impressive.” According to Steiner, she, Plath, and the other women “loved” the speech, “even if it seemed to hurl us back to the satellite role we had escaped for four years—second-class citizens in a man’s world where our only possible achievement was a vicarious one.”¹⁶

From Smith, Plath went to England on a Fulbright fellowship to Cambridge University. In February of her first year, she met Hughes, a fellow poet, at a party. The two felt an immediate attraction—they squirreled themselves away in a back room during the party to talk about poetry, and Hughes left with a bite on his cheek given to him (flirtatiously, it seems) by Plath when he kissed her. They married just months later in June, 1956. Once Plath completed her two years of study at Cambridge, she and Hughes moved to the U.S., and Plath taught freshman English at Smith. The following year, the couple lived in Boston and worked as writers, though Plath picked up a part-time job transcribing patients’ dreams at the psychiatric clinic of Massachusetts General Hospital, the very institution where she was a patient prior to her treatment at McLean.¹⁷

During this time, Plath returned to therapy with Ruth Beuscher, the psychiatrist who treated her at McLean. One outcome of Plath’s therapy with Beuscher was her decision to become pregnant right away.¹⁸ Earlier, Plath had written to her mother that she and Hughes planned to have children in their late twenties, “because both of us are slow, late maturers and must get our writing personae established well before our personalities are challenged by new arrivals,”¹⁹ but Plath now wanted to start a family at once. Difficulty conceiving bothered her deeply. In the same journal entry²⁰ that she described her plan to write about a “college girl suicide,” Plath wrote that “for a woman to be deprived of the Great Experience her body is

¹⁵ Though my quotations come directly from Stevenson’s speech, I first learned about the speech in Deborah Nelson’s reference to it in her chapter “Plath, history and politics” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. See Jo Gill, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006). Betty Friedan, another Smith graduate, also refers to Stevenson’s speech in *The Feminine Mystique*.

¹⁶ Steiner, *A Closer Look*, 81.

¹⁷ Linda W. Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 148.

¹⁸ Diane Middlebrook, “The poetry of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes: call and response,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill, 156-171 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 159.

¹⁹ Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath—A Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2003), 117.

²⁰ Plath, a prolific diarist, used her journals for a variety of purposes—sometimes her entries were gossipy, other times they were used to gauge her emotional health—but they are especially regarded today as notebooks Plath kept to encourage her development as a writer. See Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 15.

formed to partake of, to nourish, is a great and wasting Death.”²¹ Hughes himself did not understand Plath’s sudden desire to start a family. According to biographer Diane Middlebrook, he “thought Plath was sacrificing something deeply valuable to both of them” by wanting to start a family so soon, given that the two of them had dreamed of traveling the world together as writer-exiles.²²

After two years in America, however, Plath had come to an entirely different conclusion. Without a baby, writing would become “a hollow and failing substitute for real life.”²³ Perhaps her return to America influenced Plath’s thinking: childlessness had become a “mark of social maladjustment” in the 1950s, according to Elaine Tyler May.²⁴ With the average marriage age for women in America at 20.3 in the 1950s—the youngest age ever recorded in the U.S.—Plath herself was an older bride at age 23.²⁵ And with many women having their first child at age 21 and 22 in America, Plath’s decision to start her family at age 27 came much later than her peers.²⁶

But fertility was not the only thing on Plath’s mind in 1959. At Yaddo, an artists’ community where she and Hughes spent part of the summer, Plath discovered the poetry of Theodore Roethke, a poet who used experiences from his own mental breakdown in his writing. “Adopting Roethke’s techniques at Yaddo,” writes Middlebrook, “Plath experimented for the first time with finding subjective images for the experience of shock therapy, an experiment that would culminate in *The Bell Jar*.”²⁷ Plath, therefore, had at least two motivations for writing *The Bell Jar*: the popular success such a novel seemed to offer, given the popularity of the subject in a magazine like *Cosmopolitan*, and the discovery of another poet who had found a way to use a troubled past in service of his art. It is therefore unsurprising that when Plath finally sat down to

²¹ Kukil, *Unabridged Journals*, 495.

²² Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 129.

²³ Kukil, *Unabridged Journals*, 500.

²⁴ Elaine Tyler May, *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 127.

²⁵ Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 50.

²⁶ According to *The Boomerang Age*, “from 1950 until 1970...the lowest ages of mean maternal age at first birth in the U.S. [was] approximately twenty-one to twenty-two years of age.” The lowest ages of mean material age at first birth in Britain, however, was twenty-four to twenty-five years of age. See Barbara A. Mitchell, *The Boomerang Age: Transitions to Adulthood in Families* (New Brunswick, NJ: Traction Publishers, 2006): 53-54. Accessed online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=wh4MJ0XeH10C>.

²⁷ Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 111. Indeed, the “subjective images” that Middlebrook references are internally as well as externally applied to Esther in *The Bell Jar*. Shock therapy is related both to Esther’s own nerves as well as to the Rosenbergs’ execution.

write *The Bell Jar*, it took her just a few months to write it. She had been thinking about the novel for much longer.²⁸

The Ambitious Writer

To provide context to Plath's decision write about her mental breakdown, I will consider the *Cosmopolitan* articles that caught her interest. First, however, it is necessary to understand that Plath was long attracted to commercial writing, as the critic Robin Peel notes:

The longing for success in prose narrative—in particular the novel—above all other forms of imaginative writing, including poetry remained with Plath throughout her life. She was determined to have her stories published in *The Ladies Home Journal* [sic] and the other magazines she termed “the slicks,” and she took her career as a writer of prose fiction extremely seriously. The Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith houses her copies of the Writers Year Books for 1952, 1954, and 1955, and her hardback copy of *The Writers Handbook* for 1956 has heavily underlined passages in the sections devoted to “Stories” and “Writing a Novel,” but has no sentence at all marked in the section supplying advice on the writing of poetry. The essay “Writing a Novel” by Anne Hamilton seems to have been taken particularly seriously, with annotations confirming the advice to allow a year for the novel's completion and to write 2,000 and 2,500 words a day.²⁹

Later, when Plath was living in England, she continued to try to market her stories to women's magazines. With some pieces accepted by British women's magazines, she wrote to her mother in 1961 requesting back issues of the *Ladies' Home Journal*:

²⁸ According to Jo Gill, Plath scholars disagree on the period *The Bell Jar* was written:

Judith Kroll indicates that Plath was working on the book during January 1962. However, she also suggests that the manuscript had been completed some months earlier, citing a letter from Plath to her mother of 20 November 1961 in which she explains that even though she had recently received a Eugene F. Saxton writer's grant to help her compose a novel, the work itself was already done. Kroll also cites the speculation of Plath's one-time biographer Lois Ames, that Plath may have “already had a version of *The Bell Jar* in her trunks when [in 1957] she returned to the States.” Peel argues that the book was “produced during the spring and summer of 1961...it was complete by the time they moved to Devon in August.” Middlebrook narrows it down further still, proposing that Plath worked on the draft between March and May of that year, and that “it took her only six weeks.” Hughes suggests February to May.

See Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 75.

²⁹ Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2002), 234.

Could you pack me off a Ladies' Home Journal or two? I get homesick for it (no others, Mcalls or Womans Day will do!) It has a special Americanness which I feel the need to dip into, now I'm in exile, and especially as I'm writing for women's magazines in a small way now. I shall have fulfilled a very longtime ambition if a story of mine ever makes the LHJ.³⁰

True to such ambition, Hughes said that Plath wrote for either *The New Yorker* or *Ladies' Home Journal*, "the two alternating according to her mood."³¹ The fact that Plath considered publication in *Ladies' Home Journal* equal to publication in *The New Yorker* was a sign of her commitment to mainstream, white middle-class American values, particularly as they were communicated to women.³² Success in a widely-read magazine like the *Journal* was a sign to Plath, ever-ambitious, that a large audience enjoyed her work.

Of the two *Cosmopolitan* articles Plath read in 1959, one in particular suggests inspiration for *The Bell Jar*.³³ Titled "'I Was Afraid to Be a Woman,'" the six-page article opens with the teaser text "At thirty-two, 'happily' married, with four fine children, why would a woman feel a compulsion to kill herself? Here is the story of the bewilderment and hidden anguish that touches countless husbands and wives."³⁴ Patricia Blake, the author of the personal account, tells the story of her early marriage to her husband, her ensuing exhaustion trying to raise their four children and support her family with her work as a writer, and her subsequent depression. But Blake's story is not quite as simple as Esther's breakdown and recovery: as Blake recovers in a mental hospital, her husband begins an affair with a mutual friend. The betrayal, especially whenever Blake returns home for visits, is difficult to bear:

³⁰ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, October 22, 1961. Plath mss. II, 1932-1977, Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library.

³¹ Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 51.

³² It is worth mentioning, however, that women's magazines published more literary fiction by well-regarded authors in the 1950s than they do today. In 1948, according to Nancy A. Walker, "*Good Housekeeping* published short stories by Pearl S. Buck, J.D. Salinger, Max Shulman, A.A. Milne, and Jerome Weidman, a novelist and playwright whose play *Fiorello!* won the 1960 Pulitzer Prize." See Nancy A. Walker, *Shaping Our Mother's World: American Women's Magazines* (Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2000), 12.

³³ The other piece is not relevant for our purposes, as it is a piece of reportage on treatment of mental illness at the institutional level, rather than a first-person narrative like Blake's. The second article, titled "Psychiatry and Beauty," is introduced as follows: "Few people realize the vital role played by beauty care in the rehabilitation of our mentally ill. Even fewer understand the importance of personal appearance in maintaining and strengthening the mental health of the normal woman."

³⁴ Patricia Blake, "'I Was Afraid to Be a Woman,'" *Cosmopolitan*, June, 1959.



There were some agonizing scenes between my husband and me. Once I took the wedding ring I had given him from his finger and threw it out into the garden. Then I ran out into the meadow near our house and cried for half a day. Once we sat up all night talking and talking. This night stands out in my memory because we were so much ourselves. We didn't speak in anger or hatred, but just as two groping people. (60)

When Blake finishes her treatment at the hospital, she and her husband live apart. "Strangely enough," writes Blake,

This separation was quite a happy period for me. The children were really fun. They were emerging now as little people, and I made up my mind to let them be whatever they were and not try to invent personalities for them as I had done for my husband. (60)

Blake continues attending psychotherapy—in Cambridge, Massachusetts, suggesting that she, too, might have received treatment at McLean—and begins defining her religious beliefs and thinking through her relationship with her parents. One day, as Blake's "thoughts were finding their own direction," her husband calls, asking to return home. "My husband and I don't talk about our lost year very often," Blake concludes. "Since then we have lived together for six years, fully and gratefully, though not always peacefully....In a way, we are leading our quite separate lives *together*" (61).

Like Esther, as well as Plath, Blake is grateful to her psychiatrist for "sharing his light with me during the dark time," but "I Was Afraid to Be a Woman" has an entirely different story arc than *The Bell Jar* or, for that matter, Plath's life. In the *Cosmopolitan* article, betrayal by a male partner does not figure as the crux of the woman's breakdown. It is only after Blake's admission to a mental hospital that her husband begins seeing another woman; whereas, Hughes left Plath for another woman shortly before her 1963 suicide. Esther's depression is fueled in part by her anger that her boyfriend Buddy had sex with another woman while Esther stayed virginal, presumably in anticipation of marriage to him. Blake's recovery is grounded in her newfound personal strength rather than reliance on her belief in the strength of her relationship with her husband. As it is, she accepts that they are living "quite separate lives *together*." This was not the case for Plath, who seems to have relied on her husband, or at least the idea of

marriage, for emotional stability.³⁵ These differences give *The Bell Jar* a far less satisfying ending than Blake's *Cosmopolitan* article.

Crime and Punishment

Early in *The Bell Jar*, Esther explains that her narration of her descent into and recovery from a mental breakdown comes from a perspective in which she is older and "all right again." Esther also includes a detail that is critical to an understanding of the novel, in the context of explaining what she has done with gifts that she received during her internship in New York just before her breakdown. She mentions that she now has a child:³⁶

For a long time afterward I hid them [the gifts] away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with. (*The Bell Jar* 3)

Because Esther's recovery from depression and attempted suicide is couched within the framework of marriage and motherhood, it suggests that Esther's rehabilitation—becoming "all right again"—is the result of her acceptance of her role as wife and mother rather than fulfillment of her own personal ambitions or developed sense of self. Despite Esther's earlier concern that cooking, cleaning, and washing for a future husband seems like "a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's" (84), she narrates *The Bell Jar* from the perspective of maternal domesticity, contradicting her earlier assertions that the "last thing [she] wanted was infinite security" (83) and that children made her "sick" (117). In this sense, it is significant that the older Esther narrating the novel never describes her husband or her life outside of motherhood, as though the responsibility of raising a child ultimately superseded her own personal desire to marry a man she is compatible or to continue her creative work. As in J.D.

³⁵ Plath wrote the following in her journal in April, 1958: "I am perfectly at one with Ted, body & soul, as the ridiculous song says—our vocation is writing, our love is each other—and the world is ours to explore. How did I ever live in those barren, desperate days of dating, experimenting, hearing mother warn me I was too critical, that I set my sights too high & would be an old maid. Well, perhaps I would have been if Ted hadn't been born." See Kukil, *Unabridged Journals*, 361.

³⁶ We can assume that Esther has gotten married because it is unlikely that she would have a child out of wedlock. During her recovery at the asylum, she gets a diaphragm as a means to allay her fears of having an unintended pregnancy.

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, becoming "all right again" is understood within the framework of adjustment and conformity—and since Esther has managed to marry and become a mother, she can consider her recovery complete.

The Bell Jar opens with a description of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's execution,³⁷ tying the novel immediately to prevailing themes in the 1950s of suspicion, conformity, and anxiety.³⁸ Esther explains that her depression and suicide attempt takes place during the "queer, sultry summer" that the Rosenbergs were executed. Though she adds that the couple's execution, an experience she imagines as "the worst thing in the world," has "nothing" to do with her, she is incorrect: the Rosenbergs' deaths has everything to do with her, for Esther's initial rejection of marriage and motherhood will result in punishment similar to the Rosenbergs' execution for their Communist activities (1).

When Esther's boyfriend Buddy tells her in a "sinister, knowing way" (85) that Esther will feel differently about her aspirations to become a poet after she has children, she begins to wonder if "maybe it was true 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). Here, Esther is particularly sensitive to the political environment that she is a part of: she is acutely aware of the prevailing fear that totalitarianism could somehow find a foothold in the United States. Given the prevailing belief in the 1950s that a white, middle-class woman's role was to produce thoroughly freedom-loving children and to keep their white-collar husbands away from the influences of totalitarianism in an increasingly fragmented society,³⁹ Esther's disgust toward children and rejection of marriage in this context, I argue, is as much a repudiation of her role as an American patriot as a matter of personal choice; a crime, it seems, not much different from the Rosenbergs' espionage.

Shortly after her return from New York, Esther's mental health slowly begins to deteriorate. She experiences insomnia, and her inability to decide how to spend the remaining

³⁷ The Rosenbergs were a married American couple executed in 1953 for passing state atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. While it is agreed that Julius Rosenberg was a Soviet spy, Ethel's guilt remains contested.

³⁸ The House Committee on Un-American Activities' actions, including its case against State Department official Alger Hiss and investigation into communist propaganda in Hollywood movies, as well as U.S. senator Joseph McCarthy's near-witch hunt for Communists in government and the military in the 1940s and 1950s fueled the period's pervasive themes of suspicion, anxiety, and conformity. Growing concerns over the Cold War and atomic warfare did not help, either.

³⁹ Take, for instance, Adlai Stevenson's speech during Plath's commencement, who told the graduating women that the purpose of their education was to prepare them for their "primary task of making homes."

weeks of her summer—she, too, does not get accepted into a Harvard summer school writing class—plunges her into despair. When her current prescription of sleeping pills proves ineffective, her doctor refers her to Dr. Gordon, a psychiatrist. Young and good-looking, Dr. Gordon has all the trappings of a successful family man. Esther immediately notices the family portrait ornamenting his desk, and the picture of Dr. Gordon, his wife, and their two small children infuriates her. “How could this Doctor Gordon help me anyway, with a beautiful wife and beautiful children and a beautiful dog haloing him like the angels on a Christmas card?” she asks (129).

Esther is right: a doctor whose life embodies the “perfect” life of the 1950s cannot understand the source of Esther’s depression and anxiety.⁴⁰ Esther’s whole life has been based on achievement—indeed, her reputation has been built upon earning high grades, winning prizes, and receiving recognition for her writing—and so it infuriates her that she is expected to eventually give up her aspiration to become a poet in order to marry and become a mother. Gordon, a breadwinner with a seemingly doting wife and two adorable children, is blind to Esther’s suffering, and his attitude towards her is entirely paternalistic. Unsurprisingly, Esther’s experience receiving electroshock therapy from him is absolutely traumatizing:

Something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done. (143)

Though Esther receives shock treatment from Dr. Gordon not as punishment, but ostensibly to cure her depression, her experience mirrors the Rosenbergs’ execution.⁴¹ Just as Esther perceives that the Rosenbergs were “burned alive all along [their] nerves,” the electrical volts rattle her until she thinks her bones will “break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant.” The

⁴⁰ It is ironic that Esther describes Dr. Gordon as a man “with a beautiful wife and beautiful children and a beautiful dog haloing him like the angels on a Christmas card,” as Kenneth Tillotson, one of the doctors who treated Plath with shock treatment prior to her suicide attempt, lost his job at McLean in 1948 after becoming embroiled in an affair with a nurse. See Alex Beam, *Gracefully Insane: The Rise and Fall of America’s Premier Mental Hospital* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 118-19.

⁴¹ For more on the relationship and similarities between Esther Greenwood and Ethel Rosenberg, see Marie Ashe, “The Bell Jar and the Ghost of Ethel Rosenberg,” in *Secret Agents: The Rosenberg Case, McCarthyism, and Fifties America*, ed. Marjorie Garber and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 215-31 (New York: Routledge, 1995).



treatment is so traumatic that Esther wonders what “terrible thing” she could possibly be guilty of, as though she, too, is being punished for a crime like the Rosenbergs.⁴²

Esther’s “crime” is that she wants more out of life than she is allowed according to prevailing gender roles. After painful electroshock, Esther’s frustration at being unable to live a life that can incorporate a husband, career, and children becomes manifest in her depression. Her despair is made worse by the fact that she does not know any women who have successfully managed all three of these roles. The professionally successful women Esther knows are either presumably unmarried like her benefactor Philomena Guinea or her psychiatrist Dr. Nolan, married but childless like her editor Jay Cee, or lesbian like the poet at her college. Representing the other end of this binary are Esther’s mother, her neighbor Dodo Conway, and Mrs. Willard, Buddy’s mother. These three women are all college-educated, but their roles as wives and mothers keep them from pursuing careers outside of their homes, with the exception of Esther’s mother, who needed to work after the death of her husband. Esther’s confusion over her own fate is illustrated by her plaintive metaphor of her life as a fig tree. Each fig on the tree represents a “wonderful” yet exclusive future for her:

One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn’t quite make out. (77)

Esther believes that she can only choose one fig: she can either become a wife and mother or she can have a career. The possibility of becoming a “working mother” never occurs to her. A middle ground does not exist because the two choices represent fundamentally different principles: to marry and have children is to fulfill one’s responsibility to society, whereas to have a career is to indulge one’s individual self. Esther’s realization that “choosing one [fig] meant losing all the rest” spurs her depression. She describes herself as “sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would

⁴² According to Wagner-Martin, Plath responded personally to the Rosenberg’s death. In New York for the *Mademoiselle* program, Sylvia turned to a friend as they walked to the magazine’s office at the time of the execution. “Now it’s happening,” she said, and showed the insides of her arms. They were covered with red bumps, then welts, that ran up along her arms. See Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 99-100.

choose.” Her anxiety is compounded by her fear that the figs on the tree will soon “wrinkle and go black” one after another until they have all fallen to the ground, no longer available for her to pick.

The foregrounding for Esther’s transformation from an anguished single woman to a contented young mother—a process that completes itself outside of the scope of *The Bell Jar*, in the time that passes between Esther’s departure from the asylum and her narration of the novel—comes in the final pages, as Esther prepares to meet with the board of doctors who will determine whether she is well enough to leave the hospital. If Esther is discharged, she will return to her life as a college student, work on her thesis on *Finnegans Wake*, finish her degree requirements, and graduate, as though nothing has happened to her in the time since she had completed her junior year of college the previous spring. But Esther *has* changed—she has been “patched, retreaded, and approved for the road” and her vivacity has been replaced with passivity. Esther’s understanding of herself has also shifted from an insistence that she will never marry to a concluding image of herself as a future bride, in possession of “something old, something new”:

I kept shooting impatient glances at the closed boardroom door. My stocking seams were straight, my black shoes cracked, but polished, and my red wool suit flamboyant as my plans. Something old, something new...But I wasn’t getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreaded, and approved for the road. (244)

Before her breakdown, “flamboyant” plans for Esther would have involved international travel, exotic lovers, and literary success—a life opposite to the maternal and domestic one she eventually embraces. Her transformation from an angry and volatile young woman to a docile and approval-seeking one suggests that Esther—and by extension, *The Bell Jar*—has failed to break out of the cultural framework of its time. At the novel’s close, Esther ends her narration from the perspective of a bride preparing to walk down the aisle, towards a future of amusing her child with the trinkets of her past. But Plath had not always intended to end Esther’s story here; at her healthiest, she started to write a sequel to *The Bell Jar*, which we will turn to in the next section.

The Missing Sequel

Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* in the spring of 1961 in a friend's study near 3 Chalcot Square, London. She was herself now a mother to year-old Frieda Rebecca and was also recuperating from a recent miscarriage and appendectomy. Hughes watched their daughter in the morning to allow Plath to do some writing of her own. She did not tell many people that she was writing a book, though she wrote to her college friend Ann Davidow that she was working on a novel about a college co-ed overcoming a nervous breakdown.⁴³ After Plath learned that she had won a two thousand-dollar Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship, she wrote to her mother that she already "finished a batch of stuff this last year, tied it up in 4 parcels, & have it ready to report on bit by bit as required." This was *The Bell Jar*, completed in advance of the grant's deadlines. "I don't believe in getting money for something you haven't done yet, it's too nervewracking," she explained.⁴⁴

Like Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Plath wanted her character to have staying power. "Make her a statement of the generation," she wrote in her journal. "Which is you."⁴⁵ It took time for Plath to develop as a writer, however. She apprenticed herself to writers whose work she wished to emulate, as she wrote in her journal in 1957:

I could write a terrific novel. The tone is the problem. I'd like it to be serious, tragic, yet gay & rich & creative. I need a master, several masters. Lawrence, except in *Women in Love*, is too bare, too journalistic in his style. Henry James too elaborate, too calm & well-mannered. Joyce Cary I like. I have that fresh, brazen, colloquial voice. Or J.D. Salinger. But that needs an "I" speaker, which is so limiting. Or Jack Burden. I have time. I must tell myself I have time.⁴⁶

Plath considered *The Bell Jar* to be modeled after Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*—she read the novel in 1951, just as it came out⁴⁷—and she wanted her character's tone to match that of the diffident and ironic Holden. Linda W. Wagner-Martin has traced out many of the similarities between the Plath's work and Salinger's:

⁴³ Alexander, *Rough Magic*, 260.

⁴⁴ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, November 20, 1961. Plath mss. II, 1932-1977, Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library.

⁴⁵ Kukil, *Unabridged Journals*, 289. Originally encountered in Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 15.

⁴⁶ Kukil, *Unabridged Journals*, 274-75.

⁴⁷ Alexander, *Rough Magic*, 84.

In many ways, *The Catcher in the Rye* was the model Plath was using for *The Bell Jar*. Sylvia turned to it for structure, and drew on it whenever she ran out of events that seemed to fit Esther's story. Holden meets a sailor and a Cuban; so does Esther. Holden walks forty-one blocks back to his New York hotel; Esther walks forty-eight. Holden looks as yellow in his mirror as Esther (looking Chinese) does in hers. He vomits before going to bed; in *The Bell Jar*, Doreen does that, but then Esther and the other guest editors share in another long purge after eating bad crab. Both books have a cemetery scene. *Catcher* has its violent and bloody suicide in James Castle's death, which becomes the suicide by hanging in *The Bell Jar*. Holden Caulfield wants to go West because he thinks that part of the country will save him. Esther wants to go to Chicago for the same reasons.⁴⁸

But what was most important to Plath was the fact that, as Wagner-Martin points out, "*The Bell Jar* would reach beyond *Catcher*, because in that book Holden was telling his story to a sympathetic therapist and to his readers, but he was not yet free of the asylum or its stigma. For Esther, there was rebirth."⁴⁹ Unlike Holden, Esther was "patched, retreaded, and approved for the road" by the end of *The Bell Jar* and was now telling her story from the perspective of being "all right again."

The British publisher Heinemann accepted *The Bell Jar* for publication in November 1961. Since much of the novel paralleled Plath's own experiences, it was published under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas." Plath may also have wanted to develop an authorial identity, who wrote for commercial popularity, separate from her poetry.⁵⁰ Excited to have completed her first novel, she turned to writing its sequel in the spring of 1962.

That summer, Aurelia visited her daughter and son-in-law in their country manor outside London. The family had grown: in January, Plath gave birth to a son, Nicholas Farrar. As she cared for the infant, she began work on a second novel she planned to be based on her first meeting and subsequent relationship with Hughes. At one point, she wanted it to be an account of "the voyage of a girl through destruction, hatred and despair to seek and to find the meaning

⁴⁸ Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 187. For accuracy's sake, Esther actually meets a Peruvian, not a Cuban. British reviews of *The Bell Jar* also noted its similarity to *The Catcher in the Rye*. Robert Taubman described *The Bell Jar* as "the first feminine novel in a Salinger mood" in his review for *The New Statesman* on January 25, 1963. See Lynda K. Bundtzen, *Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 265.

⁴⁹ Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 187.

⁵⁰ Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 198.



of the redemptive power of love.”⁵¹ During Aurelia’s visit, Plath read some of the novel to her. In her notes, Aurelia remembered her daughter describing the novel as “upbeat”:⁵² “it told of her romance, her return to this country [America] with her husband, when she taught and traveled with him, and ended with the birth of her first child. The hero of that book was her husband. It was to be given to [Ted] in rough draft form as a birthday gift [in August].”⁵³

But problems were brewing between Hughes and Plath. Hughes had started a relationship with Assia Wevill, a mutual friend of the couple, and Plath was beginning to suspect as much. When she returned home from town with her mother one day, she answered the phone to find a woman disguising her voice as a man’s, asking for Ted. Plath, understanding the betrayal, ripped the telephone lines out of the wall. Later, when Hughes confessed the affair and moved out of the house to London, Plath took decisive revenge, burning all of Hughes’s manuscripts and letters from his study and the pages of her new novel. Aurelia, still visiting, later described the scene:

Sylvia had built a huge, blazing bonfire at the end of the cobbled courtyard. (Ted was in London.) I was caring for the children in the kitchen when I became aware of what was happening outdoors. As I stood helplessly in the doorway, with Baby Nick in my arms, struggling to keep Frieda from joining her mother, I saw Sylvia furiously ripping apart the thick Ms., the sequel to the *BELL JAR*. Distraught, I later brought up the subject of the destruction. All Sylvia would say was that the manuscript had symbolized a period of joy that now proved to have been built on false trust—the character of the hero was dead to her—this had been his funeral pyre.⁵⁴

Plath had indeed intended her second novel to serve as a sequel to *The Bell Jar*, according to Aurelia, and she wanted it be a novel that completed the process of Esther’s recovery, perhaps by explaining how being married and having a baby was related to being “all right again”:

[*The Bell Jar*] was, in part, lifted from diaries she kept during her 6-month illness in 1953....The companion book which was to follow this—and I have this all spelled out in letters from her—was to be the triumph of the healed central figure

⁵¹ Ibid., 121.

⁵² Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 173.

⁵³ Alexander, *Rough Magic*, 282.

⁵⁴ Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 175.

of the first volume and in this the caricatured characters of the first volume were to assume their true identities.⁵⁵

Things, unfortunately, did not get any easier for Plath in the months after the bonfire, even as she wrote the best poems of her life. She had the primary responsibility of caring for the children in addition to coping with her own heartbreak. During this period, Plath started what would have been her third novel, which she planned to title *Doubletake* or *Double Exposure*. She wrote to Prouty, with whom she still remained close, that the novel was “semi-autobiographical about a wife whose husband turns out to be a deserter and philanderer”⁵⁶—certainly not the story her *Bell Jar* sequel was meant to tell. Around 1970, the partial manuscript “disappeared,” according to Hughes.⁵⁷

Plath moved to London with her children in December 1962, and she found it a hopeful sign that she had discovered and then managed to lease a flat where the poet W.B. Yeats once lived. *The Bell Jar* came out in January, and though Plath dismissed the novel to her family as “a pot-boiler” and “just practise,”⁵⁸ she was in great need of encouraging news and a warm reception. The novel came out with little fanfare, since it appeared to be authored by a first-time writer, to mostly solid, if lukewarm, reviews. Most devastating to Plath, however, was the fact that the same issue of the *Observer* that briefly reviewed her book contained a poem, given prominent space, by Hughes about their daughter.⁵⁹ A few weeks later, Plath committed suicide.

Belated Appreciation

Depression ran in Plath’s family, and theories ranging from an allergy to the antidepressant prescribed to her shortly before her death to a particularly severe and untreated form of premenstrual syndrome have emerged to provide biological explanations for her tortured

⁵⁵ Peel, *Writing Back*, 83.

⁵⁶ Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 198.

⁵⁷ Hughes published *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, a collection of Plath’s short stories and diary excerpts, in 1977. In his introduction he wrote that “after *The Bell Jar* [Plath] wrote some 130 pages of another novel, provisionally titled *Double Exposure*. That manuscript disappeared somewhere around 1970.”

⁵⁸ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, October 25, 1962. Plath mss. II, 1932-1977, Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library.

⁵⁹ Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 206.



life.⁶⁰ Lives such as Plath's that end in suicide often have a shadow cast on them, muting the otherwise vibrant aspects of their experiences. Plath herself described her life as it if were "magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative—which ever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it."⁶¹

The Bell Jar is a fascinating novel because it is unfinished: Plath planned to write another novel in which her protagonist could better explain what it was to be "all right again." For Plath, being well came from being loved. It was the peace of mind her relationship with Ted Hughes gave her when their relationship was at its strongest. Unlike the author of the *Cosmopolitan* article that served as an initial inspiration, Plath was unable to discover what it was to be well on one's own, without a partner. We know this because she burned her sequel to *The Bell Jar* once she discovered Hughes' infidelity. Blake became the hero in her own story in *Cosmopolitan*. For Esther—and for Plath, too—the hero was supposed to be the husband.

But out of her death, Plath's work took on a new life. Her status as an artist grew as the poems she wrote the last year of her life were posthumously published. And as the women's movement gained momentum—Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* appeared in America the same year as *The Bell Jar* was published in England—many feminists turned to the novel as an especially evocative memoir of the limitations society placed on talented young women in America in the 1950s. When the novel came to America in 1971,⁶² it stayed on *The New York Times* best-seller list for six months.⁶³ *Times* reviewer Robert Scholes gave the novel an approving review, writing that it was "not a potboiler, nor a series of ungrateful caricatures; it is literature":

It is a fine novel, as bitter and remorseless as her last poems—the kind of book Salinger's Franny might have written about herself 10 years later, if she had spent

⁶⁰ See Kate Moses, "The Real Sylvia Plath," *Salon.com*, June 1, 2000, <http://archive.salon.com/books/feature/2000/06/01/plath2/index.html>. John Horder, the doctor who was treating Plath, believes that the antidepressant she was taking at the time of her suicide had reached an efficacy that gave her more energy, but had not yet sufficiently alleviated her mood: "There may be a point at which the anti-depressant begins to make a depressed person a little more active, though still desolate, hence capable of carrying out a determined, desperate action." See Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 297.

⁶¹ Kukil, *Unabridged Journals*, 395. Here, again, the idea of "electricity" is present in Plath's writing. In this case, however, electricity itself is a neutral force, positive at times, negative at others.

⁶² Aurelia Plath fought American publication of *The Bell Jar*, given its autobiographical nature and Plath's unflattering description of people she knew. A compromise was reached when Hughes agreed to give Aurelia permission to publish Plath's letters to family in *Letters Home* in exchange for having novel published in the U.S.

⁶³ Alexander, *Rough Magic*, 7.

those 10 years in Hell. It is very much a story of the fifties, but written in the early sixties, and now, after being effectively suppressed in this country for eight years, published in the seventies.⁶⁴

But *The Bell Jar* is more than a novel of the 1950s. Its depictions of electroshock treatment, public and private psychiatric practice, and the relationship between patient and therapist came right as a new movement—antipsychiatry—developed in the early 1960s among some psychiatrists and cultural critics. Though Plath was always grateful to her therapist and remained close to her throughout her life, she was also deeply scarred by the incompetent administration of electroshock given to her by the first psychiatrists she saw.

Plath believed that medicine could help her manage her moods—indeed, she was seeing a doctor up to the point of her death—but she was also aware that the mental health establishment could become a terror in its own right when administered by men like Dr. Gordon. *The Bell Jar*, therefore, ended up providing social commentary even as Plath aimed it for popular success. Her criticism of men like Dr. Gordon as well as her approving characterization of Dr. Nolan, the therapist who helps Esther recover, set the stage for two novels—Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and Joanne Greenberg’s *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*—that would more thoroughly investigate the relationship between patient and practitioner within the mental health establishment.

⁶⁴ Robert Scholes, “The Bell Jar,” *New York Times*, April 11, 1971.

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