

# The Disabled Female Body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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In 1953, when Sylvia Plath wrote in her poem “Admonition” that

If you dissect a bird  
    To diagram the tongue  
You'll cut the chord  
    Articulating song. (1–4)

she was addressing the inadvertent violence attached to the act of searching for the truth. Insightful answers may become evident but the concomitant penalty is the inability to render them coherently. When the bird-body in the poem cited above is cut apart, its utterance ceases. The opposite is also true though: when the body is healthy, the song ensues. For Sylvia Plath, writing the disabled body in *The Bell Jar* engenders a series of intimate encounters with the ineffectuality of language. The mind/body connection, or, more pointedly, its dis-connection, is explored in this article by utilizing a combination of feminist and disability studies, highlighted by the theoretical concepts of Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan.

According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson, the nature of disability encompasses a wide category including nuances ranging from

congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness and retardation, chronic and acute illnesses, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportions, or obesity. (13)

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Excepting those who die by suicide or accident, there is no one who will escape the dilemma of disability, however minute, at some point of existence. The force of the definition, though, is overpowering, due to its potential to stigmatize a person as “other.” This is the commonality underlying *all* degrees of disability (Thomson 15).

With regard to Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*, the disabilities that will be discussed in this article are of a temporary nature. The female body is inebriated, poisoned, broken, assaulted, depressed, shocked, overdosed, and bled. In most cases here, the agency, however indirect, is male, which gives one license to say that in the Plathian worldview, the disabled female body is a phenomenon brought about by a hegemonic, patriarchal system. According to Kelly Oliver, “theories of the body are particularly important for feminists because historically (in the humanities) the body has been associated with the feminine, the female, or woman, and denigrated as weak, immoral, unclean, or decaying” (“Kristeva” 1). Because the novel deals with Esther Greenwood’s life in the 1950s, it is not too difficult to comprehend that before feminism’s heyday in the late sixties and seventies, Plath was assessing the plight of the young woman artist at mid-century who was attempting to overcome the values of domesticity in a uni-polar milieu. If Esther and her colleagues in New York City are victimized, it is partly due to the mindset prevalent in those times: women should stay at home, cook meals, clean house, and bear children. In post-war America, it was not uncommon for families to cohesively succumb to a comfortable complacency. This placid tone pervaded the streets and towns of 1950s suburbia. But the young people who only barely experienced the fears of WWII in the form of air raids and bomb threats wanted a challenge, which evolved into the social and political uprisings of the 1960s. Keeping this in mind, Plath describes the battle that Esther Greenwood must wage in order to hear her own muse and create her own language. Although interminably abused and temporarily handicapped, she, like Plath herself at her peak, does emerge into her

own “room,” beyond the stifling enclosure of the bell jar (244). Wagner-Martin states that “The accomplishment of the novel is in part that its author was able to break through the bell jar of the confining 1950s culture, to find her voice and her spirit as she identified herself as a writer” (5–6). Consequently, Plath constructs the disabling experiences which are enmeshed into the female body as metaphors for a fractured language, and, in Lacanian terms, it “is a subtle body, but body it is” (Lacan 87).

The use of Lacan’s theories in this paper about the body, disability, and language is derived from an examination of his ideas about the origin of castration or loss. When one enters the symbolic order, she journeys from a self-perception of wholeness to a state that is limited to her designated name or pronoun. Because “the ontological being is always in excess of the linguistic marker,” she “fades away” with the onset of language (Upreti 369). Thus the subject enters the symbolic order from a position of lack or castration of her pre-symbolic self that was unified with the mother. She begins her linguistic life with a fragmented, disabled conception of who she is (Upreti 369).

When Esther Greenwood, a Bostonian, goes to New York for a month after winning a guest editorship at *Ladies’ Day* fashion magazine, she befriends the sexy, Southern Doreen. On their way to a party in a cab one night, Esther and Doreen are picked up and brought to a bar by Lenny Shepherd, a disc jockey dressed in cowboy boots. Esther, who is lost in the darkness of the bar, states that she feels “like the negative of a person” (10). In this lack of adequate self-perception it can be inferred that Esther is underrepresented and depersonalized into an obscure pre-photographic prototype, unrecognizable to herself. She has the outlines of definition without any concrete substance. She is the poem about to be created, fetal-like and shadowy in her lack of complete form. In an attempt to elucidate her own persona, Esther extends her lens and likes “looking on at other people in crucial situations” (13). This may be the reason why she accompanies Doreen to Lenny’s apartment. But when she arrives, she

sees animal heads on the walls instead of pictures (14). These are heads that do not speak, have no sound, have been silenced. They are images to be gazed at, not pictures to be engaged with.

This trophy-mentality can be extended to the way in which Lenny treats Doreen. She too is a sort of prize with whom he will never have a real encounter. Instead, disc jockey that he is, Lenny reiterates his vocal isolation when he reveals that there is “Nothing like listening to yourself talk” (15). Lenny disables Doreen as a real person and constructs instead a stuffed rag doll figure whom he bangs, swings, and bites. They both are metaphors for the stuffed heads before being cut down into submission as Lenny is “roaring” and Doreen, the “bitch,” is “screeching” in a combination of pain and laughter. As they dance, Doreen “circled belly-down”(17) not unlike primitive women who were “circulated between class, lineage, or families in place of the words of the group, which are circulated between individuals” (Gubar 294).

As a tipsy Esther, who has been watching Lenny and Doreen in a death dance, returns to the Amazon Hotel, she is struck by her own silence (15). Previously, at the apartment, she felt like a “small black dot,” “a hole in the ground,” and then finally someone who no longer has a voice (16). She has psychologically disappeared at the experience of watching human beings be reduced to animals through violent, devolved, tribal behavior. Moreover, it is not surprising that Lenny’s overbearing, patriarchal influence upon and demoralization of Doreen’s body has an overflowing effect on Esther, causing her to experience psychic dissociation. When Esther finally baptizes herself in a hot bath, she is revitalized, no longer “a dirty-scrawled-over letter” (19). It is in this metaphor for her disabled, drunken self as a piece of sullied, illegible writing that she is rendered as undesirable, unreadable, and unknowable. As Lacan asserts, this “metaphor occurs at the precise point at which sense emerges from non-sense” (158). The cure of water is Esther’s bringing her writing back to life through her body. According to Minh-ha, women’s writing from the body “draws its corporeal fluidity from images of water—a water from

the source, a deep subterranean water that trickles in the womb, a meandering river, a flow of life, of words running over or slowly dripping down the pages" (260).

When Doreen finally returns to the Amazon Hotel herself after her night with Lenny Shepherd, she plops her drunken body in front of Esther's door. Her words are garbled as she mutters repeatedly "Lemme lie down" (22). As she grows heavily in Esther's arms, "a jet of brown vomit flew from her mouth and spread in a large puddle" (22). Therefore, the oral emissions are not words but stomach contents; bile instead of eloquence. This image is consistent with the Kristevan concept of "abjection," which is the psychic process through which identity is constituted by exclusion of threats to the body's borders (Kristeva 1). For Kristeva, then, Doreen's vomit would be "what is abject [. . .] the jettisoned object [which] is radically excluded" and which will draw her "toward the place where meaning collapses" (2). Consequently, in her effort to "spit" herself out, to "abject" herself, then, Doreen, the subject, the "I" will, for Kristeva, "claim to establish herself" (3).

The inclusion of the Kristevan notion of abjection within a utilization of disability studies and the construction of language demands appropriate explication. The abject, like the disabled, "threatens identity" and "distinctions" (Oliver, *Reading* 56). When Kristeva ascertains that the abject undermines the identity of both the subject and society itself, then "It calls into question the boundaries upon which they are constructed" (Oliver, *Reading* 56). Both notions of "abject" and "disabled" disturb the usual social and cultural conceptions of normalcy, which abhor difference. Their alignment in this regard occurs under the rubric of "altered states." Mankind's perception of the banished abject and the marginalized disabled links them interminably with the provincial and dubious distinction of "other."

As Esther leaves Doreen on the carpet, the whole evening is in a state of regurgitation and all that remains in the morning is an "irregular dark stain" (23). The stain is indelible as is the fact that Esther, in the process of abandoning Doreen, has stigmatized

her as undesirable. She has, in the Kristevan world of abjection, essentially separated “out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject” (Creed 8). Esther is really afraid of Doreen’s body at this point and “it seems that what gives stigma its intensity and reality is fear” (Coleman 225). But, in this case, Esther would be remiss if she did not also stigmatize herself. The impure stain on Esther’s doorjamb is not Doreen’s. It is the vestige of an “ugly, concrete testimony” to what she terms her “own dirty nature” (23). The sign projected from the body becomes attributive of one’s being. Goffman suggests that “we believe the person with the stigma is not quite human” (205).

It may be stretching Thomson’s definition to think of “drunk” as a category of disability but since it can be conceded that it is at least a temporary impairment causing at times volatile, interior upheaval of many kinds, then it is fair to say that the inebriated body, in all of its variations, acts as a signifier for fractured language in *The Bell Jar*. Not only is speech impaired because of the effects of an excess of alcohol, but it is also inhibited as a result of guilt and revulsion. Although both Esther and Doreen take an active part in bringing about their own ends, there are a different set of constructs which underlie a description of what could be called another type of temporary disability: the poisoned body.

At the Ladies’ Day banquet, Esther and the other guest editors eat caviar, chicken slices, avocados, pear halves, and crabmeat salad. While at a football romance movie with her mid-Western friend Betsy, both girls become quite ill and vomit in the cab on their way back to the hotel. While attempting to get herself out of the bathroom, Esther says: “Just a minute!” but her “words bungled out thick as molasses” (45). Sick with ptomaine from the crabmeat salad, Esther does not become silent this time; instead, her language becomes indistinct and slow. Articulation is impossible, harking back to the time before language exists, “prior to the moment at which each subject at a certain point in his mental development makes his entry into it” (Lacan 148). Not only is she

physically poisoned, but her ability to verbalize is adversely affected by toxicity.

After the hotel nurse gives her an injection “the door took her place like a sheet of blank paper, and then a larger sheet of paper took the place of the door” as Esther “drifted towards it” (47). Esther’s poisoned perception hallucinates the tools of writing in place of the agent of her cure. The locus or site of such a perspective initially indicates a disabled relationship to language. As a result of being nursed, though, Esther perceives a door as an opening into a creative opportunity represented by the blankness of paper which not only attests to a “*tabula rasa*” birth image but also to an indication of what needs yet to be accomplished. The paper, previously wordless, is set up for a new beginning of creativity, of availability. This idea of the unwritten page as not only an access route but a signifier for the unformed or unproductive woman is evidenced in Isak Dinesen’s story “The Blank Page.” In this piece, though, the woman, through her lack of production, becomes stigmatized as a disgrace to society (99–105). Her bodily emission is supposed to be blood as Esther’s is supposed to be writing. Instead, as Esther vomits, she upholds the Kristevan idea that “the spasm and vomiting” will protect her (Kristeva 2). In the system’s poisoning of her, Esther’s production is yet to come to fruition—for the moment, only a desired outpouring is indicated.

“The Blank Page” is a short story that centers on the Carmelite nuns who weave perfect linen used for marriage nights. After the blood is imprinted, the returned sheets are framed by the nuns. Even the blank sheet, attesting to the fact that the woman who is the owner of the white sheet was (possibly) not a virgin, becomes emblematic of disgrace (Gubar 295). In this context, Gubar suggests that “women have had to experience cultural scripts in their lives by suffering them in their bodies” (299). With relation to the poisoned Esther’s disabled condition, a similar argument can be fashioned.

The matter of Esther’s poisoned body and the white sheet in “The Blank Page,” revolves around the issue of impurity. Her body has been poisoned by a city culture devoted to glamour,

excitement, and engorgement. It is New York that does not agree with Esther since she is socially inept, demonstrated by the episode in which she uses her napkin to blot her lips, leaving her mark. The ptomaine in the crabmeat salad then is symbolic of the toxic New York's fast, insensitive pace. Her poisoned body is analogous to a stifled language, of which the only form possible is that of vomit, which, as noted earlier, is "abject" and "must, nevertheless, be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. Further, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic" (Creed 9). As she recovers and her impurities are purged, Esther becomes like a blank sheet of paper, renewed, but still without language. Yet, as we see in "The Blank Page," there is a language inscribed on the white sheet for those who comprehend its message: by not writing your story, you have written it nonetheless. Your verbiage, your essence, is blood. There is no blood without suffering. The blood writing then is a statement of purity. The door which Esther eventually envisions then as a piece of blank paper is pure in itself, but only relevant when it contains writing. The unarticulated language of the blank paper then represents the poisoning of Esther Greenwood and is a metaphor for her disabled state. This image, though, is not without hope. The white paper is emblematic of her future. The door of promise will open like a beckoning muse as she writes herself onto it.

Although it could be conjectured that the patriarchal system poisoned Esther, this notion is individuated in the person of Buddy Willard, her boyfriend from Yale. Buddy is staying at a sanatorium to cure his tuberculosis. Buddy's disabled state, though, is different from what will subsequently occur to Esther. Where male disabilities center around questions of "agency" female disabilities are often associated with a "system of shame" (Miner 285). When Esther visits Buddy in the mountains, they attempt to ski on Mt. Pisgah. She is doing fine until a man steps into her path causing her to break her leg in two places. As she falls, her "teeth crunched a gravelly mouthful" and "ice water



seeped down” her throat (98). This oral explanation of the effects of the accident indicates substances going down instead of coming out, in a process of silencing and freezing her, while disabling her mouth and her abilities. This happens because a man crossed her path. Nevertheless, this momentary condition does not dissuade her; she wants to ski again until a smiling Buddy informs her that her leg is broken. As she is coming to, looking at Buddy, she sees behind him, “black dots swarmed on a plane of whiteness” (98). Although these dots are people emerging out of a hazy consciousness, it is important to notice how her first reactions are about black and white, that is, the printed word. She sees people as writings, as punctuation marks on paper, visible voices.

Because Esther is temporarily broken, her body is used here as a metaphor for a crippled language which is “in a cast for months” (98). Although people will write upon her, she is, for the time being, halted from fluidity and mobility. Her words become frozen and her vision myopic. Even if one could say that a crippled leg does not hamper one’s writing ability, it nonetheless stigmatizes her as “other” in addition to slowing her down because she will need crutches. Her disabled body represents her fractured “corpus” of writing, because she is no longer the doer of actions. Instead, things are done to her: people are “unfastening,” “collecting,” “pull[ing]” “closing,” and “probing” (98). As Esther attempts to ski again, she is “gathering the fragments of a divided, repressed body” and trying to “render noisy and audible all that had been silenced in phallogentric discourse” (Minh-ha 259). In Lacanian terms, then, “as was the case with Freud, it is not in words that the lesson can be learned, but in the body, in one’s life” (Felman 20).

It is also most interesting to note how chapter eight ends and how chapter nine begins. There is a definite gap of silence in between the two, which accounts for Plath’s/Esther’s reaction of silence to her memory of Buddy’s telling her that she will be in a cast for two months. The gap also represents the indeterminate number of months that have gone by. It is a stark reaction in any case to leave the reader to continue with the brutal lines of Hilda,

another contest winner: “I’m so glad they’re going to die” with reference to the conviction of the Rosenbergs who allegedly stole bomb drawings and gave them to the Russians (99). Because this statement comes directly after chapter eight, it could also refer back to Esther’s thought-dreams about Buddy’s smug contentment that she too would be handicapped for a while after the ski accident. Buddy’s outright revenge against Esther is his attempt to escape a feminized perception of himself as passive. This action, resulting in Esther’s broken leg, initializes Buddy as an “autonomous male agent” (Miner 188). Situated between the two violent statements, the gap suggests that it should be viewed as a disabled body itself, disjointed, cut off from language, with only space in which to recover, space to remember, or space to settle. For Toril Moi, this body gap is understandably representative, from a phallogentric point of view, of a “necessary frontier between man and chaos” . . . where women occupy the unenvied position of marginality, “neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown” (213). Irigary would agree that because women cannot fully participate in male discourse without using male language, femininity speaks best “in the gaps, blanks and silences of the text” (Moi 218).

If Buddy Willard had manipulated Esther into skiing down a slope too slippery for her own minimal expertise, another man is equally responsible for her loss of self-esteem because he is not only spiteful, but abusive. At the behest of Doreen, Esther agrees to go on a blind date with Marco, a Peruvian. In order to pave his way with Esther, Marco gives her his diamond stickpin, an object she might have used to later defend herself. But the diamond stickpin is a signifier for marriage rights. In the symbolic gesture of giving Esther the pin, Marco now assumes that there is an understanding between them: she owes him—he will make her pay in some way for being the recipient of the diamond. He intends to “perform some small service worthy of a diamond” (105). In other words, Marco will be reimbursed through his actions for the worth of the diamond.

As he begins to manhandle her by grabbing her arms, Esther labels him as a “womanhater” (106). She states that she

believes she was dealt to him as any other card in a deck of “identical cards” (106). The idea of a woman as a card emblemizes the female body as a picture, with marks on it, undifferentiated in value if picked at random among an endless series of duplicates. In this way, Esther reads herself through Marco’s eyes as a dispensable element of the pack. But as they dance, Esther who is “maneuvered,” is asked by Marco to pretend that she is “drowning” (107). This request extends the anonymity of the playing card metaphor in an increased depersonalization for Esther. Marco’s intention is that she totally submit to his will as if she were a dead body, with no cognizance of self-worth or identity of her own.

As Esther follows Marco’s lead, she becomes “riveted to him,” and the two become like one person on the floor, not through a union, but rather through engulfment (107). The one being is Marco, as Esther becomes absorbed into him. This is not a marriage rite, but a captivity. Marco proceeds to take Esther out to a deserted golf course and assault her both physically and verbally, ripping her dress with his teeth, and calling her a “slut” (109). As Esther punches him in the nose, he pulls out a white handkerchief and “Blackness, like ink, spread over the pale cloth” (109). This blood that Marco sheds and writes indelibly upon a white background, is his text written upon an assaulted, nearly raped, woman in a qualified state of temporary injury. The anxious and terrified Esther, “weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within” (Kristeva 5). She has been thrown into the mud and pinned down: in this disabled state, she creates her story in blood because language eludes her. Instead, she begins to “writhe and bite” as one might do in a turbulent moment (109).

As Marco not only stigmatizes Esther but all women as “sluts,” one wonders if he includes within that term his first cousin who spurned his love because she is going to become a nun. Or perhaps the cousin recognizes the sort of man that he is and a nunnery seems a viable alternative. Also, his anger at her refusal might be taken out on all other women as he lumps them

into one perception: violated by their own wishes. As Marco demands his diamond back, he deliberately stains Esther's two cheeks with the blood from his nose (110). She is now "marked" and does not wash off the blood. In order not to disturb the blood on her face, her language is impaired because she only speaks through her teeth without moving her lips. Marco, like Buddy Willard, needs to act in order to compensate for his feminized state. His wounded pride and bloody nose are more than he can bear. As his attempt to rape Esther is disrupted, he turns a "horror story to heroic story," by branding her with his primitive life fluid (Miner 287).

Previously, when Esther is on the ground, beneath Marco, she does not speak, but instead, will "writhe and bite" (109). When she is back at the hotel, she refuses to speak in an effort to appropriate her own experience and also to announce her participation in a ritual gone awry. It could be postulated that here the "ritual serves to renew contact with the abject element [i.e., blood] and then to subsequently exclude it" at some future cleansing (Creed 8). She wants to be noticed as one who has paid the price of sexual sisterhood—except that she is still a virgin. The two tattoo lines on her face are a written message for any reader: tribal victory which transcends "cultural mythologies about the body" (Wendell 274). These lines make visible her emotional and tumultuous encounter in which she is "marked" by Marco, and as a scar representing her place within the patriarchal construct of the word "slut," which she did nothing to encourage even if it is her dream to be initiated into the world of sex. The writing on her face is a metaphor for her experience, and her refusal to speak coherently in order not to disturb the configuration on her face represents her desire to communicate in a more concrete, visual way. Even though Marco's blood on Esther's face is a metaphor representing latent atavistic "success," for Esther, it signifies his failure "to set right what was done wrong or incompletely" (Miner 288). His blood does not signify *her* wound; he is also a disabled party; she, even though psychologically and physically assaulted, is the perpetrator of an attack upon the "traditional gender system" (Miner 286).

Plath deals directly with this idea of visualization in her 1959 short story, "The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle." The artist Carmey inscribes tattoos on the flesh of those who so desire. He equates his tattoos with dreams. People with dreams go to Carmey. He makes their dreams part of themselves in a printed narrative indelibly merged to their skins. You are your narrative. But what happens when you outgrow your own story? Add another tattoo or cover the old one up. How do we get rid of words we have outgrown? We live with them, as reminders of what once was: mistakes, lessons in humility, major events. The body on which the tattoo is inscribed is the text. It is painful and confusing to alter or to revise the text. Live with our messages of who we are to the world. "Wear your heart on your skin in this life," says Carmey (92). Words and pictures on the body are symbols. Tattoos are signifiers of secrets. Golgotha on one's back merges one with the salvific moment of the most tragic of victims: Christ. It seems like a desperate plea. One is constantly on the cross in this life, "if you've got a back to spare" (92). For Sylvia Plath, the cross *was* life. Every glimpse at the tattoo reminds us of our inseparability from the text of ourselves, our bodies, our messages. In Lacanian theory, this text or language "is rather something like a list of terms we should be transformed by, a list of terms into which to write or to translate ourselves" (Lacan 20).

Carmey's store has photographs of tattooed people. Tattoos are like clothing that covers the body. The body is being covered by a text and merges into that text, naked except for its stories. Carmey is also tattooed. He is a "living advertisement of his art" (94). He shows Gypsy Rose Lee, a bronco, a schooner, hearts, anchors, stars, names. His whole life, his loves, and his-story are on his body, which is, in turn, textualized.

For the man who wants a tattoo of a fifteen-dollar eagle, it is an operation, a religious ritual. What about the blood? It is sacrificial blood shed in order to get one's message across. "Bright beads of red rising through the ink, heart-blood bubbles smearing out into the black stream" (98). The blood spent in writing is necessary to

the life of the artist. His pain is demonstrated by his willingness to undergo the task of creation. The eagle, though, is “born and baptized in the blood of its owner” (100).

Laura, Carmey’s wife, has no tattoos. She is covered with a coat and kerchief and has a bodyguard with her, protecting her from revealing her story in any way. Laura’s story is hidden as is her voice. She has no narrative visible. But Carmey fears her. He cannot know her. She defies narrative by not displaying her biography. She is an anomalous blank, the original “tabula rasa,” “white as the day she was born” (104). She is inviolate, virginally blessed. Laura, then, exemplifies the semiotic “pre-condition of language which finds expression in non-rational discourses such as poetry and art” challenging the “rational discourse of the symbolic order” (Creed 38). Because Kristeva locates the semiotic in the feminine and the symbolic in the masculine, then, consequently, Laura, as the quintessential female, is, in actuality, “the mother [who] is gradually rejected, because she comes to represent, to signify, the period of the semiotic which the paternal symbolic constructs as ‘object’ (Creed 38).

“The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle” is a story based on a visit Sylvia and Ted made to a tattooist in Boston’s Scollay Square. “She had recognized in the tattooist a macabre and bizarre double of herself” (Stevenson 141). Sylvia Plath, the tattoo artist, will give her audience anything it wants, even death. She will place her signature on the stories of her life, inscribe her name in the text of her body so that she wears her identity for eternity: the escape artist who gassed herself to be free from an overload of life. The eagle is emblematic of the indelible flight for freedom. Perhaps Plath felt free to detextualize herself, to empty herself of her images once and for all, to undo the artist within, to end the pain of creation through unleashing the destructive power of her muse.

“The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle,” which is imbedded into flesh, can be compared to Esther’s blood lines, which are written upon her face by Marco in *The Bell Jar*. They are her tattoos, her story, but they are not a story of *her* blood, but certainly of her sacrifice. Her white sheet is still blank. Even the blood, which she shows to the

world as her pain, is not her own. Therefore, as she is written upon by Marco, her disabled, injured, marked body becomes a metaphor for untruthful lines, instead of poetic couplets. Nevertheless, they still reveal a person who has suffered at the hands of another.

In insisting upon the permanence of a bloody tattoo on her own body, a seemingly punished Esther receives, on her way home, the revelation that she will not be allowed to write on paper because she “didn’t make that writing course” (114). She falls into a “gap” created by the withdrawal of this “safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer” (114). In addition to this bad news, she also learns that Buddy Willard is in love with someone else. These two stunning rejections cause Esther to plunge into a deep depression. Her first reaction, though, is a positive one. She decides to write a novel (119). It is through this sequence of events that Esther’s mental disability becomes obvious. When she realizes that she has no experiences to write about her mother tells her to learn shorthand, as if without tales to tell the hand is in some way shortened, or withered. As Esther now begins to fall apart at the prospect of taking shorthand for a living, she gets a headache and visually “the white chalk curlicues blurred into senselessness” (122). As Esther retreats from reality, her reading of *Finnegan’s Wake* becomes distorted. Words become twisted “like faces in a funhouse mirror” while “The letters grew barbs and rams’ horns” (122). Language becomes “untranslatable” as letters in a hallucinatory episode, “jiggle up and down in a silly way” (124). Words and letters not only become incomprehensible, but hostile, like Lacan’s words that can “undergo symbolic liaisons and accomplish imaginary acts” (Lacan 87).

When Esther visits Teresa, the family doctor, she tells her that she is unable to sleep or read. As she tries to enunciate her predicament, “the zombie rose up in [her] throat and choked [her] off” (126). It is here that her mental depression and her physical or bodily functioning feed upon one another. As she gets to the point where she cannot operate on her own behalf, Esther seeks psychiatric help from Dr. Gordon. When he asks her what

is wrong she responds that she cannot read, eat, or sleep, which are all indicators of depression. But she does not mention the state of her writing, in which, as she attempts a letter to Doreen, “the lines sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally, as if they were loops of string lying on the paper, and someone had come along and blown them askew” (130).

The major depression that Esther experiences throws her body into a disabled state that affects all aspects of her being, especially her thought processes. Her thinking becomes fragmented and her writing is disjointed. Because “thought is as much a product of the eye, the finger, or the foot as it is of the brain,” Esther’s language does not operate on any physical or mental level (Minh-ha 261). This whole depressive experience that runs through *The Bell Jar* has its roots in Plath’s real life. In *Letters Home*, she reflects in an unsent letter to “E” dated 12-28-53, after not getting into Frank O’Connor’s writing class at Harvard, the following: “I was sterile, empty, un-lived, unwise and unread. And the more I tried to remedy the situation, the more I became unable to comprehend one word of our fair old language” (130).

This severe depression will eventually lead to Esther’s shock treatments, which debilitate her even further since they are administered in a barbaric fashion, akin to electrocution. The shocked body is an even deeper representation of the minimalization of language in Esther Greenwood.

In anticipation of the shock treatment at Walton, Dr. Gordon’s private hospital, Esther opens her mouth to ask him what it would be like, but “no words came out” (142). She is unable to verbalize her apprehension even before her body is short-circuited. Not one word is uttered by Esther before her botched shock episode. Even as she tries to smile, she cannot because her “skin had gone stiff, like parchment” (143). Therefore, the preshocked body of Esther Greenwood is already emptied of words or reactions that can be interpreted or understood. Barnard suggests that “By the time she becomes Dr. Gordon’s patient, her confusion is far advanced; virtually incapable of action, she has become the helpless



object of the acts of others. The clumsily applied shock treatment represents the epitome of such acts" (27). The piece of stiff paper, or parchment, which she feels that her body resembles, has yet to be written upon. She is mute, blank, and rigid, like a silent corpse which, exemplifying "the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva 3). The writing upon her will be the electric current that will erase her ability to focus or to remember.

On her way home, as she tries to concentrate, her "mind glided off, like a skater, into a large empty space, and pirouetted there, absently" (145). In this way we can see that Esther's mind separates from her body after her treatment. She is split into two at least for the moment. Later on, at another facility, where Dr. Nolan administers a more humane shock treatment, Esther, instead of feeling that her bones are being broken, feels "wiped out like chalk on a blackboard," still indicating an erasure of language, however painless (214). The effects of shock treatment for Plath herself, which she experienced in 1953, are written about in the 1956 short story, "The Wishing Box." The mind-blunting experience of electroshock therapy, which is at the root of this story, concerns the fear of having lost one's power to imagine and thus create or embody a vivid language (Mazzaro 224).

As Rose points out, "The Wishing Box" "can be read as an allegory for poetic rivalry between Plath and Hughes" (179). Harold Higgins, an accountant, has incredible dreams, containing sophisticated language, not unlike that of Hughes, Plath's real life poet husband. His wife, Agnes, has dreams that are either non-existent or boring, and, therefore, she is excluded from her husband's dreams. Harold doubtless has an uncanny imagination and is able to separate dreams from reality.

When Agnes dreams, she has nightmares which haunt her. Agnes remembers a time when her dreams were fertile, in her youth. This was when she dreamt of a land above the clouds where wishing boxes grew on trees. "You picked a box, turned the handle around nine times while whispering your wish in this

little hole in the side, and the wish came true” (206). The land above the clouds is the land of childhood where nine times are nine months and a whisper can create a wish, a life, a person. The vocalization makes it happen. Perhaps the one who hears it is Superman, the heroic figure of these dreams, with whom Agnes flies, on those more vivid nights.

In an effort to help her, Harold tries to show her ways to imagine and dream, none of which work. Agnes begins reading ravenously in an attempt to do “anything to keep from facing the gaping void in her own head of which Harold had made her so painfully conscious” (208). She uses the printed word for safety. When she confronts reality, she becomes depressed. This is where she begins to merge into her dreams and becomes alienated from the real world and the world of language (209).

Overdosing on sleeping pills, Agnes kills herself, as she merges with her superman in the land above the clouds. In this suicide, she excludes her husband, her reality, and her world, which she was once excluded from. In Kristevan terms, Agnes’s self has succumbed “to take up the place of abjection, the place where meaning collapses” (Creed 10).

Whether or not Agnes, in the end, enters the world of the imagination is questionable, even though she is described as smiling triumphantly. For Zajdel, Agnes does, in fact, enter that world which she once knew as a child, and her death is not seen as a defeat (160). Even though her adult world is rather banal, she really does not do much to improve it. Television and movies are not good enough answers to a meaningless life; they are passive entertainment, pop culture. She could have done something more creative, but, then again, Plath’s Agnes is beyond creative. She is incapable of making anything happen except an exit. This is no triumph; this is a giving in, a weakness, the end of conscious imagination, a choice which the author herself made.

Lorna Sage states that at the time of the publication of “The Wishing Box” in 1957, Plath “was playing the self-effacing wife with almost ostentatious modesty (for example, at a reading of

her own poems, “Ted, what do you think?”)” (241). When Hughes said in an interview that “there was no rivalry between [them] [. . .] in these circumstances you begin to write out of one brain” one must question which brain he is speaking of, his or hers (Sage 241).

“The Wishing Box” is also the female center of production, the womb, and women write not from their minds but from their wombs, their “site of fertilization” (Minh-ha 259). If, as Minh-ha asserts, “writing as an ‘intrinsic’ child/birth/process takes on different qualities in women’s context,” then both “The Wishing Box” and *The Bell Jar* are productions about productions (259). Both texts deal with the problems that occur when the artist and her body cannot bear language. For Agnes Higgins, this inability will end her life, whereas for Esther Greenwood, before coming out of her non-productive bell jar, she will attempt suicide, albeit unsuccessfully.

After electroshock at Walton, Esther sinks deeper and deeper into a psychotic state. After trying to drown and hang herself, she goes into the basement and overdoses on sleeping pills. Later, after being found, she wakes up in the hospital, unable to see. Wagner-Martin states that “the contortions of sight (she cannot see at all for awhile), hearing, language and the physical appearance (particularly as she gains weight because of the insulin shock treatments) continue Esther’s anxiety: nothing is recognized” (78).

Therefore, lying in the hospital bed after her suicide attempt leaves Esther physically scarred, at least temporarily, for as she finally gains back her sight she looks into a mirror and sees that her “face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow” (174). This face is a “supernatural conglomeration of bright colors” (174). In turn, she smashes the mirror into pieces, creating a kaleidoscopic, more obscure image of herself. She cannot come to terms with “the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment” (Lacan 1).

The hospitalized, brightly colored, overdosed, failed suicidal body of Esther Greenwood acts as a metaphor for a distorted

language in that she experiences herself floating “between the sheets” (171). She is not the writing on paper, but the undercurrent that runs among the pages of a text. Her whole perception of herself is as something off the page rather than on it. Overdosed, she has lost the contiguity with the text of her own body. She is out of her environment, in an altered, inappropriate gap, the underground chamber. She can be located within the nuances of language, the meaning beneath the words, the things unspoken, difficult to comprehend, sometimes violent. The body that she inhabits is the result of violence imposed upon herself through her act of attempted suicide. Between the sheets of Plath’s own texts (some of which have been lost or destroyed), she “runs back and forth across the passage of the body into words. In so doing, she identifies within writing a violence which belongs inside the body” (Rose 33). For the person who has undergone such violence, even at her own hand, she describes the suicidal self in the poem “Lady Lazarus”:

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge

For the hearing of my heart—

It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge

For a word or a touch

Or a bit of blood (58–63).

Extending this perception of the body as brutalized, stigmatized object, for which Plath did use her own personal experiences, it can be argued that “the final question for Esther in her prison-house of language—misnamed, misaddressed, misheard, and misidentified—is, what does language mean? What does language do?” (Wagner-Martin 78). These questions about the meaning and function of language, especially in relation to the body, are constantly at the core of Plath’s writing and are never fully answered. There certainly is a “physicality of language” because “language is embodied [. . .] through words” (Rose 33). What language “means”

and “does” is an ongoing and ever changing process which Plath plays with throughout her works and her life. It is one of her major themes incorporated in the concept of the “body.” Kristeva also delineated the mind/body connection “by insisting both that bodily drives are discharged in representation and that the logic of signification is already operating in the material body” (Oliver, “Kristeva” 1).

After Esther’s suicide attempt, she decides to make her own language by freeing herself from the symbolic order, and, essentially, it is her “feminist task to prevent patriarchs from silencing opposition” (Moi 221). She uses her body for her own expected pleasure by entering into the world of sexual relations. Even this turns out to be a temporary eruption of limits in which male and female reactions are rendered through ink and blood. With diaphragm in hand, tool of liberation, Esther has her first sexual encounter in Cambridge with a math professor by the name of Irwin whom she meets on the steps of Widener Library, so close to language. This sex act with Irwin hurts her and she bleeds profusely. An indifferent Irwin states “Sometimes it hurts” (229). Even though Esther is concerned about the blood she is shedding, she feels “part of a great tradition” (229). One wonders if this is the tradition of initiation into sex or of sexual abuse. She relates this feeling of belonging to “the stories of blood-stained bridal sheets and capsules of red ink bestowed on already deflowered brides” (229). Looking back at the girls in Dinesen’s “The Blank Page,” red capsules were probably unknown to them or there would have been no blankness. Esther, nevertheless, applies towel upon towel to soak up the blood from the wound she has received. In this way, where Irwin “initiates action” as the male patriarch will, she, the female, “reacts, adjusts,” to her newly found sexual freedom (Miner 289).

The hemorrhaged body of Esther Greenwood acts as the container for blood-red ink which pours out of her, and coincidentally Plath, in volumes. In her poem “Kindness” Plath writes that “The blood jet is poetry,/There is no stopping it” (18–19). What she emits from her womb is her creative force, her “opus,”

her “valuable” (Plath “Lady Lazarus” 67–68). This sort of writing that she speaks of as a birth process “takes on different qualities in women’s contexts” (Minh-ha 259). Blood stains which were once used as a “testimony to the women’s function as a silent token of exchange” are, for Plath, representative of the artist who is “bleeding into print” (Gubar 296; 301). Creativity involves “painful wounding” (296). For Kristeva, “the body’s inside [. . .] shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside” (53). This language that Esther produces onto the towel is the purpose of her whole being; its distortion lies in the idea that blood is usually red, but this blood is so red, it is black, like ink. What one might expect is instead, “one in a million” (233). As she touches the blood, her fingertips also become black. This bodily metaphor is justified by Minh-ha who asserts that “thought is as much a product of the eye, the finger, or the foot as it is of the brain” (261).

Therefore, Esther’s encounter with Irwin produces a body of writing. Now she even has something painful to write about: her wound. Writing can be libidinated as in the Derridian fable of “a sexual union in which the pen writes its in/dis/semiation in the always folded/never single space of the hymen” (Minh-ha 260). For Esther, all of the production occurs within herself but is organically imprinted like markings on shroud, on a towel, a blank page, a white absorber of hurtful feelings.

In thinking about the relationship of Esther Greenwood to writing, Axelrod suggests that “Esther is a woman of letters, an Aristotelian being of the word, her identity bound up with language. Organized as a grammar, her psyche expresses itself as a text and as the desire to compare text” (12). When she breaks down in any way, so does her “linguistic capacity” (Axelrod 12). Not only does this relationship exist between Esther and writing but between Plath and her autobiographical depiction of Esther who signifies “a body in her writing, a body whose relationship to writing and representation Plath’s texts repeatedly comment on and speak” (Rose 29).

The bodies in Plath's work(s) can be read as metaphors for a language that is interfered with, interrupted, manipulated, and deadened, not unlike the Kristevan notion that "all forms of language are sites of struggle" (Moi 221). One can further extend this analogy to the body of Plath herself, long gone now. In her newly restored journals, she speaks about her body as eaten away by a disease that she "fears will break forth in obvious sores and warts, screaming 'Traitor, sinner, imposter'" (Kukil 150). The visible evidence of her interior hell defines her in a voice that is self-castigating. Here Plath's body writes itself in the same way that Esther's temporary disabilities illustrate or even produce a fractured language. This chaotic, fragmented discourse "that has come to represent femininity" has taken its cue from "masculine rationality, that has always privileged reason, order, unity, and lucidity" (Moi 219).

When Plath gassed herself in 1963, A. Alvarez, critic and friend of the Hugheses in London, felt that she did not expect to die at all. She planned her suicide, expecting the au-pair maid's arrival to awaken the painter downstairs, Trevor Thomas. Overcome by the seepage of gas, Thomas never awakened to answer the door. Plath, therefore, astoundingly leaving the phone number of her doctor in clear sight, seemingly did not expect to have either literary or physical remains (Alvarez 33–38).

Janet Malcolm describes Ted Hughes's reaction to the Alvarez account of Plath's suicide in *The Silent Woman*. Hughes felt that the force of Alvarez produced something tangible for the public. He angrily states to Alvarez:

Now there actually is a body. The cries drew the crowd, but they come not to hear more cries—they come to see the body. Now they have it—they can smell its hair and its death. You present in the flesh what the death cries were leading up to. The public isn't really interested in death cries unless they guarantee a dead body, a slow painful death with as many signals as possible of what it is feeling like. And you present that, the things the public really wants and needs—the absolutely convincing finalised official visible gruelling death [. . .]. (Malcolm 127)

If Alvarez gave us the dead body of Plath in detail, the public subsequently appropriated the gravestone in Heptonstall cemetery, Hebdenbridge, West Yorkshire, obliterating "Hughes" from the

estate-inscribed name of “Sylvia Plath Hughes” several times. In this way, control over the remains of Plath was in some way taken away from Ted Hughes. Because there is speculation, but, unfortunately, no proof that Plath had signed divorce papers before her demise, then, it cannot be certain that “Hughes’s control over the estate was morally illegitimate” (Rose 66). Therefore, the gravestone of Sylvia Plath is all that can be altered for those who think that they can speak for her. The public removal of language restores to Plath the ownership of her own body, which is, for Kristeva, although a corpse, ironically, still a “subject-in-process” (3). In death, at least, the public reiterates what Plath had intended for Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*. As Esther’s temporarily disabled body acts as a metaphor for a disturbance in language, so the body of Sylvia Plath is partially restored to itself both by the silence of the word “Hughes” on a gravestone in England and at least two journals, no longer sealed. Now that Hughes too has passed away (1999), perhaps the Plathian legacy will one day be complete.

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