The divided woman and generic doubleness in *The Bell Jar*

GAYLE WHITTIER

*Department of English Literature, SUNY, Binghamton*

The recent American publication of *The Bell Jar* emphasizes the irony of such “relevance” as Sylvia Plath has achieved nearly a decade after her death: that biography and critical interpretation should be so inextricably knit that each more often obscures, than illuminates, the other. There are special critical problems in interpreting a novel written by a woman whose insanity and suicide are frequently her themes, whose poetry is unmistakably superior to her prose, and whose own judgment of *The Bell Jar* was that “… she apparently did not consider it a ‘serious work.’”¹ For these reasons, most readers of Plath’s only completed novel have treated it as a thinly-veiled autobiography, or have gently dismissed its technique as that of the “poet’s novel.” Charles Newman, for example, concludes his perceptive and sympathetic analysis of *The Bell Jar*’s tension between artist and society with the decision that the book “… is abortive,” but still to “… be valued as a poet’s notebook.”² Others regard the novel as a feminist manifesto, which it is only in part; as an artistic crystallization of Camus’ declaration that suicide is the major philosophical problem; or as an Ur-text and reader’s guide to the brilliant and difficult *Ariel*. My surmise is that this diversity results from the sociological shaping of the book’s plot, for *The Bell Jar* is structurally deceptive and tonally deficient, at once open-ended in a contrived way and tightly narrated as a case history by its own participant, Esther Greenwood. It is, in fact, a novel perilously close in form to the implications of its own title,
for it divides into *ostensibly* different experiences of success and illness, *ostensibly* varied locales of city and country, *ostensibly* related movements of cause and effect. Its doubleness has been sharply noted: “... (the novel) splits in two... between the girlish and the deadly...,” but its structure is by no means an easy example of “organic form” mirroring the schizophrenia of the novel’s narrator. In sum, the book merits a greater exploration than the narrow confines of judgment and biography make possible, encompassing, as it does, an aesthetic or generic confusion between kinds of novels and kinds of narrative voices; this confusion has a sociological base.

*The Bell Jar’s* title implies a subject who is a specimen, someone at once utterly exposed and finally enclosed by the same glass wall, through which it is possible to see and be seen, but not to touch or know clearly. The title indicates, in fact, the exhibition of self typified in Esther’s dismally comic adventures in the sexual marketplace and in her later examinations by unfeeling doctors and curious visitors in the mental hospital. As the glass wall suggests, the primary division in the novel is that between the spectator and the participant; and if Sylvia Plath resolved this division in her mythic treatment of pain in her poems, Esther Greenwood, her close counterpart and persona, ultimately can do so only by resorting to the chill tone of the clinician examining a strange phenomenon: her own life. We sense early on that this factual account of her former agony is possible only because her “cure” has also produced a reduction in sensibility, a reduction in the vulnerability which is inseparable from her clear vision of a crazy world. Although it is perfectly possible to argue, along with R. D. Laing, that we can only survive in the madhouse of modern culture by becoming divided and schizophrenic in some socially acceptable way, the narrator’s extremely remote treatment of her past denies the novel’s ostensible form, which is that of a well-wrought story of therapy and recovery. Moreover, the cold and precise voice of the “cured” Esther does not quite attain the aesthetic control a painful autobiography requires; hers is a survival truce with passion. “After great pain, a formal feeling comes...” Esther Greenwood’s initiation into American middle-class life is no *education sentimentale*, then, but a ritual extinguishing of sentiment: she learns to record accurately.

Superficially at least, *The Bell Jar’s* plot repeats the pattern of a
familiar genre of literature, the story of confession, conversion, and healing. Theologically and socially, these three experiences are often related to one another; Horatio Alger’s many books exemplify a comic movement towards moral and financial success, placing them within a social subcategory in this novelistic tradition, while Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress overtly conforms to the religious model which is probably at the heartpoint of all such accounts. The novel of recovery or cure is one that has taken special shape in America, where its subject is often literally that of health (mental or physical, since the two are equivocated), and where the body and the psyche are both commonly regarded as cosmetically or medically perfectible. Thus an American reader is likely to accept Esther Greenwood’s “madwoman’s progress” from dissociation, through collapse, to functional restoration, at face value, while an English reader is more likely to respond to Plath’s satiric treatment of American society, that very milieu which expects a comic resolution of so grim and enduring a crisis as that between an artist and her “home.” For the novel also contains elements of another subgenre of prose work, one in which the vision of an insane speaker is given full expression. Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye rely on this narrative technique, which has gained more favor with the post-Romantic deification of insanity as a “holy sickness” and with the post-modern obsession with the world as a great madhouse in which staff and patients are necessarily confused. By one of those simple inversions that so neatly avoid ambiguities, the mad narrator usually envisions rather than hallucinates. His is customarily the “true” vision, although the mode of such narration remains subjectively opposed to the “omniscience” of a third-person account. These two patterns of novelistic structure, the conversion and the mad vision, both influence The Bell Jar; and since neither is dominant, the hybrid account that results is unsettling to the reader. Esther Greenwood’s case history exerts a subtle structural tension, one in which we are caught between hope and despair, one in which cause and effect finally lose their seemingly sequential fixity.

The novel’s plot initially appears to be in the conversion pattern, since the narrator’s recollection of a crucial event (as yet mysterious) indicates that she still exists to tell it. But the conclusion of the novel
inverts the expected movement of the conversion plot, for if the first part of the novel treats Esther's prize month in New York, an award bestowed for her ability to take the hurdles in the academic steeple-chase with seeming flawlessness, the account ends with incipient judgment by the staff of the mental asylum. At first this inversion of judgment and reward-or-punishment suggests no more than the success story gone awry. On later consideration the pattern of the plot appears as circular as a bell jar's circumference, especially since the recurrent ritual of examinations establishes a continuity between the seemingly diverse settings of women's college and private hospital, and the seemingly different phases of the narrator's evolution as the "American Girl who caves into Crazy Girl. . . ." In other words, the apparently comic conclusion of the book is actually a suspended ending, one which will return Esther either to the asylum or to the world. The suspension itself implies that the differences between these milieux are negligible, since "reward" for performing well is as dubious as her illness is visionary. The structure of The Bell Jar equivocates between two essentially different traditions in novelistic form, at odds in their contrastive implications of insight and "therapeutic" cure. And although the bell jar is a silent bell, its structure announces a series of circular and/or dual patterns pervading the novel, and specifically significant to its tone of narration.

Esther Greenwood's primary identity is that of an intellectual woman. According to her society's standards an "intellectual woman" is herself a cultural contradiction in terms, a disharmonious combination of biology and intelligence. It is in part from this sense of herself as a living paradox that Esther grows increasingly depressed. However, Esther Greenwood's dilemma as a thoughtful and potentially creative woman is encompassed by the more general duality between the former Esther and the narrator of the book. The story is not simply one in which one Esther recollects another after ten years of experience, but an account in which the voice of the narrator is sharply divorced from the events of her past. The narrator is not, in fact, Esther Greenwood, but Esther X, for she has presumably married and given birth to a child. But we learn virtually nothing of the later Esther, who significantly lacks an identified surname, as if halved by her survival. Her child and husband are also unnamed. If Esther
Greenwood’s maiden name suggests youth, potential growth, and naïveté, her married name, by its very absence, indicates a void. And this sense of vacancy is increased by her dispassionate dissection of her earlier life, one in which we understand that she is (or was) “someone else.” She has thus come, in her cure, to embody otherness, to contemplate an almost metamorphic shift from neurotic to narrator. We understand that the two roles must touch, but they are keep apart in virtually every narrative context. Despite its being written in the first person, Esther’s story is a third-person account in its removal of feeling, its charted detail, its flat tone. The flatness is that of a desert, arid and expansive, with no rest for the eye. Precisely because we are given so limited a knowledge of Esther X’s older personality, we tend to hypothesize about her; and in this we are offered both too little and too much help from the text itself.

The cured Esther is a speaker or writer and a mother. We learn of her maternity in a lightning-fast allusion early in the novel:

I realized we kept piling up these presents because it was as good as free advertising for the firms involved. . . . For a long time afterward I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again I got them out, and 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* (p. 4).

As the placement of this statement suggests, we are meant to discover early in the book that Esther has conformed, at least in physical experience, to the womanly ideal of her society. She narratively links being “all right” with motherhood and with commercial trappings that characterize femininity, lipsticks and decorated sunglass cases, uniting the two by recognizing that these “gifts” were “free advertising,” but nevertheless handing them down, like cultural heirlooms, to a baby. In the subsequent account of Esther Greenwood’s insanity, Esther regards childbearing with distanced idealism, detached curiosity, or simple denial, all of which contribute to her self-condemnation as “abnormal.” Although Esther X’s reference to motherhood is made almost in passing, it matters greatly to the reader’s relieved sense of her as “cured,” as having joined “other women” in an acceptable way. It may be that the brevity and insufficiency of Esther X’s status suggest that motherhood annihilates other forms of personal expression, just
as marriage apparently changed (but really removed) her nominal identity as a Greenwood; or it may be that the “cured” woman’s identity requires no more expression than the fact of motherhood. On a happier plane, Esther X’s dual role as writer and parent may indicate the resolution of the artist–woman conflict Esther Greenwood so painfully experiences. But this optimistic reading is qualified by a second, more ambiguous reference to pregnancy, one which occurs later in the novel and, in likelihood, after we have forgotten the first: “I’m not sure why it is, but I love food more than just about anything else. No matter how much I eat, I never put on weight. With one exception I’ve been the same weight for ten years” (p. 26). Reading the book for the first time, we almost inescapably assume that the weight gain coincided with her pregnancy. It is only much later in the novel that Esther herself draws a comparison between her weight gain in insulin therapy and the normal increase in childbearing:

But I never seemed to get any reaction. I just grew fatter and fatter. Already I filled the new, too big clothes my mother had bought, and when I peered down at my plump stomach and my broad hips, I thought what a good thing Mrs. Guinea hadn’t seen me like this, because I looked just as if I were going to have a baby (pp. 216–217).

An analogy between pregnancy and therapy is made explicit in this comment; and it is an apt one, since motherhood is the acceptable physical act whereby a woman “proves” her normality (and hence, her sanity): “How easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn’t I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat piling baby like Dodo Conway?” (p. 250). _The Bell Jar’s_ emphasis on marriage-and-family as evidence of “health” is comically and brilliantly expressed in Buddy Willard’s reaction to Esther’s refusal to marry him, for his response is at once idiomatic and literal. “‘You’re crazy,’ Buddy brightened, ‘You’ll change your mind’” (p. 103). Esther herself, however, idiomatically equates craziness with passion (a rather more traditional view), when she explains that “there is something demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other, especially when you are the only extra person in the room” (p. 18). Sexual role-playing, itself defined dually, by juxtaposition, is one of the major forms of division in the book, and is inseparable from its major account of madness.
To play a role is to have, and perhaps to become, one's own double. The motif recurs in ancient and modern literature, but its meaning is never stabilized; the Scottish *fetch*, for example, is a "double walker" who comes to announce one's death, while in the Talmud a man seeking God meets himself because of his prophetic powers. In *The Bell Jar*, as in the general tradition of Doubles, the alter self or alter situations lacks consistency, appearing sometimes as a mirror reflection, sometimes as a contrastive image. Dualities are at times united, or they appear as halves, as entities divorced from unity. Usually, however, the double is connected with a mask. Buddy Willard, the potential "other self" whom Esther might marry, plays the role of suitor as if following an old movie script: Then I heard him whisper, "How would you like to be Mrs. Buddy Willard?" (p. 102). The role he is inviting Esther to play is one which, in his own statement, reduces her selfhood to her relationship to him. Esther, however, perceives his hypocrisy (which we might call a discovered discrepancy between one's and real projected selves). She lives with a sense of *paradox*, that is, with a sense of rapid movement between contraries, through which opposites may perhaps be unified.

"If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days." Buddy put his hand on mine. "Let me fly with you" (p. 104).

At this point in the narrative, Esther perceives and reports division; Buddy unconsciously embodies it. And this rather formulaic reduction of the two characters expresses the inner conflict in the roles they are expected to play. Doubleness exists in their social definitions by others, and only secondarily in themselves as they determine their relationship. For example, Esther is expected to be outwardly seductive but inwardly chaste, a familiar state of sexual schizophrenia in which reality and appearance are deliberately set at odds. Buddy, similarly, may pretend purity or require it of a "Mrs. Buddy Willard," while nevertheless indulging in sexual activity with a woman whose feelings are suitably explained through the conventional *femme fatale* stereotype:

Of course, somebody had seduced Buddy. Buddy hadn't started it and it wasn't really his fault. It was this waitress at the hotel he worked at as a busboy the
last summer at Cape Cod. Buddy had noticed her staring at him queerly and
shoving her breasts up against him in the confusion of the kitchen, so finally
he asked her what the trouble was, and she looked him straight in the eye and
said, "I want you."

"Served up with parsley?" Buddy had laughed innocently.
"No," she had said. "Some night."
And that's how Buddy had lost his pureness and his virginity (p. 77).

Esther judges this example of bad faith by commenting that "I thought the TB might just be a punishment for living the kind of
double life Buddy lived and feeling so superior to people" (p. 80). Her
judgment that his illness is the natural consequence of a division in
himself is ironic, since her "mental illness," the counterpart of his TB,
results from her inability to be double, but her superior ability to see
doublessness. As seeing and being double are counterpoised, so another
division, that between that body and mind, becomes one of the major
manifestations of sexual role-playing.

"I hated coming downstairs sweaty-handed and curious every
Saturday night," Esther says of her "blind" dates, "... and finding
some pale mushroomy fellow with protruding ears or buck teeth or a
bad leg. I didn't think I deserved it. After all, I wasn't crippled in any
way. I just studied too hard. I didn't know when to stop" (p. 64). The
sexual marketplace determines the price of Esther's affection or use
according to general social values; excessive mind in a woman is
equated with defective body in a man. The two misfits are then paired
off as routinely as the partners of an arranged marriage, having been
judged as suitable for no one else. Buddy Willard's "defects" are less
obvious than mushroomy features or a bad leg; he regards marriage
as a killing cure which will halve Esther's tense union of mind and
body, leaving only the flesh. "I also remembered Buddy Willard saying
in a sinister knowing way that after I had children I would feel differ-
ently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more" (p. 94). This tension
between intellectual accomplishment and feminine fulfillment virtually
never lessens, and it can best be seen in the limited range of female
models against whom Esther is measured, and in whom she finds a
narrow selection of ideals.

There is, to begin, the Amazon Hotel, implicit fortress for mutilated
female warriors. Here the residents are "protected" from a sexual
world for which they are nevertheless carefully prepared; their secre-
tatorial school curricula lean heavily to Good Grooming, and most are “simply hanging around New York waiting to get married to some career man or other” (p. 4). If “a friend as another self,” as Pythagoras thought, Esther Greenwood’s “other selves” themselves divide into contrasts. Doreen, more a mineral conglomerate than a person, represents the woman-as-artifact pattern of cultural standards. She has “… bright white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff around her head and blue eyes like transparent agate marbles, hard and polished” (p. 5), “long nicotine-colored nails” (p. 6), and skin with “a bronzy polish” (p. 8). She exemplifies doublessness, “dusky as a bleached blond Negress in her white dress . . .” (pp. 12–13), and acts in a divided manner, pretending not to understand or even notice Lenny Shepherd’s sexual invitations. It is in response to Doreen’s dualities that Esther creates her first deliberate persona, as if to fight doublessness with doublessness: “’My name’s Elly Higginbottom,’ I said. ‘I come from Chicago.’ After that I felt safer” (p. 13). She feels safer because she has conformed to the world of disguise. But later, when Doreen comes home sick, the invented name takes on a reality she did not intend, as she is wakened by her friend’s estranging “Elly, Elly . . .” and the maid’s equally distant “Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood . . .” Esther decides to formalize the broken friendship by allying herself with Doreen’s opposite, Betsy.

Betsy reflects the cult of the “innocent country girl,” the obverse of Doreen’s artificial femme fatale role. Her potential is realized only by a movement from her first stereotyped identity to a second, as the commercial model in an advertisement in which she is but another nameless wife (like Esther X), married to an executive whose name is itself no more than initials. “Later on, the Beauty Editor persuaded Betsy to cut her hair and made a cover girl out of her, and I still see her face now and then, smiling out of P. Q.’s wife wears B. H. Wraggs’ ads.” (p. 7). At the end of the New York visit, Esther, caught between these stereotypes, enacts her first symbolic suicide. She casts her clothing over the city, returning home in a skirt and blouse more suitable to Betsy, their former owner, her face still streaked with the blood of woman-hating Marco. She is now “in costume,” but no one notices that fact, because counterfeit is so pervasive a way of life.

If sexual role-playing is inseparable from a division between body
and mind, action and sensibility, it ultimately leads to another level of experience in which the dualities are less social than metaphysical. The childbirth scene in Chapter Six of *The Bell Jar* contains the "Divided Woman" pattern of the earlier pages of the book, while introducing a new duality, that of life and death. By placing the dead, the sick, and the childbearing in the same institution, a hospital, "society" implies a general illness, as if the hospital were a microcosm or the macrocosm were a hospital. The crises of existence are then distanced, turned into a sideshow series of exhibits through which Esther is conducted by her "guide," Buddy Willard. Her tour runs contrary to the progress of life, since they begin with the spectacle of the cadavers ("so unhuman-looking they didn't bother me a bit" [p. 69]), through the pickled fetuses in their bottles, to the "living drama" of actual childbirth. The movement of the chapter is from death to life, in anticipation of Esther's symbolic "rebirth" as a suicide; but it is life which appears as a horrible, death as a neutral, condition. The division between life and death is effectively obscured, or even overturned, in this sequence. Moreover, in the delivery-room episode, which we might expect to celebrate life, still another division, one between awareness and experience, is emphasized. Since Esther's knowledge of the mutuality of interdependence of life and death influences the mode of her suicide attempt (she first "recovers" her dead father, then curls in the bowels of her mother's house to be reborn, half-blind as a new baby, in the mental hospital), the scene foreshadows much of her insanity.

"'You oughtn't to see this,' Will murmured in my ear. 'You'll never want to have a baby if you do. They oughtn't to let women watch. It'll be the end of the human race,'" (p. 71). The social peril is that, in being a spectator, a woman will not become a participant in her "destiny." The two states must be kept divided for the sake of ongoing life, since the dangers of childbirth are as much in the seeing as in the experiencing. As Will's comments suggest, it is also a woman's awareness, not her pain, which, from a cultural standpoint, must be erased.

Later Buddy told me the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain and that when she swore and groaned she really didn't know what she was doing because she was in a kind of sleep.

I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan
like that, and she would go straight home and have another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again (p. 72).

The comment on twilight sleep is remarkable, for Esther perceives that ignorance has been substituted for comfort, that the drug is amnesiac without being truly anaesthetic. However, the “sexual politics” of twilight sleep can only work because the woman herself contains her grim destiny as her anatomy, since it is “in some secret part of her . . .” that the prison ultimately has been built. Twilight sleep “works” by divorcing understanding from experience, the laboring woman being separated from her own consciousness even as the child is separated from her body. Her posture, too, is divisive (“The woman’s stomach stuck up so high you couldn’t see her face or the upper part of her body at all . . .” [p. 72]), her mind and face erased, her procreatively necessary parts exposed as if to indicate that reason has no place in parturition; she is significantly without words (“. . . she never stopped making this unhuman whooping noise” [p. 72]). And even as the laboring woman is separated from herself, part of her role is assumed by the attending doctors. Will’s response to the delivery is what the woman herself might have voiced had she not been reduced to mere animal sound.


It is he who artificially divides the laboring mother’s flesh and subsequently delivers the child through an opening that is no longer simply a natural orifice, but also a wound. Meanwhile the woman herself suffers without knowledge or a sense of accomplishment, reacting with complete passivity to the news that her child has been born.

The image of the laboring woman strapped to a table (more like an instrument of torture than a helpful invention) is one of a series of images in which society ostensibly “helps” people by reducing them to passivity. There is a grim analogy among the delivery table, the gynecologist’s examination table, the emergency room apparatus, the electroshock treatment room, the electric chair awaiting the
Rosenbergs, and the slab where, even after death, one is to be ritually dismembered in the name of knowledge. The machinery of all these devices overwhelms the activity and autonomy of the “examined,” effectively separating participant from spectator in the same personality (except, of course, in the example of capital punishment, where part of the punishment is the known spectacle of one’s death, and in the autopsy, where death has removed both categories of experience). Given the repeated passivity of society’s victims and their painfully ambiguous “treatments,” we sense that Esther’s milieu does not truly distinguish among sin, treason, sickness, vision, living or dying. In saying that this is so, Esther departs from the social custom of silence which the intermingling of seeming contraries will never be overtly acknowledged.

Esther’s open recognition of the interchangeable states of life and death is what sets her apart from others, who may see that living and dying are alike, but who never admit their own understanding. The woman lawyer who defends chastity, for example, runs through a spurious pseudo-biological and metaphysical “sugar-coating” of the case for virginity, only to end by giving the real reason: “The woman finished her article by saying better be safe than sorry and besides, there was no sure way of not getting stuck with a baby and then you’d be in a pickle” (p. 89). “Safety” is associated with abstinence, implying that sex is dangerous, while pregnancy becomes virtually a punishment or complication of sexual pleasure, far from the fulfillment it magically assures once a woman is married. And, finally, the woman lawyer’s cliché that “there is no sure way of not getting stuck with a baby and then you’d be in a pickle” alerts any reader who draws an analogy between the mother “in a pickle” and the dead fetuses and cadavers pickled in their preservative solutions. That is, the woman lawyer herself analogically associates bearing children with a kind of peril or death, an association already enacted in the delivery-room episode. But she does not admit or consciously fulfill the implications of this association: Esther does. Perceiving life and death to be interchangeable states, she regards suicide as potential rebirth. Images of growth, nativity, and peace accompany her first precise formulation of the desire to die, as, unable to move in doubleness (zigzagging) she descends the ski slope while Buddy watches.
The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower (p. 107).

I plummeted down past the zigzagers, the students, the experts, through year after year of doubleness, and smiles, and compromise into my own past.

People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother’s belly (p. 108).

In light of these passages, Esther’s restoration to her social world will be accomplished by a “cure” which first divorces life from death, and then removes one of the two selves of the intellectual-and-biological woman. The “cure” is not a mending, but a final division, of Esther’s experience; and its course is fittingly accompanied by a decreasing irony on the part of Esther X: irony requires distance and critical perspective rather than docile participation in social ritual. It is part of Esther’s “cure” that she should rationally elect sexual experience, and, encouraged by Dr. Nolan (another “double,” feminine in appearance and “masculine” in accomplishment), Esther goes to be fitted for a diaphragm. The visit returns us to the explicitly medical and paradoxical; the gynecologist’s office is full of pregnant women and Baby Talk magazines, but his purpose is to make Esther impregnable. In view of the other cruelties and absurdities masked as “medicine” in The Bell Jar, Esther’s view of this event is both naïve and hopeful:

I climbed up on the examination table, thinking, “I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because what they did, they would do anyway, regardless . . .” (p. 251).

Her ignorance of her sexuality is suggested in “I climbed up on the examination table, thinking . . . ,” for the book contains no incidents in which one can be both examined and rational. And the clichés of “freedom from fear,” a culturally accepted benefit of democracy, and marriage “just because of sex,” are highly ironic in a context where Esther never feels sexual pleasure or escapes social conditioning. For she has accepted the modern myth that sexual freedom can be assured by contraception, that pleasure and sterility are necessarily associated. Her dispassionate choice of still another male instructor, Irwin the mathematics professor, merely parodies the “liberated woman’s” predatory use of men; it is really in the feelingless mode of her world.
For all her scientific “control” and reasoned planning, Esther’s sexual initiation culminates in a freakish accident. At first welcoming her virginal blood, the sign that she has passed still another “examination,” Esther continues to bleed as if to the point of exsanguination. A customarily erotic event becomes a medical crisis, and Esther’s myth of scientific freedom collapses into the earlier myth of feminine sexuality as a lethal condition. Even her terror is not her own, but derived from an academic setting, one which she has learned abstractly.

I remembered a worrisome course in the Victorian novel where woman after woman died. Palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth. Perhaps Irwin had injured me in some awful obscure way, and all the while I lay there on Joan’s sofa I was really dying (p. 261).

Her sexual experience is expressed by means of the old archetype in which sexuality is synonymous with a wound or death. Caught between two mythic structures, the new one in which she is sexually freed by contraceptives, the older one in which she remains the martyr dying a suitably feminine death (while fulfilling her perilous destiny), Esther never attains the proof of her normality which she sought from the encounter with Irwin: “I decided to practice my new, normal personality on this man who, in the course of my hesitations, told me his name was Irwin and that he was a very well-paid professor of mathematics . . .” (p. 254). Instead, she is revealed as a deviant even physically, “one in a million,” according to the doctor who stanches the flow of her blood by packing her with sterile gauze rolls, in therapeutic imitation of the earlier act. Like Buddy Willard, who triumphed in her ski accident, he laughs before her pain and fear vis à vis his competence. And, despite her scientific devices to defeat fertility and win freedom, Esther resorts in her panic to the image of the childbearer rather than the virgin. She returns to the image convention demands, and is, in Mary Ellmann’s eloquent observation, “cured” of being “crude, self-made and self-sufficient,” while “taken up by two elite societies . . . the dead inviting her to die, the unborn requesting to be born. Between these rival importunities she draws, for a time, her breath.”

As if in accordance with the interchange of life and death, Esther’s disease and cure progress randomly, only apparently coinciding in a pattern of cause and effect. Her first doctor, a woman, immediately
passes her on to Dr. Gordon, a psychiatrist. He gives the briefest of trials to a therapeutic dialogue since, like most of the characters in the novel, he does not really believe in or use words to effect his purpose. His introduction in the novel emphasizes that the “healer” usually conforms to the masculine standard for his society, while his patient must become socially acceptable as a “woman” if she is to be deemed well. In other words, Esther’s experience in the mental asylum is a kind of counter-education or sexual reeducation, since her academic pursuits and her ironic rationality have placed her outside the circle of most other people and, finally, have threatened to place her outside life itself. Esther’s madness is characterized by extreme wakefulness and an inability to write, which is to say that she suffers from an involuntarily steady awareness and cannot communicate with others. Throughout the novel, strategic passivity and unawareness have been encouraged or induced as a remedy for tuberculosis, childbirth pain, and even as a means for survival in the world. Dr. Gordon begins with speech, but presently he turns to electric shock therapy, which creates a gap in consciousness, as, later, Dr. Nolan relies on both therapy and insulin in an effort to cure the mind through the body.

Esther comes to Dr. Gordon from the maternity ward, where, as a volunteer, she has unsuccessfully attempted to divide life from death (and has been reproved for throwing out dead flowers). Dr. Gordon first tries to seduce her from her vision altogether, as if it were a child’s game or an unlikely ruse.

“Suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong.” I turned the words over suspiciously, like round, sea-polished pebbles that might suddenly put out a claw and change into something else.

What did I think was wrong?

That made it sound as if nothing was really wrong, I only thought it was wrong (p. 145).

The doctor’s assumption that he has a superior view of “reality” is the result, in part, of his winning status in conforming to societal expectation. Esther’s pain is juxtaposed to his complacency. On his desk is a photograph of his family, an image rather than a relationship (Esther’s mother uses the same family photograph device, a false bait of intimacy, to lure her home). The family in the frame is socially correct in the number of children (two), the beauty of the doctor’s wife, their
obvious health and comfort. There are, of course, some significant ambiguities in the photo. Esther is not sure whether the dog is real or merely a continuation of the woman’s costume, while the children are so young that they blur into unisexual identity. The doctor and his wife also suggest melded opposites, since they appear to be brother and sister. Nevertheless, the picture clearly represents Dr. Gordon’s final credential, his trophy of normality and his license to indoctrinate others in the “right way” of life. Esther responds to it with anger and despair.

Then I thought, how could this Dr. Gordon help me anyway, with a beautiful wife and beautiful children and a beautiful dog halloing him like the angels on a Christmas card? (p. 145).

He cannot. His subsequent response to her is a dismissal in which he subtly reminds her of her sexual place; her college was once the post of a group of WAC (“My, they were a pretty bunch of girls” [p. 147]), whom he remembers as a collection rather than as individuals. “I was doctor for the lot,” he tells her, and then, like the other men to whom she turns for relief and understanding in her pain, he laughs.

From this point on, the course of Esther’s disease and her cure advance unevenly. For if the diagnosis and the recovery ought to be causally related, they are finally no more than parallel, rather than intersecting, events. Her treatment begins as she worsens, but it does not prevent her from plummeting into greater dissociation and depression. All the while that she is being “helped” by one doctor or another, her suicide fantasies are being increasingly realized. And her treatment is perceived by her (and probably by many readers) as a merciless therapy in which she might as well be a criminal being punished for being “ill” at all: “... 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” (p. 161). But the mental hospital carefully preserves a façade of resort normality, and its inmates are returned to the outside or “demoted” to other wards primarily on the basis of seeming rationality and good manners (much as children are promoted in an elementary school). In her college as in the mental hospital, Esther is the subject for experiments, whether Mr. Manzi’s unpublished books or the psychiatrists’ latest
chemical treatments; and in both "schools" there is always a series of examinations to be docilely completed, and a rebellious self to be carefully hidden along with the truth. In fact, the same woman who provides Esther's scholarship to college also pays for her "other" education in the madhouse, asking only that there be no sexual aspects in her illness. The chief distinction between college and hospital is that intellectual accomplishment is "rewarded" in the first, but punished in the second.

Much of Esther's treatment is designed to convince her that she is not superior or "different." The attendants in the hospital are especially useful in this aspect of her reeducation, since they sense that the usual social hierarchy is now overturned, and that their patients, who have more money than they do and higher social status, are for the moment within their control. As a result, a subtle social vengeance enters what passes for "medical care." A nurse taunts Esther by calling her "Lady Jane," and the orderly ridicules her as "Miss Mucky-Muck." She is put on exhibition for the curious as if she were incarcerated in 18th-century Bedlam. But it is above all for her intellectual acuity that she is most sharply criticized. Having seen her battered, sexless image in a mirror given to her (against orders) by a nurse, she reasonably enough breaks the glass (or double of herself). And this breach of doubleness, so to speak, is regarded as an unforgiven insubordination.

The other, older nurse came back in the room. She stood there, arms folded, staring hard at me.

"Seven years' bad luck."

"What?"

"I said," the nurse raised her voice, as if speaking to a deaf person, "seven years' bad luck."

The young nurse returned with a dustpan and brush and began to sweep up the glittery splinters.

"That's only a superstition," I said then.

"Huh!" The second nurse addressed herself to the nurse on her hands and knees as if I wasn't there.

"At you-know-where they'll take care of her!" (p. 198).

The nurse's superstition is a culturally received kind of irrationality. Esther's questioning of its validity represents not only a threat to the nurse's authority, but also her refusal to submit unquestioningly to all
of society's irrational beliefs. She is therefore to be threatened with a mysterious removal, and is to be turned from actor into nonentity ("as if I wasn't there").

Lest Esther miss the ritual enslavement (one might almost say, the revolutionary reversal) of patients by the staff, she is presented with the view of Miss Norris, whose only discernible "madness" is a silent refusal to play any game at all. Going on to her next phase, but convinced that she is "failing" and about to be sent to "a building for worse people," Esther passes Miss Norris, who is truly going to Wymark, and who conforms to the stereotype of the old maid in dress, "schoolmarmish" hair style, even in her use of spectacles "attached to her breast pocket with a black elastic" (pp. 214–215). The moral is clear: the unmarried woman, a social outcast, goes into a decline, while Esther moves towards sexuality and "cure." But even this movement is deceptive, for her sexual initiation ends in a wound which inspires Joan, her final counterpart, to suicide. And her perception of her own state of mind almost never corresponds to that held by her doctor-captors.

Esther's second bout with electric shock therapy begins unannounced, as if she has been betrayed by her surrogate parent, Dr. Nolan, and at a time when she has spontaneously begun to recover an interest, even a love, for the rituals of morning. Her improvement coincides with the more drastic therapeutic treatment. Esther herself protests throughout most of her hospitalization that her mental state is unchanged, but as no one believes in stasis (only in forward or backward steps), she is not believed. She perceives her insanity as completely outside her control, since the bell jar lifts or drops whenever it may, while those around her assume that she is more or less responsible for her illness. Towards the end of the novel, the plot repeats itself. There is again "a man on the floor," and Buddy Willard, the visitor from Yale, again appears to clear himself of any contribution to her suicide attempt or Joan's successful suicide. In a uniting flash of insight, Esther sees the images of dormitory corridor and hospital hall as one; they might be (and indeed are) the same building, varying in the degrees of disgrace or pride they bestow on the inhabitants, but structurally and pedagogically similar. She conceives that they are not double, that they are one, is ready to advance to her examination by
the staff as if to her bridal. She no longer has the "single eye" with
which to see dualities.

The price Esther Greenwood pays for normality is, if not high,
treachery in implication. As Esther X, she now stands outside the
bell jar rather than acting within it. She has become her own double,
has certified herself a woman by means of maternity (the one condition
everyone is willing to accept as her rightful accomplishment) and has
lived to write about it. But as a survivor she belongs, in tone, to her
society. Her sense of humor rapidly diminishes as she is cured, and her
detachment increases to the laboratory precision her rejected suitor
exemplified. Narratively, the patterns of conversion and mad vision
converge; but as we apprehend primarily their tonal differences, the
convergence is not a harmonious one. The novel ends as if to satisfy the
formal demands, the symmetrical structure, of the two patterns, but is
simultaneously circular in shape: illness and cure are not related as
progressive phases of a linear experience, but as manifestations of one
another. This generic, structural, and tonal tension undercuts our sense
of The Bell Jar as an artistically flawless work; ironically, however,
the same tension suggests the sociological dilemma of the novel, a
dilemma to which most of its readers must respond. The intellectual
or creative woman must divide, is already divided by her society into
incompatible selves or half-selves. The Bell Jar faithfully imitates that
inevitable division and presents us with a divided life narrated as if in
a coroner's report.

References and Notes

1. The observation is made by Charles Newman in "Candor is the Only Wile,"
   included in his edition of The Art of Sylvia Plath (Bloomington and
   London: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 35. He goes on to say that
   "... she felt, I would guess, ... that it was too serious ... that is, it
   recorded autobiographical data not completely absorbed and transformed
   by her art."


3. The quotation is taken from Mary Ellman's essay "The Bell Jar: An
   American Girlhood" in The Art of Sylvia Plath, 224. See also Harriet
   Rosenstein, "Reconsidering Sylvia Plath," Ms. (September, 1972) for a
general discussion of The Bell Jar's place in Plath's works.

4. The similarities between Plath and Dickinson are so rich that Charles
   Newman's "Candor is the only wile" deals with them extensively.
5. Stephen Wall’s review of the English edition of *The Bell Jar* in *The Observer*, no. 91, 940 (September 11, 1966), 27, overturns the usual evaluation of her poetry as superior to her novel and reflects the recurrent English judgment of *The Bell Jar* as a satire on American values. He praises her “unwinking intelligence.”

6. The examples I cite are two from myriads, and the exact source of this literary trend cannot be known, although Gogol’s influence must be considered great. Of the “madhouse narratives” with which I am familiar, only one account blends a Utopian (or renewal) pattern and mental or visionary derangement: Akutagawa’s short story “The Kappa” in the narrator of the central part of this story is hospitalized for madness, a madness which apparently results from his falling into a mirror image of what is worst and what is considered ideal in human society. This story is exceedingly interesting in itself, curiously pertinent to the generic “confusion” of *The Bell Jar*.


10. Harriet Rosenstein (p. 47) notes the style of this same passage as itself divisive: “The passage is also remarkable stylistically. It splits down the middle, as the novel so often does, between schoolgirl idiom—‘go straight home and start another baby’—and protracted, intensely felt metaphor. The person who speaks the first half of the sentence would never have been capable of the second.”