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Sylvia Plath's Fig Tree: Discourse Formation and the Production and Consumption of Women's Identity

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Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

English Department

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Introduction

"The image of identity we must daily fight to impress on the neutral, or hostile, world, collapses inward; we feel crushed."

The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, p. 356

Virginia Woolf gave her lecture entitled "A Room of One's Own" in 1928. Simon de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* in 1949. Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. bell hooks published *Ain't I a Woman* in 1981. The Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963. Title IX was established in 1972. *Roe v. Wade* was "settled" in 1973.

Second-wave feminism, emerging in the mid-20th century, represented a pivotal period in the pursuit of gender equality, particularly in England and America. It challenged entrenched social norms and institutionalized sexism, advocating for women's rights in various spheres, including politics, education, and the workplace. In England, second-wave feminism gained traction through movements like the Women's Liberation Movement, which aimed to dismantle patriarchal structures and address issues such as reproductive rights and domestic violence. Similarly, in America, activists such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem spearheaded campaigns for gender equality, leading to landmark achievements like the passage of the Equal Pay Act and *Roe v. Wade*. This period catalyzed profound social and legislative changes, shaping the discourse on gender and influencing cultural figures like Sylvia Plath, whose works often reflected the tensions and aspirations of this era.

At the edge of this movement, at the cusp of revolution, sat Sylvia Plath, a literary luminary in her own right who, while her work is heralded among scholars as such, was not considered a feminist during her life. Plath was writing before any of this discourse was popularized, particularly outside of feminist discursive and academic circles. That said, through her prose, poetry, and private writing alike, Plath homed in on issues with which theorists were

simultaneously grappling. Plath provided grace and elegance to these complex topics, disguising them in metaphor, illustrating the reality of these struggles through believable and relatable characters, popularizing these ideas, making them palatable to the masses. In a featured story on Faber's website, Sarah Savitt comments:

> Plath is most powerful when she explores what it means to be a woman in an unequal world – and this is why she is considered a feminist icon as well as a brilliant poet. She recreates on the page the experience of having a female body, society's double standards about sex, the emphasis on appearance over intellect, the imbalance of power. She does it with passion, humour and intelligence – and sometimes with anger.

Savitt is right; Plath has become a "feminist icon," and a considerable amount of her work juggles with the very ideas Savitt lists. In this analysis, I will explore many of these same issues, particularly regarding the body and feeding practices as they relates to consumption and production of discursive identities. *The Bell Jar* is one of Plath's most famous works. Though she primarily considered herself a poet, Plath's only novel is heavily autobiographical and reveals much about Plath's own experience with the constant, conflicting messages that adolescent women are fed and their effects on young women. One of the most iconic scenes in *The Bell Jar* is the commonly-remarked upon fig tree passage where Plath's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, imagines herself sitting in the crotch of a fig tree from a story she read for her internship as an editor at a women's magazine:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig

> was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.
>
> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (77)

I position this passage at the heart of my argument because it is profoundly rich and illustrates three distinct discursive identities, each of which I will elucidate across Plath's work and the broader socio-political environment in which Plath was writing. In this passage, the housewife, the working woman, and the madwoman archetypes are vividly portrayed through the imagery of the fig tree and the protagonist's struggle with social expectations and personal desires. The housewife is represented by the fig symbolizing "a husband and a happy home and children." This fig embodies traditional gender roles and domesticity, reflecting the societal pressure on women to prioritize marriage and family life, otherwise known as Friedan's (as yet unnamed) "feminine mystique." The working woman, or woman writer, is embodied in the figs representing "a famous poet," "a brilliant professor," "and an amazing editor" –with a snappy nickname and all. These figs symbolize ambition, career aspirations, and intellectual fulfillment, highlighting the desire for independence and professional success beyond traditional domestic roles. The madwoman archetype emerges not so much as a fig itself, but rather by the

accumulation of blackened figs, “plopped [on] the ground at [her] feet.” Overwhelmed by the multitude of choices before her and the inability to reconcile conflicting desires and mutually exclusive identities, Esther notes that “choosing one meant losing all the rest.” This sense of paralysis and existential crisis leads to her metaphorical starvation as her potential futures wither and fall, suggesting the psychological toll of social expectations and the pressure to conform to narrow and mutually exclusive gender roles. Even more noteworthy, Esther’s “starving to death” affirms the suicidal ideation and madness that is key to the madwoman identity. This starvation occurs because the identities, or figs, can exist only separately, never synchronously, and since Esther rejects choosing one, she exists purely in a state of stasis – a kind of madness. Plath's image captures the tension between social norms and individual autonomy, showcasing the complex interplay among the housewife, the woman writer, and the madwoman in Esther's psyche.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, in her life, Plath did take on all three of these identities. Obviously, Plath took on the role of writer, an “authoress” and “poetess” (327). Plath married Ted Hughes and produced two children, fulfilling the role of the housewife in her life outside of literature. Moreover, as a housewife, Plath experienced the social pressures and expectations placed upon women to conform to traditional gender roles. Plath’s performance of this identity is evident in her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. While *The Bell Jar* never states that it is expressly autobiographical, Plath details her writing process in her journal and in letters, revealing it is practically a narrative of her summer of 1953 during which, like Esther, she interned for a woman’s magazine (*Madamoiselle* rather than the fictional *Ladies' Day,*) and attempted suicide. In *The Bell Jar,* Plath explores the suffocating confines of domesticity and the struggle for autonomy in post-World War II America. Similarly, the novel also explores the

plight of the woman writer. Plath was a talented poet, author, and academic. She pursued her literary ambitions with fervor from a young age. While Plath pursued her artistic ambitions zealously and garnered slight recognition, her first volume of poems, *Colossus*, was indifferently received and her single novel was largely ignored, published only in England during her life. Despite the struggles of her personal life, the stylistic conflicts of the British publishing world, and watching her husband garner recognition with ease, Plath still published steadily; even her posthumously published collection of poems *Ariel* garnered great recognition.

Ultimately, though, the madwoman archetype is perhaps most associated with Plath, particularly due to her struggles with mental illness and her eventual suicide. Plath's poetry often delves into themes of psychological turmoil, existential angst, and the dark corners of the human psyche. Through her confessional style and raw emotional intensity, she exposes the complexities of mental illness and challenges social stigmas surrounding madness. Literary critics inevitably remark on her psychological history and suicide, and the circumstances of Hughes's posthumous editing and publication of *Ariel* invite conversation and criticism regarding the autonomous agency behind her most celebrated work. Moreover, contemporary discourse has further perpetuated the commodification of the madwoman identity and Plath’s madness. Plath's oeuvre, notably her confessional poetry, such as "The Beekeeper’s Daughter," “Tulips,” “Point Shirley,” and "Lady Lazarus," almost invites this commodification given that her personal struggles with mental illness and societal pressures intertwine with broader narratives of female experience. Plath's portrayal of madness, characterized by intense emotional turmoil, existential despair, and a profound sense of alienation, has been extensively examined through feminist and literary lenses. The commodification of Plath's madness can be observed in various dimensions. Firstly, her persona as the archetypal "madwoman" has been commodified by popular culture,

transforming her struggles into marketable symbols of female suffering and artistic genius. This commodification often simplifies and sensationalizes the complexities of Plath's mental health, reducing her to a romanticized figure of feminine madness. From Lisa Simpson of *The Simpsons* fame and Kat Stratford in Disney's *10 Things I Hate About You* featured reading *The Bell Jar*, to romanticized film portrayals such as *Sylvia* featuring Gwyneth Paltrow, Plath and her readership maintain a pervasive image in our cultural psyche (Badia 26). Janet Badia even argues that "the pervasiveness of an exaggerated and distorted rhetoric about these readers tells us far less about Plath's audience and the value or meanings of Plath's writing than about the patriarchal ideologies that enable the rhetoric and make us blind to its implications…" (23). Thus, the commercialization of Plath's works through merchandise, adaptations, and cultural references further perpetuates the madwoman's commodification, distancing Plath from the socio-political contexts that shaped her writings.

In this context, the theories of Michel Foucault offer valuable insights into the construction of dominant discourses and the regulation of subjectivities. Foucault's concept of discourse formation highlights the ways in which social norms and institutionalized power structures shape and circulate knowledge about gender identities and madness. Foucault's framework also underscores the fluidity and contingency of discursive formations, providing a lens through which I will examine the intersections of power, knowledge, and resistance in Plath's works. Through her exploration of madness and female subjectivity, Plath exposes the limitations and contradictions inherent in dominant discourses, offering a powerful critique of patriarchal norms and the constraints they impose on women's lives. By situating Plath's works within the framework of discourse formation, we can elucidate the complex dynamics of power

and knowledge that govern the construction of gender identities and the marginalization of certain subjectivities.

The issue of marginalization of certain subjectivities is closely tied to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, which offers a valuable perspective on the relegation of the madwoman to marginalized positions within dominant discourse. Spivak's seminal work emphasizes the voices and experiences of those who are silenced or excluded by hegemonic power structures. In the context of Sylvia Plath's portrayal of the madwoman archetype, Spivak's framework illuminates how social norms and institutionalized discourses render certain identities invisible. Plath's exploration of madness in her poetry and prose highlights the ways in which women who deviate from normative expectations are marginalized and excluded from mainstream narratives. By situating Plath's madwoman within the framework of the subaltern, we can uncover the power dynamics that govern the production and circulation of knowledge about mental illness and female subjectivity. Integrating Spivak's concept of the subaltern and Foucault's discourse formation into my analysis of Plath's exploration of women's identities expands my commentary past Plath's page to the larger issue of women's rights and marginalization at large. By examining how dominant discourses marginalize certain identities and regulate subjectivities through the example of the madwoman, we can uncover the complex interplay between power, knowledge, and resistance in Plath's works. This exploration extends beyond Plath's literary creations to encompass her lived experiences, particularly her struggles with mental illness as outlined in her private writing.

A. Alvarez, in his book *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide,* discusses Plath's struggles with mental illness and her eventual suicide. He delves into the complexities of her life, including her tumultuous relationship with Ted Hughes, her battles with depression, and the

themes of madness and despair that permeate her work. Alvarez does not romanticize or sensationalize Plath's mental illness, but rather provides a thoughtful analysis of how it influenced her writing and her life. He portrays her as a deeply troubled individual who used poetry as a means of expression and catharsis. While acknowledging the presence of madness in Plath's work, Alvarez also emphasizes her immense talent and the significance of her contributions to literature. While Alvarez's own romantic involvement with Plath may compromise his objective analysis, his discussion cemented Plath's popular identity as a poet of madness. Ultimately, though, Plath was more than her madness. She was a "poetess" and an "authoress" (*Unabridged Journals* 327), as she longed to be. She birthed and raised two children until the day of her suicide. She taught English at Smith College and took a roadtrip across America with her husband. Plath navigated a world that was fairly difficult to navigate as a woman alone, much less as a woman experiencing mental illness. Interestingly, Plath not only experienced all these identities, but she wrote about them and the conditions that create them in all genres of her writing.

In order to best analyze Plath's conceptions of these identities and their respective discursive formations, I will engage here with Plath's poetry, prose, and private writings. The private writings I draw on most heavily are her journals, specifically, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (Kukil).[1] Her journals are especially rich because as Julie Rak has written, "the diary is a trace of a life, since it records only what its author wishes. Diary-keeping does not adhere to many rules…It does not have a conventional audience, a market or even a subject" (87). In her journals, Plath chronicles the daily challenges of balancing her roles as a writer, wife, and mother within the constraints of social expectations. She reflects on the tensions between

[1] Plath's letters to her mother, published as *Letters Home,* as well as *Sylvia Plath's Letters* (Steinberg and Kukil) were indispensable in my process of cultivating a complete image of Plath's private attitude toward these identities and the conditions that create them.

domesticity and artistic ambition, offering a nuanced portrayal of the patriarchal pressures that shaped her life and career. Through her journal entries Plath exposes the contradictions inherent in mid-century gender roles, highlighting the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms on women's lives. Dan Ben-Amos discusses the role of journals and diaries on the formation of identity, arguing that “as repositories for secrets, diaries can articulate and document these porous boundaries [of social networks]. Studies of nineteenth-century American women’s diaries have explored the role of interpersonal relationships in the construction of subjectivity” (261). Essentially, I argue that journals serve as a vital tool for women to codify and understand the discursive elements of identity and subjectivity, enabling them to define their own identity and self-actualize in a patriarchal society; thus Plath’s journals are indispensable in understanding her perception of identity formation. Moreover, through journaling, women have the opportunity to engage in introspection, self-reflection, and self-expression, thereby navigating the complexities of their lived experiences and forging a sense of self that transcends social expectations. Firstly, journals provide a private space for women to document their thoughts, feelings, and experiences without fear of judgment or censorship. This freedom of expression allows women to articulate their innermost thoughts and emotions, enabling them to explore and confront the multifaceted aspects of their identity. By engaging in this process of self-reflection, women can gain a deeper understanding of their values, beliefs, and desires, thus empowering them to assert their agency and autonomy in shaping their own lives. Moreover, journals facilitate the construction of narrative identities, allowing women to make sense of their lived experiences through storytelling and reflection. By documenting their daily lives, struggles, and triumphs, women can create a coherent narrative that reflects their unique perspectives and lived realities. This process of narrative construction enables women to assert their own agency in shaping their identities,

challenging dominant discourses and stereotypes that seek to define them. Furthermore, journals serve as a form of resistance against patriarchal oppression, providing women with a platform to voice their dissent and challenge societal norms. Through their writings, women can critique the unequal power dynamics and systemic injustices that perpetuate gender inequality, thus contributing to broader social and political change. This is exactly what Plath does through her journals; she allows herself to identify elements of her identity that she can improve. Notably, Plath made a list of rules and reminders for herself titled “Back to School Commandments” (464). This is just one example of Plath’s explicit use of the genre conventions of the journal to form her identity as informed by her consumption of the discursive elements of feminine identity. Rick Barot spotlights Plath’s compulsive formation of identity within her journals:

> The young writer who appears in Plath's journals and letters, frantically making assessments of her own person and her talents, making plans and resolutions for improvement, is a poignantly uncertain and resolute figure, and all the more affecting for the achievement that we know is going to come. Every writer suffers the peculiar agonies of the trade which Plath catalogues in her private writings; her suffering is as unexceptional as any other artist's. But her private agony is notable for the exceptional art that was that suffering's yield. (110)

Barot touches on the fulfillment that a reader of Plath’s journals may experience as they read her youthful anxieties with the benefit of hindsight and knowledge that her anxieties yield a kind of resolution through the success of a beautiful, impactful (albeit posthumous) literary legacy. However, Barot does not consider the agony that accompanies reading Plath’s “sufferings.” As Plath expresses concerns over the longevity of her marriage, mental health, and happiness that all eventually crumble, the knowledgeable reader must remember that though Plath suffered, her art

greatly influenced the world. The inverse is also true: though her art proved influential through its lasting legacy, Plath suffered greatly in making it.

Plath's influential body of work addresses in both poetry and prose, as well as in public and private writing, the same concerns that Esther expresses in the fig tree passage. Plath's short stories and novel, *The Bell Jar,* offer fictionalized accounts of her own experiences, providing a broader exploration of the patriarchal confines of mid-century society. Through Esther's narrative, Plath examines the intersection of gender, mental health, and social expectations, shedding light on the ways in which patriarchal structures can contribute to women's oppression and alienation. Plath offers a poignant exploration of the discursive formation of identity, particularly through the experiences of Esther Greenwood. Plath intricately weaves together the internal struggles and external pressures that shape Esther's sense of self, highlighting the complex interplay between social expectations, gender roles, and individual agency. One of the central themes in the novel is the oppressive nature of social expectations and the ways in which they influence Esther's sense of identity. From the outset, Esther grapples with the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and social norms, which dictate her aspirations, behavior, and relationships. Through Esther's narrative, Plath vividly depicts the suffocating effects of these expectations on her psyche, as she struggles to reconcile her own desires and ambitions with the expectations placed upon her as a young woman in mid-century America. Moreover, Plath portrays the discursive formation of identity through Esther's interactions with various authority figures and social institutions. Throughout the novel, Esther is subjected to the influence of psychiatrists, mentors, and societal institutions, all of which attempt to impose their own interpretations and expectations upon her. These external forces contribute to Esther's sense of alienation and fragmentation as she grapples with conflicting messages about who she should be

and what she should aspire to achieve. Additionally, Plath explores the role of language and narrative in shaping Esther's identity. As a writer and aspiring poet, Esther is acutely aware of the power of words to construct and define reality; however, she also experiences the limitations of language in expressing her innermost thoughts and emotions, particularly when confronted with the complexities of her own mental health. Through Esther's struggle to articulate her experiences, Plath highlights the ways in which language can both empower and constrain individuals in their quest for self-understanding and self-expression.

I argue that language as a means for both empowerment and constraint of the discursive formation of identities is best conceptualized through Plath's poetry. Her poems delve into the intricacies of selfhood, examining how identity is constructed, negotiated, and sometimes fractured within the context of personal experiences, social expectations, and cultural discourses. In part, Plath portrays the discursive formation of identity in her poetry is through the use of vivid and evocative imagery. She often employs images of confinement, fragmentation, and transformation to convey the complexities of identity. For example, in poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy," Plath uses powerful metaphors such as the Holocaust, resurrection, and rebirth to depict the struggles of the self against external forces and internal conflicts. Through these topics, Plath suggests that identity is not fixed but rather fluid and subject to constant negotiation and redefinition.

Plath's multifaceted exploration of identity and self-actualization resonates with the ongoing quest for gender equality and liberation. Through her poetry, prose fiction, and private writings, Plath navigates the complex interplay between social expectations and individual agency, challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and advocating for the autonomy of women. Central to Plath's discourse is the dichotomy between consumption and production, where

women are often relegated to the role of passive consumers of social expectations while simultaneously striving to assert their creative and intellectual agency. Plath's fig tree passage in *The Bell Jar* vividly illustrates this tension, as Esther Greenwood grapples with the conflicting desires represented by the various figs dangling before her. The housewife, the woman writer, and the madwoman archetypes emerge as competing discursive identities, each vying for recognition and fulfillment within the confines of a patriarchal society. Yet, Plath does not simply present these identities as static or mutually exclusive; rather, she interrogates their fluidity and interconnectedness, revealing the inherent complexities of female subjectivity. In the realm of consumption, women are bombarded with social expectations and gendered stereotypes that dictate their roles and aspirations. Plath exposes the suffocating pressures of conformity and the psychological toll of trying to fit into narrow and predetermined molds. However, Plath also celebrates the power of female agency and creativity, as embodied in the woman writer archetype. Through her own literary endeavors, Plath asserts the importance of women's voices and experiences, challenging the dominant narratives that seek to marginalize and silence them.

Ultimately, Sylvia Plath's legacy as a feminist icon lies in her then-radical exploration of the feminine quest for identity and self-actualization. She transcends the binaries of consumption and production, offering a vibrant and dynamic vision of womanhood that defies easy categorization. Plath's enduring relevance speaks to the enduring struggle for gender equality and the ongoing pursuit of liberation for all. As we continue to grapple with the complexities of identity and agency, Sylvia Plath's words serve as a beacon of inspiration and empowerment, reminding us of the transformative power of self-expression and the enduring importance of feminist discourse in shaping our collective future.

Chapter I: The Woman Writer

> "My identity is shaping, forming itself – I feel stories sprout, reading the collection of New Yorker stories – yes, I shall, in the fullness of time, be among them – the poetesses, the authoresses…"
>
> *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath,* p. 327

Plath longed to be a writer. There is no debate on that matter; however, her confidence in taking up that identity, that space, and that commitment constantly wavers as Plath vacillated between extremes in nearly all aspects of her life. Plath was cognizant of the inherent struggles for success that accompany pursuing a career in the arts, particularly as a woman, and these anxieties are inextricably linked to Esther's anxieties around selecting a career and identity as expressed in *The Bell Jar*'s fig tree passage. Three of the figs that Esther Greenwood imagines are careers in or adjacent to the writing field: "One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, …" (77). While this range of options suggests a positive view of her potential career choices, Esther immediately negates this optimism by reminding herself and her audience of the mutual exclusivity of these roles for women: "I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet." Plath communicates a deep sense of anxiety over picking a career or life path – really, this is an anxiety about selecting an identity.

Foucault's perspective on "Discursive Formation" of identity underscores the dynamic interplay between power, knowledge, and subjectivity within society. According to Foucault, identities are not fixed or inherent but are constructed through discursive practices that establish norms, classifications, and categories within specific historical and cultural contexts (229). These

discursive formations regulate and discipline individuals, shaping their subjectivities and positioning them within social frameworks (Foucault 21). In emphasizing the contingent nature of subjectivity, Foucault challenges essentialist notions of identity and highlights the role of power and knowledge in shaping individuals' understanding of themselves and their social realities; one such example is Foucault's understanding of the material objectivity of madness and how discourse shapes this understanding of identity:

> The unity of discourses on madness would be the interplay of the rules that define the transformations of these different objects, their non-identity through time, the break produced in them, the internal discontinuity that suspends their permanence. Paradoxically, to define a group of statements in terms of its individuality would be to define the dispersion of these objects, to grasp all the interstices that separate them, to measure the distances that reign between them – in other words, to formulate their law of division. (33)

While I will delve into the identity of madness later, Foucault's framework for the creation of identity through "the unity of discourse" aids in understanding the discursive formation of identity at large, beyond madness. Thus, in a society characterized by rigid gender roles and patriarchal norms, the discursive formations surrounding femininity and female creativity were often restrictive and prescriptive, an influence that is undeniable in Plath's work.

In the wake of World War II, American women had a newfound expectation to manage both a home and a profession. However, the world was still coming to terms with having women in the workforce en masse, a burden that the working women had to bear. In 1968, five years after the publication of *The Bell Jar* in England and three years before its publication in America, researchers from Harvard and Colombia conducted a statistical study on housewifery and social

conceptions of career as related to gender; the study is aptly named "Constructs of Career and Family: A Statistical Analysis of Thematic Material" as these researchers attempt to standardize a particularly subjective topic like sex and career, particularly in the mid-twentieth century. The statisticians designed the project to "involve the analysis of the content of … stories written by comparable groups of mature, educated men and women" (Baruch et al., 308). The subjects were shown a photograph "depicting a man seated at a desk or drafting board, with a picture of a woman and children on the desk before him,"; they were then asked to respond with a reference to the work role and a reference to the family through a story and answer a standardized questionnaire (Baruch et al. 309). Through questions about gender norms, household labor roles, and career roles, the statisticians concluded that

> evidence obtained through the discriminant analysis suggests the intriguing, but quite speculative, idea that married working women tend to identify with the role portrayed by the male figure; whereas housewives tend to identify more with the women in the family picture. The experiences of married working women focus their careerist concerns in much the way these concerns are focused for men, and yet they bring into stories more clearly than men their awareness of the potential role conflict experienced if ego investment in both work and family role is part of experience. (Baruch et al. 315)

While the age of the study makes it irrelevant to any current sociological or statistical conversations surrounding gender and career and labor roles, it provides crucial social-historical context regarding mid-century American conceptions of gender and the workforce, especially in the midst of conversation surrounding the feminine mystique that subjugates women to a life of destitute acceptance of a generally unstimulating life:

> By choosing femininity over the painful growth to full identity, by never achieving the hard core of self that comes not from fantasy but from mastering reality, these girls are doomed to suffer ultimately that bored, diffuse feeling of purposelessness, non-existence, non-involvement with the world that can be called *anomie*, or lack of identity, or merely felt as the problem that has no name. (Friedan 181)

In the study conducted by Baruch et al., we see that statistically speaking, women were expected to "focus their careerist concerns" like their male counterparts while they also understand that their gender can create "potential role conflict." The researchers found that men did not feel this same pressure or "awareness," making clear the vastly different social roles of men and women related to career and homemaking goals at the time.

Women were expected not only to maintain a home, but also to navigate a changing cultural climate and assert themselves as authoritative figures in the workforce. Therein lies the issue for a young woman in mid-century England and America: she must assert herself in her chosen career field while maintaining a demure and obedient image of femininity; she must become paradox personified.

As a result, a woman seeking a career in the mid-twentieth century required a supportive husband in order to balance her career and domestic duties. Plath's relationship with Ted Hughes not only shaped her domestic endeavors (he was her husband for six years and father to their two children) but also entirely influenced her literary career. Hughes is a critically difficult topic in Plath studies because of the tumultuous and entrenched nature of their partnership. Each influenced the other not only as husband and wife but as literary partners, though critics differ greatly in their opinions regarding the balance, toxicity, and validity of the impact that the

Hughes-Plath pairing had on their writing.[2] The relationship was ripe with literary fruits from the very start: Plath approached Hughes at their first meeting by reciting several lines from his poems. That same encounter ended with a kiss during which Plath bit Hughes's cheek, drawing blood. That kiss reinforces the theme of consumption that surrounds Plath's life and search for identity: "And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face" (Plath *Unabridged Journals* 212). These two portents of literary strife proved true as the pair spent much of their respective writing expressing feelings of disillusionment with the reality of their marriage and the literary partnership that accompanies it. Through this tumultuous beginning, beyond reaffirming the theme of consumption, Plath and Hughes establish a dynamic of predator and prey, hunter and hunted, consumer and consumed, and producer and product. Their relationship is complex because each adopts aspects of these binary identities at different points.

Diane Middlebrook describes the pairing as a "complex dynamic of sameness and difference" given that whenever the two spoke publicly of their literary companionship they acknowledged the influence of proximity, but simultaneously refused to deny influence, maintaining that they upheld their individuality (163). In her private journals, though, Plath reveals a far more complex set of anxieties surrounding Hughes, his influence, and their relative success. In her January 1959 entry, Plath explicitly states her anxieties surrounding their literary partnership: "Must try poems. DO NOT SHOW ANY TO TED. I sometimes feel a paralysis come over me: his opinion is so important to me. Didn't show him the bull one: a small victory" (329). Plath resolves to distinguish herself from Hughes by "try[ing]" poems because, at this point in their relationship, Plath has evidently become consumed by the partnership and she is

[2] These critics include but are not limited to Heather Clark, A. Alvarez, Margaret Dickie, Michele Reese, Janet Malcolm, and Diane Middlebrook.

consumed by the weight of her own esteem of Ted's approval and opinion – an anxiety that accompanies not only romantic vulnerability but creative vulnerability. Plath also fears that Hughes's popularity will surpass her own. In *The Grief of Influence*, Heather Clark argues that "Plath's repeated insistence on not showing Hughes her poetry suggests that his evaluation of her work had begun to threaten her own… it was not long before the man who had inspired Plath to believe in a marriage of true minds would become her rival" (69). This sense of rivalry was constantly fed by public perception of the couple as a literary power couple, encouraging direct comparisons of the two.

And compared they were; even now, Hughes and Plath are closely linked. Given that Plath was so confessional in nature, it is only natural that her husband and domestic partner would be featured in her work and criticism on her work; however, his position as a rival only spurs critical conversation. Much scholarship on Plath was published after her death as a result of her posthumous success;[3] nevertheless, Plath dealt with comparisons from media outlets like the BBC and thus struggled with discerning her own path or place within the literary kairos of 1950s Britain and America. Plath struggled with discerning her own path or place within the literary kairos of 1950s Britain and America. Again in January 1959, Plath resolves to distinguish herself as a poet, but also sees potential in becoming the snappy magazine writer she had been before she arrived in England. Earlier, in April 1958, she seemingly brainstorms an identity:

> We have finished tea, and the late afternoon Sunday sun lights the blue-lined page opposite and causes the red armchair to incandesce like ruby. I can write for the woman's slicks: More & more this comes over me – as easily as I wrote for Seventeen, while keeping my art intact: I shall call myself Sylvan Hughes –

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[3] These comparisons include Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath,* Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, and Al Alvarez's *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide.*

> pleasantly woodsy, colorful- yet sexless & close to my own name: a perfectly euphonious magazine name. (*Unabridged Journals* 632)

Here Plath not only correlates writing with eating – particularly after a meal, suggesting that writing has become secondary to her housework – but also explores gender as it relates to genre and the career of the writer as a whole. In her sense of agency and confidence that she "can write for the woman's slicks," Plath recalls her many pieces published in America. Perhaps Plath wanted to reignite her love of writing as she was experiencing writer's block at this time, or perhaps Plath knew that she was a superior prose writer to Hughes and felt that as such she could better distinguish herself from Hughes. In pursuing a different and hardly comparable genre, Plath could be attempting to avoid the comparisons the couple experienced. The Plath-Hughes partnership and consequential comparison offers a microcosm of the experience of the working woman in 1950s Britain and America – she is directly compared to her male counterpart though her social constrictions significantly surpass that of her husband, as I will explore more fully in the following chapter. In trying to avoid comparison, Plath even explicitly yearns for a "sexless" pseudonym. But it is more than an attempt to draw attention away from their literary partnership – this speaks to the position of the woman writer as a whole: she must fight for basic validity and recognition while maintaining a socially commendable conception of femininity. In attempting to juggle these various demands, Plath's questions of identity naturally became all-consuming.

Michel Foucault's theoretical framework regarding discursive identities constitutes a significant contribution to contemporary discourse on power dynamics and subject formation. Foucault's concept of discursive formations delineates the boundaries of permissible discourse, defining what can be known and articulated about various subjects; thus, identities are not inherent or fixed but are contingent upon the discourses available within a given society (99).

Individuals come to understand themselves through these discursive frameworks, which establish norms, classifications, and categories that govern social existence. Foucault’s framework is essential for understanding these feminine identities because discursive practices, such as classification and normalization, play a crucial role in identity construction by regulating and disciplining individuals and groups like the housewife or the woman writer.

In mid-twentieth century Britain and America, a woman seeking a career as a writer would have navigated complex discursive formations that shaped social perceptions of gender, literature, and professional roles. In this period, dominant discourses around gender often constrained women's access to certain professions, including writing. Norms regarding women's roles as homemakers and caregivers were deeply entrenched, relegating these individuals to the private sphere, or the home, and limiting their participation in public intellectual and creative endeavors because of these expectations. These discourses operated to construct femininity in ways that prioritized domesticity and maternal nurturing over professional ambition and intellectual pursuits. Consequently, a woman aspiring to a writing career would have encountered discursive barriers that sought to confine her within traditional gender roles. Discourses of literary merit and authority were often gendered, with male writers typically afforded greater recognition and opportunities for publication and acclaim – something Plath well understood, as I will explain later in this section. Foucault's insights into discursive identities illuminate the complex interplay of power, knowledge, and subjectivity that shaped the experiences of women like Plath seeking careers as writers in mid-twentieth century Britain and America. By analyzing the discursive formations that governed gender roles and literary practices, we gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by women writers and the strategies they employed to negotiate and resist prevailing norms and expectations.

In much of Plath's work, she tackles this concept of the formation of identity through models she constructs before her characters. Plath explores the issue of an observed, consumed, and reproduced identity, particularly in the form of a writer, in *The Bell Jar* by establishing several models of both conformity and aberration. Given that *The Bell Jar* is a quasi-bildungsroman, it is natural that Esther would be informed by models. Though critics disagree about whether *The Bell Jar* qualifies as a bildungsroman – some argue that it narrates too brief a period of Esther's young life – the novel certainly follows her through "a troubled quest for identity" (Baldick). Relating to the theme of consumption and absorbed identities, Aaron Schneeberger demonstrates that Plath's portrayal of the body through Esther's perception of bodily habits and the bodies of herself and others qualifies *The Bell Jar* as a "neoliberal bildungsroman":

> Esther's narration frequently links certain bodily habits to certain social outcomes, these habits becoming the measures by which individuals fit into the broader social milieu of Plath's novel. For Esther, however, such habits frequently conflict with desires arising not only from within her own body, but also the social and material environments that surround it … The result is a bildungsroman in which the tensions between acculturation and personal desire, typical of coming-of-age novels, are located within the body itself… (544)

While Schneeberger's argument delves far more into Marxist critique than is applicable to this paper, he astutely argues that Plath's near obsession with the body and with habits regarding the body, like eating practices, define the body as "material object" (544).[4] Beyond this material object, Plath also explores the "tension between acculturation and personal desire" through the

[4] While it is beyond the scope of this project, future study pertaining to the correlative nature of food, class, and embodied rhetoric within *The Bell Jar* would likely contribute to a greater understanding of Plath's message.

models laid before Esther. A bildungsroman offers models from which its protagonist might choose, models of both positive and negative influence that exhibit different features of adulthood and exist in various social spheres. Schneeberger identifies Jay Cee as a model, further highlighting Esther's physical description of herself as evidence of the material objectivity of the body; however, I find this argument lacking given that such descriptions are typical in establishing the appearance of a character. Rather, I believe that Esther's interactions with paragon figures like Jay Cee and other professional models – such as the "famous poet," who I will contextualize shortly – speak more clearly to this "tension between acculturation and personal desire." One aspect of Esther's narration wherein "habits becom[e] the measures by which individuals fit into the broader social milieu" is through eating practices, particularly those she experiences at her *Ladies' Day* internship. Esther is exposed to a new variety of lifestyles and social classes, coming to understand more fully her potential and, by proxy, what is at stake in choosing one identity lest she sacrifice the rest.

Identity and social class through the lens of eating practices is the underbelly of much of Esther's experience in New York; in viewing these models through an observed social and bodily habit like eating, Esther believes that she will be able to ingratiate herself into New York society. One episode in which Esther details not only her observations but also her subsequent performance of the consumed identity occurs during a meal provided by *Ladies' Day*, wherein Esther explicates the signifiers like manners and behavior of the various identities she has observed:

> I'd discovered, after a lot of extreme apprehension about what spoons to use, that if you do something incorrect at the table with a certain arrogance, as if you knew perfectly well you were doing it properly, you can get away with it and

> nobody will think you are bad-mannered or poorly brought up. They will think you are original and very witty.
>
> I learned this trick the day Jay Cee took me to lunch with a famous poet…
>
> This poet ate his salad with his fingers, leaf by leaf, while talking to me about the antithesis of nature and art. I couldn't take my eyes off the pale, stubby white fingers traveling back and forth from the poet's salad bowl to the poet's mouth with one dripping lettuce leaf after another. Nobody giggled or whispered rude remarks. The poet made eating salad with your fingers seem to be the only natural and sensible thing to do. (*Bell Jar* 27)

In this passage, Esther directly notes that her observations, or rather her "discoveries," influenced her actions; moreover, this passage reveals several class-related anxieties that accompany any eating practice like manners, clothing, and upbringing. Here again, arises the issue of performative identity: through consuming models like this famous poet, Esther is able to produce a manicured version of herself, a performative identity informed by signs and signifiers in the larger discourse in the context of the *Ladies' Day* meal. But it is important to note that she is choosing the wrong model to replicate; Esther believes that "arrogance" is a kind of life hack because she observes it in a "famous poet," but there exists a chasm between her perception of the event and the reality of the dinner. Esther carefully consumes the famous poet's behavior but fails to recognize that the poet is performing his own identity, and to a ridiculous extent. This poet is performing eccentricity and nonconformity in order to solidify himself as an artist, as a counter-culturally significant persona. Naturally, Plath and the retrospective narrator that is adult Esther Greenwood are commenting on the ridiculous arrogance of certain artists, but she is also ironically highlighting the naivety of young artists and their valorization of aberration. Esther

admires that which is associated with the higher social class; however, she also learns behavior from the worst model before her, consuming and then producing the performative identity of an eccentric poet.

Furthermore, this passage highlights the effect that the poet has on the table, making a ridiculous concept like eating salad with your hands seem “the only natural and sensible thing to do.” Esther establishes the poet as a great influencer, as someone who, through his identity as a famous poet alone, can challenge social norms, even ones as small as manners. Thus, through food and eating practices, Plath manages to demonstrate how Esther comes to a two-fold revelation: firstly, that poets can challenge reality and inflict social change, and secondly, that one’s profession can vastly influence one’s identity and, in turn, one’s social interactions.

Esther observes these performed identities of Jay Cee and the “famous poet” as embodiments of their respective fields and careers as writers. In the two figures, Plath highlights both the eccentricity permitted to poets and the rigidity of social norms in the episodes featuring *Ladies' Day* meals. Esther offers sprawling descriptions of the many luncheons and dinner parties she attends as an intern for a women’s magazine. One such description stands out:

> Arrayed on the *Ladies' Day* banquet table were yellow-green avocado pear halves stuffed with crabmeat and mayonnaise, and platters of rare roast beef and cold chicken, and every so often a cut-glass bowl heaped with black caviar. I hadn’t had time to eat any breakfast at the hotel cafeteria that morning, except for a cup of overstepped coffee so bitter it made my nose curl, and I was starving. (*Bell Jar* 24)

This passage is particularly interesting because of the juxtaposition of expensive, imported foods to Esther's meager ingestion at the hotel. This lack of food (and time to eat it) suggests a struggle

that Esther experiences in this rigorous environment. Esther experiences an insurmountable level of stress at the internship, replacing meals with coffees in order to boost productivity or to manage her weight to best fit in with the other women at *Ladies' Day* parties. Esther compares her "bodily habits" like eating, dieting, and exercising with the other interns who, like "almost everybody [Esther] met in New York," were "trying to reduce" (25). Diet culture as a signifier of identity and acculturalization is important context for understanding Esther's identification of discursive identities.

Interestingly, just after describing the gluttonous array of food provided by *Ladies' Day*, Esther details her perception of restaurants before arriving in New York: "I'd never eaten out in a proper restaurant. I don't count Howard Johnson's, where I only had french fries and cheeseburgers and vanilla frappes with people like Buddy Willard" (24). Esther's remark that the restaurants back home "don't count" shows disdain for her upbringing and a readiness to integrate into New York society. The fact that Esther highlights Buddy Willard specifically shows the connection that Esther holds between food, eating, and domesticity. Within a few lines, Esther has noted different foods and bodily habits in eating those foods, codifying her associations with social stature and eating habits. In the contrasting passages, Plath clearly distinguishes class not only through the type of food consumed but also the social setting in which it is consumed. In these passages, Plath establishes a relationship between social expectations and eating practices in the mind of Esther Greenwood. In choosing to conjure a memory of eating out – particularly on a date – before Esther came to New York, Plath directly juxtaposes housewifery and Esther's blossoming career, and the social roles that she would have to play in those various identities. What is particularly noteworthy about the above passage is Esther's immediate negation of not only the restaurant but also of Buddy Willard, enforcing the

tension between her desires and her inability to commit to a singular identity. Moreover, in considering her past, Esther also correlates the meals with her dining company. Plath compares her *Ladies' Day* meals to Howard Johnson's, a chain famous for its accessibility, family friendliness, and roadside convenience (and infamous for the negatives that naturally accompany a road-side chain seafood restaurant and hotel). Now that Esther has experienced truly refined dining, Howard Johnson's pales in comparison both in its food and the company with whom she eats; Esther thinks of Buddy Willard and fried food, of motherhood and mediocrity when she thinks of her previous dining experiences. Thus the different eating practices function as signs within cultural discourses, showing a split between the lives she envisions herself having: one where she becomes the domesticated wife of Buddy Willard and one where she is an independent writer and editor living in New York. Esther has consumed these discursive signs of identity through career models and she uses these models to inform her performance, production, and formation of identity in order to properly acculturate into the identity of a woman writer. Ultimately, Esther's commentary on eating practices and social acceptability is intensely consumed and reproduced in identity.

While Plath positions Esther to consume and reproduce this identity, Plath herself took on the identity of a woman writer. From this identity, Plath produced several collections of poetry, multiple short stories, poetry readings for various broadcasting services including the BBC, among other projects and publications. The product of the writer is multifaceted, extending beyond mere words on a page; at its core, a writer's output comprises written works, but the significance of a writer's production transcends the tangible product. Great writers produce meaning, provoke thought, challenge social norms, and engage with readers on intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic levels, shaping public discourse and collective understanding.

Sylvia Plath's literary output, marked by her confessional style, constitutes a profound intertwining of personal experience, creative expression, and identity formation.[5] Plath's confessional poetry transcends mere textual production, imbuing her written works with a deeply personal and autobiographical dimension. Through her stark imagery, vivid language, and intense emotional depth, Plath lays bare the complexities of her own life, drawing directly from her personal experiences, relationships, and traumas. Considering this confessional nature, we can see that the product of a writer, in Plath's case, is not merely a collection of poems or a novel but rather a manifestation of herself. Each poem and every word becomes a fragment of her identity, reflecting her struggles, aspirations, and fears. Thus, the product of the woman writer, particularly Plath, is the product of herself and her own experiences. Through the permanency (or at least longevity) of literature, the woman writer's product contributes to discursive frameworks of identity, transcending the limitation of the sociopolitical moment of its production in a way that the housewife's product cannot. Conventionally, the housewife's duties are domestic and practical, centered around tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and managing the home, all of which are essentially impermanent if not intangible. The product of the housewife is material, immediate, and focused on the present maintenance and well-being of the home and family. Thus, in considering mutually exclusive identities, the woman must consider what her impact will be and how she will be remembered. This is an intensely human desire to be remembered, but through the tension between longevity and ephemerality, it creates an anxiety of irrelevancy that Plath and women at large had to consider in selecting an identity. Teenage Plath notes this most poignantly in her March 1951 journal entry:

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[5] Though literary critics differ on the implications of classifying Plath as a confessional poet, I believe that this term is entirely relevant to Plath's work and content. Christina Britzolakis in her book, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* argues against oversimplifying Plath as confessional. A. Alvarez, though he is so closely associated with the term "confessional poet" warns against the limitations of the label. Harold Bloom discusses Plath in his book, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry,* also warning against oversimplification.

> ... I desire the things which will destroy me in the end... I wonder if art divorced from normal and conventional living is as vital as art combined with living: in a word, would marriage sap my creative energy and annihilate my desire for written and pictorial expression which increases with this depth of unsatisfied emotion ... or would I achieve a fuller expression in art as well as in the creation of children? .... Am I strong enough to do both well? ... That is the crux of the matter, and I hope to steel myself for the test... as frightened as I am ... (*Unabridged Journals* 280; all ellipses original)

Chapter II: The Housewife

> "Being a woman, it is like being crucified to give up my dearest lares and penates, my 'household gods': which are all the small, warm gestures of knowing you and loving you: writing you…"
>
> *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath,* p. 218

The housewife was the hallmark of womanhood in 1950s America. As Sherry Inness has written, "This was a period when being a housewife was held up to countless middle-class women as the ideal, one that many accepted (at least on the surface), leaving wartime jobs in droves to pursue careers as stay-at-home mothers and wives" (142). This shift in national identity in the wake of war is what allowed these "middle-class women" to "pursue careers as stay-at-home mothers and wives"; however, in order to understand this career, I want to establish a definition of housewifery. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska describes this housewife figure as "typically a woman living in a heterosexual cohabiting relationship whose identity is defined in terms of her ultimate responsibility for keeping house and servicing the family regardless of employment status. Being a housewife, therefore, for many women is not simply about what they do but strikes at the heart of who they are" (151). I want to highlight this element of identity in Zweiniger-Bargielowska's definition; the housewife identity was totalizing, requiring a woman's almost complete submission. Friedan homes in on this totalizing aspect in *The Feminine Mystique*:

> But the new mystique makes the housewife-mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else, the model for all women; it presupposes that history has reached a final and glorious end in the here and now, as far as women are concerned. Beneath the sophisticated trappings, it simply makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence – as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children –

> into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity. (43)

While Friedan deals with a broader, harsher reality of female identities through the lens of "the feminine mystique," she is right in highlighting the cultural conceptions of femininity as it relates to housewifery and the exclusivity of this identity. Friedan's seminal work unpacks social constructions of femininity and their impact on women's sense of self and identity formation. The notion of "the feminine mystique" encapsulates the prevailing cultural narrative dictating that a woman's primary source of fulfillment lies in fulfilling traditional domestic roles. Within this framework, women were relegated to the confines of the home and were expected to find fulfillment solely through their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Such narrow conceptions of femininity not only imposed rigid social expectations but also stifled women's opportunities for self-expression, personal growth, and intellectual pursuits. As a result, many women grappled with a profound sense of discontent and alienation, feeling constrained by societal norms that denied them the opportunity to explore and actualize their full potential. The totalizing nature of the housewife identity was something that Plath struggled with in all genres of her work, evident even in the fig tree passage in *The Bell Jar,* wherein Esther highlights the mutual exclusivity of her forming identities.

The position of the housewife is all-consuming, demanding a subservient and willing woman; the identity demands that the woman produce with progressing intensity. As wife, woman strips herself of independence, taking on her husband's name, consuming a part of her identity and producing a new one as wife. As wife, woman must take on "shopping, cooking, cleaning, washing for themselves and for others" (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 150). As mother, woman bears a child, literally producing another being from herself, giving parts of herself even

after pregnancy as the child breastfeeds. As housewife, woman must master these skills and the quality of her work will be judged as a quality of her worth, of her femininity (Friedan 49). The housewife is judged on her ability to produce a happy home, lovely dinners, beef stew, yet all of these products are intangible or ephemeral. These products are made to be consumed, and so the housewife labors for the enjoyment of others, for the appeal to public appearance and perception. We can analyze poems and stories from the woman writer, but there is no way to taste Plath's beef stew. Though the products of the housewife are essentially transient, other's consumption of her product is crucial to the assessment of her wifely abilities. Only those who were invited to dinners or bridge games could assess the cleanliness of the home or the tastiness of the stew – all things that are subjective, informed by standards that are produced out of social conventions and Emily Post rather than the valid assessment of one's characteristics. Thus, even in the very construction of this housewife identity, the tension between the consumption of selfhood and the production of identity is fundamental. So why would Plath long for this identity?

Plath was critical of 1950s American and British societies' simultaneously limiting and insurmountable expectations for women, yet she understood and yearned for the normativity and acculturation that accompanied the housewife identity. The housewife is a figure or identity that Plath simultaneously yearns for and rails against; it is everything she stands against and everything she hopes to achieve. In Plath's prose, the housewife often functions as a figure representative of the typical or the expected – the identity itself is a way to convey status quo. Many times in her private writing, Plath portrays the housewife as an escape plan, or a role to fulfill lest her aspirations beyond the domestic fail. Plath portrays the housewife as an option to anchor her to the physical world as she is comforted by the conformity associated with this identity. Often, Plath ties eating to the housewife identity as a sense of normalcy throughout her

journals, as in an excerpt from her February 20, 1956 entry: "I want to get back to my more normal immediate path where the substance of the world is permeated by my being: eating food, reading, writing, talking, shopping" (*Unabridged Journals* 204). In this instance, "eating food" is the first thing Plath associates with normality in routine; in a sense, food is what ties her to the world, as she suggests in her February 19, 1956 journal entry:

> I long to permeate the matter of this world: to become anchored to life by laundry and lilacs, daily bread and fried eggs, and a man, the dark-eyed stranger, who eats my food and my body and my love and goes around the world all day and comes back to find solace with me at night. Who will give me a child, that will bring me again to be a member of that race which throws snowballs at me, sensing perhaps the rot at which the strike? (*Unabridged Journals* 201)

These associations of normalcy and eating show Plath's longing for a husband simply because of the sense of self that a husband – and by proxy association, the identity of wife – would provide. This quotation shows Plath's association relationship between food, love, and the body that is ever present in her work. Naturally, there is the element of sexual innuendo in the element of sexual longing for a man to eat her body is present; however, for Plath this yearning extends to a kind of all-consuming love, reaching poetic depths, rooted in "daily bread and fried eggs." This association is comforting but also religious. Plath establishes a sense of normalcy and domestic routine by employing "daily"; however, the phrase "daily bread" suggests a religiosity surrounding Plath's romantic desires. But outside of the metaphorical religiosity and the symbols of desire in this passage, this passage also functions as a result of its genre – it is private, an expression of longing, but a longing to be the object of affection, a longing to be loved that can

be found in almost every journal entry.[6] Barot argues that this private longing is underscored by Plath's feelings of being undeserving of love, and this is evident in the above 1956 passage: "the wish to inhabit, to 'permeate' the world, is a dream of domesticity – 'laundry and lilacs, daily bread and fried eggs' – and a dream of romance – 'the dark-eyed stranger, who eats my food and my body and my love.' And it is a longing, moreover, built on the fear that she might in fact deserve the opposite of what she dreams" (Barot 113). Barot underscores an issue that is pervasive in Plath's journals: she both longs to be worthy of love and has a terrible sense of anxiety about her ability to accept love and relegate herself to the totalizing identity of housewife. We see one example of concrete longing within the critical framework of consuming discursive identities is in her March 6, 1956 journal entry, wherein Plath names what she feels as a naturally, distinctly female longing: "This part of the woman in me, the concrete, present, immediate part, which needs the warmth of her man in bed and her man eating with her man thinking and communing with her soul: this part still cries to you: why, why will you not only see me and be with me" (219). In this passage, Plath makes clear that concepts of basic elements of existence like "eating, thinking, and communing" are all equally important and intrinsically tied in her feminine experience. Moreover, the issue of religiosity in Plath's view of the ideal relationship is glaring; she needs a man to "see" her and choose her as the one with whom he "communes." Like the "daily bread," religiosity in Plath's conception of a romantic and domestic relationship could be an appeal to the status-quo, to a tie to normality, a life like the standard middle-class American, church-going, nuclear family. Moreover, Plath associates consumption and normalcy with religion in *The Bell Jar*: "The only trouble was, Church, even the Catholic Church, didn't take up the whole of your life. No matter how much you knelt and prayed, you

[6] These yearning lamentations can especially be found in the journals of adolescents and young women given that they are statistically more likely to keep journals (Ben-Amos).

still had to eat three meals a day and have a job and live in the world" (164). Here, Esther searches for meaning and a way to root herself in the world through the anchor of the Catholic Church; in longing for her life to be entirely "taken up" by the Catholic Church, Esther recognizes an alternative identity that is entirely consuming.[7] In Plath's search for control and identity, she is trying to escape into love. Thus, love is essentially this "daily bread" for Plath is essentially, love; it is the reassurance that someone may love her daily and intensely. But of course, with the issue of communion, the act of consuming Christ's body involves an aspect of taking. Even in her yearning, there is a tangible tension between wanting an all-consuming love and fearing that this love may consume her entirely. This issue of Plath's fear of losing herself in consumption suggests not only that Plath desires more for herself beyond the rigid confines of femininity, but it also suggests that she fears she may not deserve that love. These anxieties come to a head because of Plath's understanding of the totalizing nature of female identities in 1950s America and England. Not only does Plath desire contrasting and mutually exclusive identities, but she vacillates constantly from one extreme to the other.

Plath demonstrates these intense vacillations between longing for and dread of the housewife, specifically as a mother figure, in her multi-part "Poem for a Birthday." From the outset of the poem, Plath establishes a theme of consumption and production, as pregnancy both expects production out of a woman while actively requiring the biological consumption of her energy and resources. In the first section of the poem, "I. Who," Plath enforces the theme of production and consumption: "The fruit's in, / Eaten or rotten. I am all mouth" (1-2) Here, Plath establishes the speaker as "all mouth" so she is taking in the "fruit," or the child growing within

[7] Ironically, if Esther were to commit herself to a religious life, she would be doing expressly the opposite of having children, maintaining a home, and maintaining her wifely duties. Rather, as a nun, Esther would serve an institution higher than herself, in a position that emphasizes the total reconfiguration of identity that is larger than the individual and is wholly rooted in scripture. Nuns often view their commitment to religious life as a means of deepening and enriching their sense of identity through spiritual growth, service to others, and communal living rather than self-actualization and self-identification.

her, the biological aspect of consumption that accompanies pregnancy. Moreover, in identifying the speaker as "all mouth," Plath highlights consumption as a key signifier of the identity of a housewife. Beyond this identity of consumer, Plath – or the speaker – addresses her own mother in "Who": "Mother, you are the one mouth / I would be tongue to. Mother of otherness / Eat me" (26-28). Here, Plath scores the complex relationship between mother and child, consumed and consumer, through a series of enjambments. This poem was written in 1959 during Plath's pregnancy with her daughter Frieda; thus she is considering how she will fulfill the identity of "Mother" and most specifically, a "Mother of otherness."

Consumption permeates the third section of this poem, "Maenad," wherein Plath creates a nearly mythological atmosphere through allusion and imagery. The titular figures of this section, the maenads, followers of Dionysus, god of wine, vegetation, and festivities, symbolize a desire to consume the carnal pleasures of life. In this section consuming begins with the speaker "Eating the fingers of wisdom" (65), but eventually the speaker becomes a "devourer" (78), employing the imperative, demanding to be fed "the berries of dark." This transformation from eating to devouring shows a critical change in the speaker; she becomes voracious, a total consumer. This "devourer" expresses a desire to take all that she may get her hands on: "I must swallow it all" (83). The speaker is attempting to learn, to consume all that she can, to best perform the identity of mother that she will soon be expected to fill. Ultimately, I argue that Plath positions her speaker as the epitome of consumed and produced: as a consumer of identity, as a producer of a child, as a mother consumed by her fetus, as an identity produced through observation out of obligation. Given this broader context, the speaker's vacillations between excitement and dread emphasize how Plath moves between extremes, particularly regarding her opinions towards motherhood and housewifery at large.

These vacillations are particularly important because of Plath's passionate regard for housewifery. It is not as though Plath vaguely desires to have children or not have children; she is shifting between intense desires on opposite ends of a spectrum, leaving a chasm of confusion and tension between these extremes. On the opposite side of longing – as I have highlighted thus far – Plath also dreads that she is undeserving of love, as Barot argues, and so she turns to mock domesticity. Take, for example, her December 12, 1958 journal entry:

> Get a nice little, safe little, sweet little loving little imitation man who'll give you babies and bread and a secure roof and a green lawn and money money money every month. Compromise. A smart girl can't have everything she wants. Take second best. Take anything nice you think you can manage and sweetly master. Don't let him get mad or die or go to Paris with his sexy secretary. Be sure he's nice nice nice. (*Unabridged Journals* 431)

Here Plath carefully, though ironically, outlines the social expectations of an ideal housewife. In Plath's portrayal of the domestic ideal, she consumes what is "give[n]" to her, at the mercy of her bread-winning husband.[8] Beyond a facetious take on housewifery, Plath communicates her conception of identity in relationships, particularly the performative element of marriage. Plath suggests that many couples perform happiness, perform perfection, perform fidelity. In this portrayal, Plath purports that marriages are made of two individuals who are more committed to their ideal, imagined, and romanticized image of marriage, children, and money than the reality of their marriage. This façade and Plath's adversity to the feminine mystique – that is, to the limiting view promulgated through patriarchal societies that expectations for marriage and wifely duties – come at the cost of what she desires since this reality is "second best." Thus, even in this

[8] And women were financially dependent on their husbands. It is easy to forget that The Equal Credit Opportunity Act, which gave every American woman, regardless of marital status, the right to open her own bank or credit account, was not ratified until 1974.

grim portrayal of marriage, the identity of wife is totalizing because it requires Plath to give up alternate paths, paths that would be the "best." Again, Plath yearns for the security and social acceptance that accompanies marriage and the identity of wife, while maintaining her disillusionment with a woman's relegation to mutually exclusive identities – and thus is consumed with anxieties surrounding "compromise."

In *The Bell Jar,* Esther Greenwood also worries about compromising her life's goals and being consumed by the domestic identity, particularly in her budding relationship with Buddy Willard. Buddy is an almost comical character, Plath's illustration of a classically American, traditional man – perfectly playing into the anxieties surrounding housewifery that Plath expresses in her journal. Plath often uses Buddy and other suitors like Constantin and Atilla to inform Esther's conception of a woman and wife's social roles:

> I tried to imagine what it would be like if Constantin were my husband.
>
> It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curlers after he'd left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he'd expect a big dinner, and I'd spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed utterly exhausted.
>
> This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's, but I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning til night … (*Bell Jar* 84)

This passage echoes the anxieties of Plath's December 1958 journal entry; not only does she portray the identity of the housewife as a sacrifice for the academically inclined woman, but

Plath also uses models to inform Esther's perception of wifely duties.[9] Interestingly, Esther consumes the model of housewifery and wifely duties not by observing her own mother but Buddy Willard's. Esther does not have a present father, so her mother definitionally cannot be a housewife. Rather, Esther fears becoming both wife and mother to Buddy. Esther is predicting what she would do as a wife – catering to the masculine ideal of a housewife to appease Constantin or Buddy or any other prop of a man – rather than what it would be like to have a husband, even though that is what she "tried to imagine." Esther cannot separate domestic duties and double standards from her idea of having a husband; thus this "dream," as Barot identifies it, is not a romantic dream, but rather a dream of an identity, a destiny, to fulfill. She claims that she "tried to imagine" what it would be like to have Constantin as "her husband," yet she imagines what she would do as a wife, thus showing Plath's consumption of the housewife model and the subsequent production of this identity. Esther must force herself to "try to imagine" this image of being loved and wed, but can only imagine the tasks and products of her labor. Plath further perpetuates Esther's negative associations with housewifery by juxtaposing the "lively, fascinating day" that her husband will live to her "dawdling" day. What may first seem like jealousy is more accurately an expression of Esther's resentment and anxieties about being consumed by wifely duties simply so that her husband might consume a healthy breakfast. Thus, the figure of the wife is reduced to a springboard from which the rest of her husband's day – and, on a larger scale, life – will begin. In this portrayal of housewifery, the wife is the producer of breakfast and the husband consumes the benefits of her labor, thus consuming her. Plath portrays the wife as a reduced, objectified, and deeply misunderstood figure. Finally, by comparing their days, Plath juxtaposes the double standards between a man who will have a "lively, fascinating day" and the objectified wife; that is, the social expectations based on gender in 1950s America.

[9] "A girl with fifteen years of straight A's" to be precise…

Plath explores double standards through Buddy Willard, particularly through Esther's resentment of Buddy for the mediocrity that he is permitted on account of his gender: “I couldn’t stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not” (*Bell Jar* 81). While Esther is referring to virginity and the subsequent double standards based on gender, this passage is important to consider in tandem with the identity of the housewife because it highlights Plath’s anxieties surrounding cultural conceptions of a woman’s sexuality. Friedan examines mid-twentieth century conceptions of female sexuality in much of *The Feminine Mystique*, ultimately concluding that social conventions support a woman who waits for marriage after finishing school and who maintains subservience to her husband’s desires. This model is partially informed by the ideal housewife figure: the 1950s housewife should be a chaste baby-maker while the husband is permitted lipstick on his collar -- as in Plath’s December 12, 1958 entry: “Don’t let him get mad or die or go to Paris with his sexy secretary” (*Unabridged Journals* 431). In this passage, Plath criticizes the popular conception of the housewife identity as one who should keep her husband happy, and if the woman does not perform her role, then her husband’s infidelity is justifiable, perhaps even deserved. Plath’s use of the verb “let” expresses the perceived element of control that the woman might feel in conforming to this identity; however, this control is merely an illusion. Regardless of a wife’s given ability to perform her wifely duties, her husband maintains his free will; there is ultimately nothing one individual can do to stop her husband’s infidelity. In many ways, the husband is the product of the housewife, his success a reflection of her efficacy in performing her wifely duties. Thus, an unfaithful husband reflects poorly on the housewife’s ability to perform her social responsibilities, in turn damaging her public and private image and reducing confidence in her conformity. Ultimately, the housewife is caught in an impossible situation

where she is responsible for her husband's actions, though he ultimately has complete authority over her image.

This bitter authority is a concept Plath explores through much of her later poetry, including “Lady Lazarus,” “Daddy,” and other poems to be discussed later; however, “The Applicant” directly explores the binary of roles that husband and the wife play in the controlled and the controller. “The Applicant” begins with the speaker, part of a collective whole, interrogating the “Applicant,” the subject of the poem:

> First, are you our sort of a person?
>
> Do you wear
>
> A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
>
> A brace or a hook,
>
> Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch, (1-5)

The questions posed by the interviewer reflect a scrutiny of the applicant's physical attributes and external features, suggesting a judgment based on superficial criteria rather than intrinsic qualities. The interrogation begins with the question "First, are you our sort of a person?" implying a predetermined standard of acceptability set by the interrogator or society at large. This question immediately establishes a sense of otherness, where the applicant is positioned as either fitting into or deviating from the accepted mold. The subsequent inquiries about wearing a glass eye, false teeth, a crutch, a brace, or a hook, as well as rubber breasts or a rubber crotch, further emphasize the theme of control through the embodied experience of identity. These physical attributes represent deviations from the norm, suggesting a fixation on the external appearance and the expectation for individuals to conform to a certain idealized image of sexuality. In this poem, Plath is breaking down the embodied experience of female identity, first

through physicality, then through the ability to conform, and finally through her ability to produce. In investigating the hands of the applicant, the speaker notes: “Here is a hand / … / To bring teacups and roll away headaches / And do whatever you tell it. / Will you marry it?” (10-14). Here, the applicant is assessed by its literally objectified body, its false breasts and crotch. Along with the later nudity of the speaker, this image sexualizes the body, but these lines also suggest that the object of the body is to produce “whatever you tell it.” It is not until the end of the poem that Plath identifies this “it,” this “applicant,” as “A living doll, everywhere you look. / It can sew, it can cook, /It can talk, talk, talk” (33-35). Through this metaphor, Plath critiques the entrenched gender roles that confine women to traditional roles as homemakers and caregivers. The doll, with its abilities to sew, cook, and incessantly converse, embodies the idealized image of the housewife, valued primarily for her domestic skills and emotional labor. Plath's repetition of the doll's capabilities, particularly the emphasis on its inane "talk, talk, talk," underscores the performative nature of femininity within patriarchal structures. Women are depicted as passive objects of consumption and production, expected to fulfill the needs and expectations of others without agency or autonomy in shaping their own identities. This portrayal of the "living doll" serves as a pointed critique of the commodification of women's identities within patriarchal societies. By reducing women to domestic objects, Plath exposes the dehumanizing effects of traditional gender norms and the limitations they impose on women's agency and self-determination. The final line of "The Applicant," "Will you marry it, marry it, marry it" (40), encapsulates the poem's overarching themes of social expectations, the commodification of identity, and the objectification of women. Here, the repetition of "marry it" emphasizes the pressure and insistence placed upon individuals, particularly women, to conform to social norms and expectations, regardless of their own desires or agency. The repetition of

"marry it" also conveys a sense of coercion and control, suggesting that individuals are expected to acquiesce to social norms and conform to prescribed roles without question. Furthermore, the use of the pronoun "it" in reference to the applicant reinforces the dehumanization and objectification of women. The applicant is reduced to a mere object to be possessed and controlled, further underscoring Plath's critique of the ways in which women's identities are commodified and consumed by social expectations.

In recognizing the limitations that accompany the identity of the housewife, Plath disdainfully expresses a different kind of anxiety about the housewife identity. Plath's February 25, 1957 journal entry highlights the pessimistic ways Plath illustrates housewifery: "I was getting worried about becoming too happily stodgily practical: instead of studying Locke, for instance, or writing - - - I go make an apple pie, or study the Joy of Cooking, reading it like a rare novel. Woah, I said to myself. You will escape into domesticity & stifle yourself by falling headfirst into a bowl of cookie batter" (269). Here we find Plath's complicated feelings towards domesticity: it is simultaneously limiting, "stifling," and escapist. In this passage, Plath uses the verb "escape" to describe her relationship with domesticity, shifting from first person to second person as she issues a warning to herself lest she succumbs to the totalizing identity of housewife through the mainstream conception of domesticity. This linguistic element of escapism is just another means by which Plath rails against an all-consuming love lest she "stifle" herself and lose herself in domesticity. Interestingly, Marsha Bryant argues that "Plath's domesticity is neither escapist nor compulsive, but a set of skills that complements the art of writing" (220). While Bryant is right insofar as Plath intensely studied models of housewife figures as seen in her journals and even her poetry (such as like that of her grandmother in "Point Shirley"), I argue almost the inverse of Bryant's point: rather, that, for Plath, domesticity is compulsive and writing

is escapist. I argue that this compulsive domesticity is both a result of and results in Plath's studied domesticity; Plath consumes the image and model of housewifery that was fed to her as a young girl, as a nanny during her summers, at a women's college like Smith. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther studies the domesticity of her mother and grandmother: "I started adding up all the things I couldn't do. I began with cooking. My grandmother and my mother were such good cooks that I left everything to them" (75). Clearly, Esther believes the ability to cook is paramount for a mother to master; she studies how her mother and grandmother cook, and ultimately chooses to remain ignorant of this domestic task. Plath's journals, like many journals, occasionally list what she ate and drank that day or at a specific event; however, in the wake of her marriage and on her honeymoon, her description of meals, foods, and kitchens changes entirely. These many sprawling accounts of the couple's meals and grocery shopping perfectly showcase this studied domesticity. Plath realizes that upon their return from continental Europe, she will be expected to perform the role of housewife for Hughes. She must learn how to cook, keep house, and perform the domestic role that she so pointedly ignored before:

> Never did a new bride queen it over her deep-freeze, washing machine, pressure cooker, et. al. as I do over my one-ring petrol stove, single frying pan, cold water sink, tangles of straw for cleaning, and iceless storage pantry, where I keep my vegetables, bottles of oil, wine and vinegar, and all my cooking preparations. Yesterday I read through the vegetable section of my blessed Rombauer, mouth watering, to cull all the sauteed dishes: we have chiefly potatoes, eggs, tomatoes and onions, from which, during the summer, I hope to pull enough variety to keep Ted from roaring protest. How I love to cook; the delectable recipes in the book, with all the right touches of seasoning, and always the one ingredient which I

> don't have, make me long for the time when I can cook with modern range, icebox, and a variety of food. At least, if I manage on this narrow leash, I should be in heaven with the most modest of American kitchens. (*Unabridged Journals* 248-49)

Hughes and Plath's honeymoon is particularly important as the setting for this passage not only because it acts as a rehearsal for the true performance of the housewife, but also because it is an observation of the foreign. Plath and Hughes intended to forge an artistic partnership of poetic depths, and Plath likely wanted to learn the meals that were emblematic of the "exotic" French and Spanish experience. Plath is consuming not only the meals on the honeymoon, but she is consuming the different recipes and practices; she is intently studying domesticity so that upon the resumption of her normal life, she will be able to perform the role of housewife while writing and pursuing a career in order to support herself and her husband. Thus, this studied domesticity acts as an escape from the confines of the limiting identity of the housewife; in studying compulsively, perhaps Plath felt she could have it all like she feared she would not be able to do in her March 1951 entry: "Am I strong enough to do both well? ... That is the crux of the matter, and I hope to steel myself for the test... as frightened as I am …" (*Unabridged Journals* 55-56). And perhaps, in recording these meals, Plath was attempting to give a sense of permanency to what she will perform at home, since that will inevitably disappear as it is made to be consumed. Moreover, in her journals, Plath highlights a model of domesticity in the form of a fellow female author, Virginia Woolf: "And just now I pick up the blessed diary of Virginia Woolf…And she works off her depression over rejections … by cleaning out the kitchen. And cooks haddock & sausage. Bless her" (*Unabridged Journals* 269). Woolf compulsively performs domestic tasks to "work off her depression," and Plath portrays an almost optimistic view of domesticity; perhaps

Plath felt a sense of relief in seeing Woolf as a model of a writer and a homemaker given that Plath's greatest anxieties around these identities is their perceived mutual exclusivity.

As in her March 1951 journal entry, Plath was intensely aware of the inherent struggles for women to exist in either realm independently, as a housewife or a writer, let alone the scrutiny she would receive if she attempted to perform both identities simultaneously. These anxieties stem from the totalizing nature of these identities, and they follow her through her marriage and life. As a result, Plath often expresses a negative view of domestic life, presenting it as a punishment, as something she deserves:

> But I am not. I am inclined to babies and bed and brilliant friends and a magnificent stimulating home where geniuses drink gin in the kitchen after a delectable dinner and read their own novels and tell about why the stock market is the way it will be and discuss scientific mysticism … — well, anyhow, this is what I was meant to make for a man, and to give him this colossal reservoir of faith and love for him to swim in daily, and to give him children; lots of them, in great pain and pride. (221)

This passage from her March 6, 1956 journal entry is just one example of Plath's view toward taking on the identity of a woman writer and housewife simultaneously. Here Plath places herself on the outskirts of this "brilliant" conversation among "geniuses," as an ornament of domesticity, a product of her femininity and conformity, thus incorporating the performance of the housewife identity. As a woman, as a wife, she is simply a prop in her husband's life, something to produce dinner and love, though she does not have to feel it herself; their relationship does not mandate reciprocity. She watches the "geniuses drink gin in the kitchen after a delectable dinner" though she gives no real sense that she is a part of these conversations. Plath consumes the scraps of

conversation from the geniuses; she consumes their idea of what she should provide for a man, and in turn, produces a home – more specifically, a space for their conversation to take place. It is as though the ideal housewife is consumed by the idea of producing. Even in the above quotation, because Plath presents what she "was meant to make for a man," production is intrinsically tied with domesticity. The real pain of this assessment of production is that it relegates the woman to dedicating her life to that task; she is obligated to produce, and so Plath surmises that she was put here to provide this for a man, and that it would be too exhausting to be a writer as well. In many ways, Plath's anxieties were valid; the housewife is relegated to constant production, giving her energy, her body, and her life, but if Plath were to pursue a career like writing, like the "geniuses" in her living room, she would take on the identity of writer, who is expected to produce parts of herself in her works and ideas. In both of these identities, the woman is consumed, consuming, produced, and producing, leading to the final, commodified identity of the madwoman, who is a product, essentially, of the expectations placed upon the woman writer and the housewife.

Chapter III: The Madwoman

"What vision of madness in a mad world?"

The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, p. 275

What is an analysis of Plath without an analysis of feminine madness? The madwoman as an identity is perhaps the most commodified of them all; she is both the product of and a reaction to the conditions of her suffering. As a figure that originates in patriarchal thought, her conception is reliant on the very object of her suffering: patriarchal conceptions of feminine identity (Gilbert and Gubar 45-46). In this way, she is a feedback loop of an identity. Once a woman has been deemed mad, and even more so, once she has accepted the conditions of her madness and the rigidity of the identity of the madwoman, her very suffering and its perception further perpetuate her suffering.

Gender is inherent to the identity of the madwoman in a way that is akin to but further ingrained than the woman writer or the housewife. The madwoman as an identity is transient, existing in various forms before the monstrous "madwoman in the attic" became identified as a figure in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's revolutionary feminist literary critical work, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. The titular figure of the madwoman is rooted in an investigation of Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason as the theorists track the appearances of feminine madness and the madwoman's social roles across literature. The madwoman is defined by gender, as though her mental state and her gender are intrinsically intertwined; in fact, when the scholars and Plath alike were writing, gender was inextricably tied to mental illness as the "concept of hysterical neurosis [was] deleted with the 1980 DSM III" (Tasca 110). While gender was not a diagnostic criteria for hysteria, women were more frequently diagnosed with this generic label; moreover, "in a characteristic manner the suffering women also differed in the attribution of the causes of their discomfort"

(Tasca 117). This inability to originate the source of the suffering that these "hysterical" women faced emphasizes not only the abstract nature of feminine suffering in a patriarchal society, but also the overdiagnosis of women in the mid-twentieth century with vague "melancholy" (Tasca 112). The issue of overdiagnosis in women extends beyond the medical field and beyond the mid-twentieth century. The tred of overdiagnosis led to a sense of entrapment that Gilbert and Gubar identify through their framework of "the distinctively female diseases of anorexia and agoraphobia" (85). This seminal theory, published in 1979 when hysteria was still a valid diagnostic label according to the DSM II, remains at the core of many discourses in the realm of disability studies and feminist theory.

Just as mid-twentieth century women were overdiagnosed with hysteria, literary critics of the mid-1900s engaged in impassioned overdiagnosis and revisionist analysis, particularly in Plathian studies.[10] Maria Rovito examines the legacy of Gilbert and Gubar and "the madwoman theory" as they relate to Plath in her aptly named article, "Toward a New Madwoman Theory: Reckoning the Pathologization of Sylvia Plath," ultimately taking a more pejorative view of the pathologization in literary criticism:

> When a diagnosis is forced upon a living or dead author without their consent and uses stigmatizing representation of mental difference to conduct this pathologization, this act does not help or forward disability rights, but rather causes harm to the goals of disability justice. … Madwoman theory argues for a privileging of disabled women's voices over those of psychiatric and

[10] Maria Rovito argues that "Hughes's connections to literary critics, such as Robert Lowell, Al Alvarez, and George Steiner, helped canonize Plath as the 'madwoman,' pigeonholing her as paranoid and destructive" (321); however, psychoanalytical criticism continued without the help of Hughes, including work by that of Hillary Clark, Frederick Feirstein, Anthony Ryle, B. Cooper, and countless others.

> psychoanalytic discourses, which obscure and cloud disabled women's narratives by placing a clinical label on them. (319)

While Rovito's perspective transitions abruptly from literary analysis to stigmatization, leaving little room for genuine and constructive discourse surrounding the appearance and representation of mental illnesses in literature, she aptly advocates for those with disabilities concerning the dangers of illegitimate diagnosis. Before I investigate Plath's portrayal of the madwoman identity and madness in Plath's life, I want to acknowledge that the object of this paper is not to posthumously pathologize Plath, but rather to explore discursive identities and their ultimate effect on Plath's writing and death, extending her case to the larger social conception of feminine identities.

The core of my argument is the contention that these feminine identities are exemplified in the fig tree passage, though the madwoman figure appears fairly late as Esther "saw [her]self sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death" (*Bell Jar* 77). Interestingly, this final identity is the only one that Esther fully projects onto herself. Esther observes potential identities as figs, though these identities are objective as Plath does not employ the first person until the end of the passage; Plath does utilize the first person in the latter half as Esther returns to the image of her body. The identities of the woman writer and the housewife are both represented in figs as something Esther views as desirable, just as they are exemplified in the models Esther consumes throughout the novel. However, in the case of the madwoman, this identity reveals itself through Esther's actions, in the way she interacts with this mental exercise of recalling the fig tree. The identity of the madwoman, shown through experiences of madness, often appears more subtly in Plath's work. Though she openly explores madness, there is still a feeling of uncertainty and taboo surrounding this discourse because, as Linda Wagner-Martin argues,

"disdain for her own health was part of the feminine self-sacrificing ethos that dominated many women's lives at mid-century" (42). Women's healthcare, particularly mental healthcare, was not a priority in mid-twentieth century America and Britain as many of the psychotherapies are now clinically proven to be more harmful than helpful. Thus, the identity of the madwoman is one of disenfranchisement on all accounts – her marginalization has driven her to the point of madness, and once she has reached it, she is further marginalized. Obviously madness is not something anyone longs for, and mental illness is an affliction; however, it is important to understand the cyclical nature of the suffering that the madwoman faces. This marginalization creates a sense of entrapment, something Plath details in her January 21, 1958 journal entry:

> Perhaps the remedy for suppressed talent is to become queer: queer and isolate, yet somehow able to maintain one's queerness while feeding food & words to all the world's others…I wonder if, shut in a room, I could write for a year. I panic: no experience! Yet what couldn't I dredge up from my mind? Hospitals & mad women. Shock treatment & insulin trances. Tonsils & teeth out. Petting, parking, a mismanaged loss of virginity … I make up forgotten details. Faces and violence. Bites and wry words. Try these. (*Unabridged Journals* 316)

This quotation highlights several key tenets of Plath's conception of the madwoman. As she is musing on writing *The Bell Jar* and moving toward long-form prose, Plath wonders about the potential benefits of madness. She explores the concept of the madwoman in *The Bell Jar* as the autobiographical novel details the summer of Esther's mental health degradation, drawing on Plath's own experience. As Esther juggles her internship, her romantic and sexual relationships, and viewing the various models before her, she crumbles under the social pressure to select an identity. This crumbling includes an eventual attempt at suicide that lands Esther in a mental

health facility, though her mental illness is never explicitly defined. While Plath does not long to be ill – much the contrary, she articulates her aspiration to improve her health – she correctly identifies the benefit of embracing the commodified identity of the madwoman as a writer. Drawing on her own experience, Plath bemoans her inability to set aside her experience being institutionalized: “Yet what couldn’t I dredge up from my mind?” She conjures images of “mad women” who receive the same procedures she received, “shock treatment & insulin trances.” Esther experiences both of these procedures as well as other events Plath details in this entry, thus solidifying that Plath was considering the commodification of the madwoman in her prose. That said, this entry indicates hesitancy. Plath has consumed models of writers, but this instance is noteworthy because as she “wonders,” employing contemplative language like “perhaps,” and rhetorical questions of her ability to write, she ultimately resolves to “try.” Within one entry, Plath has consumed the social role of the madwoman and what it means to be mad while noting that she will attempt to produce something out of this “queerness.” Moreover, Plath again identifies “food & words” as the product of her labor, but as something meant ultimately to be consumed by others. That said, the connection between “food & words” suggests a certain transience in her product; food is meant to be consumed like writing is, but writing should withstand time. The transient nature of these products induces a sense of anxiety in Plath as part of her “wondering” is about if she is able to be “queer” while producing both “food & words” simultaneously. Therein lies the inherent contradiction of feminine identities depicted in this passage: Can the "queer," "isolate," "mad woman" coexist simultaneously with the housewife who prepares and produces "food" and the writer who crafts and produces "words"? Gilbert and Gubar mused on these same anxieties, ultimately articulating the following:

> Inevitably, then, since [women] were trapped in so many ways in the architecture – both the houses and the institutions – of patriarchy, women expressed their anxiety of authorship by comparing their "presumptuous" literary ambitions with the domestic accomplishments that had been prescribed for them. Inevitably, too, they expressed their claustrophobic rage by enacting rebellious escapes. (85)

This sense of rebellion is something Rovito encourages us to move beyond in the new madwoman theory; however, there is much to be said about rebellion as the product of the madwoman. If the madwoman has been so preoccupied with producing both the performance of identity and the fruits of that identity, it seems only natural that the madwoman's product is her rebellion, her story, and more precisely, her voice.

In the previous chapters, I have explored feminine identities that are both consumed and produced, analyzing how Plath presents consumption and production of identity across her works. The woman writer and the housewife demand production from their subject, but it is in this production – even more so, in the desire to produce – that she is consumed entirely. The experience of the mad woman, like the previous identities, is totalizing, requiring complete yielding to the condition of madness, to the relegation of deficiency, and to the ultimate submission to the patriarchy. The experience of the madwoman can best be understood through Plath's portrayal of madness because Plath explores the identity of a madwoman as someone who fails to perform and acculturate to the rigorous and limiting expectations for women; thus, Esther personifies the failure. An example of this personification of failure occurs in *The Bell Jar* when Buddy has just psychoanalyzed Esther, categorizing her as "neurotic." This propels Buddy and Esther into the topic of their future together, a conversation that eventually ends with Esther's declaration (much to Buddy's chagrin) that "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 " (*Bell Jar* 94). This issue of mutual exclusivity harkens back to the fig tree passage. Even in that passage, the madwoman makes her appearance as Esther "starves" to death because of her inability to choose between what she perceives as mutually exclusive options.

This starvation and the theme of consumption as it relates to food is nearly inescapable, and I argue that Plath uses food to demonstrate Esther's mental degradation; from its opening, *The Bell Jar* constantly showcases food and eating. As Esther comments on the impending electrocution of the Rosenbergs, she remembers the impact of seeing a cadaver: "For weeks afterward, the cadaver's head – or what there was left of it – floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast and behind the face of Buddy Willard, who was responsible for my seeing it in the first place…" (*Bell Jar* 1-2). Not only does this description follow one of the most iconic opening lines in American literature, but it establishes several of the major struggles Esther goes on to face as the novel progresses. Buddy is naturally connected to food, indicating a kind of ever-present anxiety over her romantic endeavors that is typical for a young woman of the 1950s, but what is most pertinent about this quotation is the dimensionality and connectivity of the domestic, the mad, and food. In characterizing the cadaver's head as "floating," Esther blurs the boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical, suggesting a disconcerting entanglement between her corporeal existence and her psychological state. This lack of delineation emphasizes Esther's fraught relationship with food and body image, emblematic of broader cultural anxieties regarding femininity, and underscores the exploration of formation of discursive identities in Plath's work. The imagery of the cadaver's head permeating her daily rituals evokes a sense of existential unease, as Esther grapples with the visceral remnants of mortality amidst the banality

of domestic life. In blurring the “floating head” with her breakfast plate, Esther fails to maintain a Cartesian mind-body dualism, in which the mind and body remain distinct entities with separate ontological statuses. Descartes proposed a radical split between the immaterial mind, or soul, and the material body, asserting that the existence of self is rooted in thinking, most succinctly stated in his seminal work, *Discourse on Method*: "I think, therefore I am” (73). In this declaration, Descartes establishes the primacy of consciousness, implying the separation of the mind (thinking) from the body (existence). This separation forms the core of Cartesian dualism, emphasizing the fundamental distinction between mental and physical aspects of reality. The very impact of the Cartesian split on identity is profound as Descartes’ affirmation of the self as a thinking being suggests that identity is rooted in consciousness rather than in physical attributes or bodily experiences. I argue the inverse, that social interactions and bodily experiences are at the core of the formation of identity, particularly discursive identities of which Esther and Plath were so conscious. Descartes's emphasis on the primacy of thought lays the groundwork for modern conceptions of selfhood, which continue to grapple with the complexities of identity in relation to mind-body dualism; thus, it is important to highlight the absence of Cartesian dualism in Esther’s account because it affirms that Esther’s experience forming identity is rooted in corporeality.

This root in bodily experience impacts Esther’s narration of food; as Esther’s mental health declines, her relationship with food and her narration of the food changes entirely. Her narration critically transitions from sprawling descriptions of caviar and luncheons to conversations with her psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon, from whom she receives electro-convulsive therapy. Esther imagines her anticipated discussions with Dr. Gordon: “Then he would lean back in his chair and match the tips of his fingers together in a little steeple and tell me why I couldn’t

sleep and why I couldn't read and why I couldn't eat and why everything people did seemed so silly, because they only died in the end" (*Bell Jar* 133). In this imagined conversation, Esther shows a sense of nihilism as a signifier of her depression, but more pertinent, she reveals her ailments, the physical manifestations of her mental illness. From this vignette of a larger conversation, Dr. Gordon decides to prescribe another round of electroconvulsive therapy (*Bell Jar* 135). Along with electroconvulsive therapy, Esther and Plath alike underwent insulin coma therapy. Neither of these practices are mainstream clinical treatments in psychiatry, and "more critically, several historians have deemed ICT [insulin coma therapy] a relic in the secret closet of psychiatry's past; these are most notably historians of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), the only somatic therapy still in use and the one most notoriously criticized" (Doroshow 213). Moreover, ECT and insulin coma therapy (ICT) in the mid-20th century were subject to criticism for their potential contributions to the systematic oppression of women within psychiatric care.

The prevailing gender bias in psychiatric diagnosis resulted in a disproportionate number of women being diagnosed with conditions such as depression and hysteria, for which these treatments were frequently prescribed (Krasny 126). Consequently, women became overrepresented among those subjected to ECT and ICT, often without their informed consent, thus highlighting a systemic disregard for patient autonomy and agency. Furthermore, ECT and ICT were occasionally employed as tools of control, particularly in cases where women challenged or diverged from prevailing social expectations. The adverse effects associated with these treatments, including memory loss, cognitive impairment, and physical complications, disproportionately affected women, exacerbating their marginalization within the healthcare system (Munkholm et al.). This medial marginalization contributed to and perpetuated preexisting prejudices and further engrained social expectations for feminine conformity.

Interestingly, second-wave feminism – spanning from the early 1960s to the late 1980s and characterized by a focus on women's rights beyond suffrage, advocating for reproductive rights, workplace equality, and challenging traditional gender roles and social expectations – identified this complex as an extension of violence against women.

This violence against women coupled with the legitimate, clinical side effects inflicted by these treatments establishes the historical context that Plath considers while portraying Esther's experience undergoing these treatments. In Esther's critical transformation in her discourse surrounding food and eating, Plath reveals the harsh realities of these women-client-victims. Esther begins the novel content in her body, and shares with the audience her deviance from the norm: "no matter how much I eat, I never put on weight" (*Bell Jar* 24). Esther understands but is seemingly unbothered that her relationship with food and eating differs from that of her peers in New York: "I made a point of eating so fast I never kept the other people waiting who … were trying to reduce. Almost everybody I met in New York was trying to reduce" (*Bell Jar* 25). Here Esther reveals that she is cognizant of her deviation from normative dietary and eating practices, but rather than conform and alter her diet, she instead alters the rate at which she eats. During the 1950s, societal expectations regarding women's bodies were deeply intertwined with the prevailing cultural construct of the "feminine mystique," which perpetuated the ideal of the suburban housewife, emphasizing women's roles as caregivers and homemakers while simultaneously devaluing their intellectual and professional aspirations. Within this framework, women were not only expected to conform to traditional gender roles but also to embody a specific physical ideal characterized by delicacy and thinness (Friedan 133). Thus, this narrow conception of femininity created a pressure cooker environment wherein women felt compelled to engage in extreme measures, such as restrictive dieting, to attain the prescribed ideal. The

relentless pursuit of thinness was not merely a matter of personal preference but rather a manifestation of the social imperative dictating women's worth and desirability.

Esther's encounters with dieting reflect the pervasive influence of the social pressures to conform to narrow beauty standards. Plath's portrayal underscores diet culture's perpetuation of unrealistic expectations and contribution to the erosion of women's mental and physical health. Esther's engagement with dieting is not portrayed as a mere personal choice but rather as a response to the imposition of social expectations for bodily appearance as was ingrained in the milieu of mid-twentieth century America. Esther's observations of social norms regarding eating practices and bodily habits are intertwined with her quest for identity and self-worth in a world where women's value is often equated with their physical appearance. It is as though Esther's different diet and experience with food and eating habits only exacerbate her feelings of social, feminine inadequacy. Not only can Esther not relate to her New York peers, but when she considers returning to college after her internship, she reflects on the diets of her college peers: "I would be way ahead when college started … and able to enjoy my last year instead of swotting away with no makeup and stringy hair, on a diet of coffee and Benzedrine, the way most of the seniors taking honors did, until they finished their thesis" (*Bell Jar* 122). Esther's desire to be "way ahead" before college starts reflects her aspiration to conform to social ideals of success, which often intertwine academic excellence with physical appearance and feminine norms. But at the same time, Esther is critical of the women who are "swotting away with no makeup and stringy hair, on a diet of coffee and Benzedrine," thus portraying the prevailing image of the serious, studious woman, as someone who must sacrifice personal grooming and physical well-being in pursuit of academic achievement. This portrayal highlights the dichotomy between academic rigor and traditional notions of femininity, suggesting that women are

expected to prioritize their appearance and femininity rather than intellectual pursuits, and when they do, they are worthy of criticism. Moreover, the description of these seniors engaging in extreme measures like adhering to restrictive diets and relying on stimulants like Benzedrine emphasizes the high stakes associated with academic success for women and the sacrifices required to meet insurmountable expectations. Esther's acknowledgment of her own inability – really, lack of desire – to conform to these norms underscores her sense of alienation and disconnection from her peers. Despite her desire to excel academically and aesthetically, Esther finds herself unable to fit into the mold prescribed by society, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt.

Though these passages invite psychoanalysis, I argue that Esther's meticulous scrutiny of the eating habits of those around her – like her observations of the "reducing" women in New York and her pill-popping peers – serves as a lens through which she deciphers and interprets the tacit codes of femininity and social belonging. In meticulously detailing the rituals, behaviors, and bodily habits associated with food consumption, Esther demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the performative aspects of identity construction. Her observations suggest a deliberate engagement with the discursive constructs of femininity, wherein food and eating practices serve as potent symbols of social status, self-control, and conformity. Furthermore, Esther's conscious consumption of these discursive signs of identity underscores her awareness of the constructed nature of social norms and the ways in which they shape individual subjectivities. By scrutinizing and internalizing social expectations surrounding food and eating, Esther grapples with the paradoxical demands placed upon women to simultaneously indulge in and restrain their appetites, reflecting broader cultural anxieties surrounding femininity, desire, and self-discipline. Esther's observations of eating practices serve as a microcosm of her broader quest for identity

and autonomy within a society that seeks to confine and define her according to rigid, gendered norms.

Interestingly, Plath herself did not seem to struggle with fad-dieting. The word "diet" only appears thrice in her journals, all in reference to the diets of her children. So, I argue Plath designed these portrayals of the polarized diet culture in the 1950s in order to explore another realm in which women were governed in the mid-twentieth century. Esther's perception of identity signifiers that are codified through bodily experiences like eating only further underscores the pervasiveness of consumption in Plath's work. Through consuming these signs of identity Esther becomes entrenched in her attempt to appeal to all these identities, to grasp at each fig. Attempting to juggle myriad intersecting expectations and social conceptions of acceptable femininity, Esther is consumed entirely by these different models and identities.

Thus, this gluttonous, food-loving young woman is administered ICT and struggles to garner the intended clinical results of an insulin reaction: "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 it was a good thing Mrs. Guinea hadn't seen me like this, because I looked just as if I were going to have a baby" (*Bell Jar* 192). Here, Esther is clearly grappling with her identity as it is embodied. She no longer looks down and views the skinny, bright girl who might write for the "slicks" but rather sees an embodiment of the loss of her own autonomy. Not only does Esther see herself as akin to a pregnant woman – and imagine how horrifying it would be to be perceived as such – but given the cause of this weight gain, in seeing her body, she views her mental illness embodied. Nóra Séllei comments on the connection between pregnancy and madness in this

quotation specifically, exploring the bottle that Esther is fed once the ICT finally produces the desired effect:

> Consequently, at the institute she becomes what she flees from: on one hand, she assumes the image of the fertile and pregnant woman she otherwise rejects, with all the culturally inscribed connotations of body fat; on the other hand, in this context regression into childhood evokes exposure, dependency, and obedience since the milk Esther gets is her reward for being a "good girl," her body obeyed, and produced a reaction. (149)

Séllei is right in noting the relationship between mother and mothered in this context, further highlighting Esther's forced relinquishment of autonomy at the institute. In relinquishing her control, her madness transforms from an internal experience to an external representation. At the institute, she loses the ability to perform alternative identities and can be only the mad woman; thus, her madness is embodied as a product of the madwoman identity. Essentially, her body itself becomes the product of her illness – a product of the madwoman identity. The effects of the ICT and ECT – more generally, the violence enacted upon her – are tangibly exterior; thus, she can no longer perform through embodied signs the physicality of normality, like maintaining a conventionally attractive body. Like Plath, who bore a scar for the rest of her life after her unsuccessful 1953 suicide attempt, Esther now reckons with the physicality of the mad woman. Esther's physical change is inflicted upon her by an institution, and thus, Plath ingeniously comments on the lack of autonomy in mental health settings and the subsequent complicit contribution to patriarchal oppression that ICT and ECT made.

Even through this violence and physical transformation, Esther is working toward improvement, mental and physical. As a result of the embodiment of her treatment-suffering,

Esther continues to associate food with her madness. But even more interestingly, Esther associates displays of food with normalcy: “I looked with love at the lineup of waiting trays – the white paper napkins, folded in their crips, isosceles triangles, each under the anchor of its silver fork, the pale domes of soft-boiled eggs in the blue egg cups, the scalloped glass shells of orange marmalade. All I had to do was reach out and claim my tray, and the world would be perfectly normal” (*Bell Jar* 210). Not only is Esther “looking,” showing an element of removal, but in the intangibility of these trays and her subsequent inability to “reach out and claim” her food, making her world “perfectly normal,” Esther underscores the connection between consumption and normality, thus highlighting the subsequent detachment that her therapies impose. Moreover, on a formalist level, this quotation is ripe with adjectives to the extent that nearly every noun is coupled with a descriptor. This kind of structure is reminiscent of Esther’s glowing description of the *Ladies' Day* luncheons at the outset of the novel; these parallels cement the association between food and normalcy. That said, in the above passage, what is notable about the mad woman is the element of removal – in this instance, Esther does not receive any food from the “lineup of waiting trays” but is pulled away for more treatment. Even when the madwoman is ready to consume the tangible, real world, she is denied, and instead, she is consumed by these treatments which aim to produce a new self, a new woman who is distinct from her madness. In this way, Plath, Esther, and the figure of the madwoman are essentially imprisoned by their madness. In her February 28, 1961 journal entry, Plath expresses this very idea of an imprisonment in madness from the long-lasting negative effects and social stigma of receiving ECT: “Today is the day. Amid the chatter & breakfasting off all the other patients I alone am quiet & without food. Yet I feel curiously less worried about losing my appendix than being electrocuted” (*Unabridged Journals* 601). Plath was hospitalized for appendicitis, but as she is

deprived of breakfast, similar to Esther before receiving treatment, Plath experiences physical reminders of the suffering of "being electrocuted." Though Plath is not explicitly criticizing ECT and ICT, this anxiety, this misplaced "worry" shows the long lasting effects of these treatments and the trauma they inflict. By being denied her breakfast and the ability to eat, Plath is instead consumed by this anxiety and is thus perpetually jailed by the looming possibility of receiving another round of harmful treatments. This feeling of imprisonment is something Plath explored in much of her poetry. Plath's most famous poems were written in the last few months – weeks, really – of her life (Clark 902). In this period, in the wake of Hughes's infidelity, the couple's subsequent separation, and Plath raising their two children independently in an apartment where W.B. Yeats once lived, Plath wrote on myriad topics, but naturally explored the feelings of a woman consumed by the occupations of maintaining a home, a creative career, two children, and living with the disappointment of her broken marriage.[11] This analysis is not a biography, but it is important to establish the conditions that would have produced the same kind of suffocating consumption that the madwoman experiences. Plath explores feelings of imprisonment in "The Jailer"; from the outset, Plath saturates the poem with the theme of consumption, establishing a binary between not only the titular figure of "The Jailer" but the subject, the speaker who is jailed: "My night sweats grease his breakfast plate" (1). The juxtaposition of the jailer's seemingly unaffected consumption of the speaker's distress with the speaker's own deteriorating physical state highlights the asymmetrical power dynamics at play. Continuing this exploration, the speaker's contemplation of her own physicality—"My ribs show. What have I eaten? / Lies and smiles" (22-23) —further underscores the theme of consumption in the imprisoned madwoman. Here, the madwoman's skeletal frame, her very physicality, serves as a metaphor for

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[11] Only Plath's own writing could sufficiently express the mental state she experienced in order to corroborate my argument, but her final journals were infamously destroyed by Hughes.

the emotional and psychological toll of her confinement, suggesting that she is being spiritually consumed by the deceit and pressure demanded of her. The lines "My ribs show. What have I eaten? / Lies and smiles" encapsulate the paradox of her condition, where the very act of survival feels like a betrayal of her true self. The mention of "lies and smiles" suggests the corrupt nature of the relationship between the Jailer and the jailed forces the madwoman (or the inmate) to suppress her true feelings and experiences.

Furthermore, the madwoman's fantasies about death—"Hung, starved, burned, hooked" (35)—underscore the theme of suffering and the struggle for autonomy within a patriarchal society. The ambiguity of who perpetrates the violence reflects the pervasive sense of powerlessness experienced by the madwoman, as she grapples with the oppressive forces that seek to consume her. While he consumes her "night sweats," the product of her suffering, she illustrates the dynamic through the theme of consumption and dining:

> I imagine him
> Impotent as distant thunder,
> In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration.
> I wish him dead or away.
> That, it seems, is the impossibility
>
> That being free. What would the dark
> Do without fevers to eat? (36-42)

Despite her fantasies of liberation, the Jailer retains his power over the madwoman, as illustrated through her description of how she eats her "ghost ration" in his "shadow." This imagery evokes a sense of psychological imprisonment, where the madwoman's very sustenance is tainted by a

shadow, a presence of her oppressor that is looming, more removed than a corporeal figure. The speaker's desire for the Jailer's demise or departure reflects her longing for freedom from the oppressive forces that confine her, yet she acknowledges the impossibility of such liberation within the confines of her reality. Carole Stone writes on these poems from Plath's most productive era, arguing that because "many of these poems are about marriage," this period of her writing was a kind of cleansing, "as if before Plath's new artistic and personal life could begin, she had to rid herself of the old" (91). Plath's juxtaposition of consumption and being consumed in "The Jailer" illuminates the complex dynamics at play within the madwoman's psyche; her oppression is cyclical because, being deemed mad, not only must she live with the looming possibility of harmful therapies, but she loses value in society and she consequently loses the ability to break this perpetual suffering through conformity, bringing us to another element of madwoman theory: madness as a rebellion.

Gilbert and Gubar famously frame the madwoman figure as a rebellious response to the constraints of conventional femininity and the limitations imposed upon women by patriarchal norms. The madwoman embodies a rejection of social expectations and a refusal to conform to the prescribed roles of wife, mother, and homemaker. She symbolizes the unruly and disruptive forces that threaten to disrupt the status quo and challenge the dominant power structures. For Gilbert and Gubar, the madwoman in the attic represents both the potential for subversion and the consequences of social repression, much like Plath's exploration of madness in "The Jailer" and *The Bell Jar*. By refusing to adhere to normative femininity, the madwoman asserts her autonomy and agency, albeit in a manner that is often deemed socially unacceptable or insane; "in other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been

'killed' into art" (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Her rebellion is a form of resistance against the oppressive forces that seek to confine and silence her.

The figure and poem that best describe the phenomenon of madness as rebellion in Plath's canon is "Lady Lazarus." Written within six months of her suicide, Plath explores the "art" of "dying" in the terms of an embodied performance taking the form of "the big strip tease" for "the peanut-crunching crowd" (29, 26). This crowd, those around her, the public, not only consume "peanuts" but also the embodied madness that is her striptease and her subsequent reclamation of her unique experience as a madwoman:

> These are my hands
>
> My knees.
>
> I may be skin and bone,
>
> Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman. (31-34)

As the speaker, the "smiling woman," takes stock of her corporeal figure, she notes that she is "the same, identical woman," suggesting that though her metaphysical frame has shifted, the embodied presentation of the female figure does not reflect this change. The speaker involves the crowd, performing for them the art of dying on her own terms, and in so doing, she is both reclaiming the bodily experience of madness and embodying madness. As the director of this production, the madwoman gains the ultimate power over her lunacy, over producing the identity: she is able to rise again from her deconstruction. Through self-identification and subsequent reclamation of the identity of the madwoman, she is able to parse her gender from her madness and deconstruct the patriarchal confines of her identity. Thus, the speaker can now rise again and "eat men like air" (84). In the case of Lady Lazarus, the conditions of visualizing

the embodied experience of her identity empowers her to rebel in the form of suicide, the ultimate act of autonomy; Séllei argues that "we are … inclined to consider suicide as an autonomous act like creation" (140). Thus, though suicide should be the ultimate destruction of identity, it is in through this very act that the madwoman gains her voice.

Perhaps the very reclamation of her madness is the madwoman's product; for Plath such reclamation takes the form of her writing, but other madwomen are not so lucky. Though they gain power in their lunacy, they do not garner respect, for there is no established social role for madwomen outside of suicide, stigmatization, or institutionalization. To counter this convention, I propose that madwomen should convert their identity, one that was forced upon them by the patriarchal conditions in which they function, and reclaim it. The product of the madwoman is her voice. But can she be heard?

Conclusion: Can The Madwoman Be Heard?

"I have experienced love, sorrow, madness, and if I cannot make these experiences meaningful, no new experience will help me."

The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, p. 458

Being heard is a necessary precondition to being understood.

Discourse, that which shapes identity (as I have explained throughout this essay), is ultimately subjective. Every rhetorical situation offers only the potential to be misread, for signs to go unidentified or misinterpreted. The madwoman identity is one that is deeply misunderstood, even by the madwoman herself. Through the self-actualization of the madwoman identity – that which is both a product of and a reaction to the conditions of her suffering and formed entirely on patriarchal conceptions of both femininity and lunacy – the madwoman gains her voice. Self-actualization within patriarchal conditions often involves recognizing the systemic forces that contribute to personal struggles and feelings of madness. Through self-awareness and critical reflection, the madwoman comes to understand that dominant discourse shapes both her experiences and her perception of herself and her identity. By acknowledging the impact of patriarchal oppression, the madwoman gains a sense of agency and empowerment, realizing that her struggles are not solely personal but rooted in the larger social dynamic and discursive situation. This realization can provide a reprieve from feelings of madness by validating and contextualizing their experiences within the larger framework of patriarchal oppression. In this realization, the madwoman can speak, but there is no guarantee that she can be heard.

Spivak famously asked, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak's essay by the same name is a seminal work in postcolonial theory which has two opposing endings; in the original essay, Spivak concluded that the subaltern cannot speak, while in the second, she surmises that the

subaltern can speak through representation and interpretation. Spivak interrogates the concept of the subaltern, drawing attention to the structural and epistemological barriers that prevent these subjects' voices from being heard within dominant discourses. She critically examines the limitations of Western academic practices and the challenges of representing the experiences of the subaltern without reproducing systems of domination. While Spivak defines the subaltern through the terms of colonialism, taking a Marxist, postcolonial approach, her framework for considering marginalized voices is crucial to considering if the madwoman can be heard.

The madwoman can speak; Plath is evidence of this. And the madwoman is certainly not a subaltern, as Spivak notes that "simply by being postcolonial or the member of an ethnic minority, we are not 'subaltern.' That word is reserved for the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space" (65). While the madwoman is inherently devoid of race as a purely gendered identity, in many ways, as the madwoman gains her voice and her ability to tell her story to an audience, the mind of her audience is transformed to a "decolonized space." Spivak argues that decolonized spaces are not merely physical locations but conceptual and epistemic domains where dominant narratives and systems of oppression can be critically examined and subverted. These spaces prioritize marginalized voices and perspectives, allowing for the recognition and validation of alternative ways of knowing and being that have been historically marginalized. Thus, when Lady Lazaurus performs her "big strip tease," she gains a voice, catering to the "peanut crunching crowd," and as she dies, her suicide changes the discourse of the madwoman from one born out of patriarchal thought to one of reclamation. When Plath wrote her experiences receiving mental healthcare as a woman in America in the early 1950s into the character of Esther Greenwood, she revolutionized the popular conception of madness. Suddenly women had a narrative with which they could empathize. Plath and the voice of the madwoman alike speak

for the marginalized masses. But when the social conditions that created the madwoman are the same conditions that dominate and suppress the voice of the madwoman, it is imperative that voices of the dominant discourse interrogate what voices are not being heard and are not given the opportunity to speak. When Gilbert and Gubar, Heather Clark, Renee Dowbnia, Rovito, and numerous other critics and scholars engage in madwoman discourse, they are encouraging the madwoman to speak: "all speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distance decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception. That is what speaking is" (Spivak 64). By engaging in discourse that is conscious of her marginalization, the madwoman speaks through these individuals. Thus, the madwoman can speak. Who will listen?

Voice, the product of the madwoman, represents the potential to speak. There still needs to be a platform from which speech can be formed, and in order to create this platform, this space for deconstructing identity, actual change must occur. Lady Lazarus had to die, she had to perform her death, make a spectacle of herself, and translate her intangible experience of identity to the corporeal in order to cater to the dominate discourse through commodifying her suicide as a "strip tease." Enough madwomen, both fictional and entirely real, have died to be heard. Change must occur on a practical and broader social level.

Progress has been made since Plath's death in February of 1963. Practically, physicians and clinicians have retired ICT, acknowledging the harmful effects.[12] Hysteria is no longer a valid diagnostic label. Companies and governments alike are working to lower the barriers to healthcare access. Within the field of psychiatry, practitioners have shifted towards more inclusive and responsive practices, driven by an understanding of gender-specific mental health concerns and the social context in which they arise. Mental health professionals now recognize

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[12] ECT is still used today, albeit with more refined techniques and under strict medical supervision. It is primarily used in the treatment of severe depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia, particularly when other treatments such as medication or psychotherapy have not been effective.

that women may exhibit symptoms of mental illness differently than men, leading to the refinement of diagnostic frameworks to better capture these differences through gender-sensitive diagnostic criteria (Women's Health Initiative). Similarly, practitioners have come to understand that women and people with the ability to reproduce face unique challenges during reproductive transitions; this has led to specialized interventions for perinatal mood disorders, postpartum depression, and other reproductive-related mental health concerns (Horowitz). Moreover, advocacy efforts and policy initiatives have complemented clinical advancements, aiming to address systemic barriers to care and promote gender equity in mental health research and treatment. These efforts have led to increased funding for women's mental health programs, expanded insurance coverage, and policies to dismantle structural inequalities (Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act).[13]

While practical changes in mental health care are essential, they only scratch the surface of the broader social and structural issues that contribute to women's mental health challenges. In the case of the madwoman, whose experiences are often shaped by patriarchal norms and power dynamics, addressing the root causes necessitates a deeper examination of entrenched social inequalities and systemic injustices. The patriarchal underpinnings of mental health disparities are multifaceted, perpetuating harmful stereotypes, restrictive gender roles, and unequal power relations that marginalize women and undermine their mental well-being. These structural inequalities manifest in various forms, including but not limited to: unequal access to resources, limited economic opportunities, and social norms that stigmatize women's expressions of distress or vulnerability. Furthermore, efforts to address women's mental health must be intersectional,

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[13] In addition to policies like the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA), which were passed in the United States in 2008, there is a requirement for health insurance plans to offer mental health and substance use disorder services at the same level as coverage for medical and surgical services. This legislation addresses discrepancies in insurance coverage for mental health care, aiming to ensure equality in access to treatment.

recognizing the intersecting forms of oppression that compound women's experiences of marginalization, such as race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and disability. Intersectional analyses illuminate how systems of power and privilege intersect to shape mental health outcomes, highlighting the importance of inclusive and equitable approaches to advocacy, policy, and practice. Ultimately, transforming the landscape of women's mental health requires a commitment to social justice and collective action to challenge patriarchal structures and create more equitable and inclusive societies. This transformation entails addressing not only the symptoms of mental health disparities but also their root causes through systemic change and the promotion of gender equity on a larger scale. To enact meaningful change, it is imperative to deconstruct patriarchal structures and challenge the ideologies that sustain them. This change requires dismantling systems of oppression; that is what must be done in order for the madwoman to be heard.

In engaging with this material, in reading Plath, Sexton, Brontë, Spivak, hooks, and other women, in critically considering the rigid conception of femininity that thus creates the madwoman, we hear the madwoman. We answer the speaker of Plath's "Mad Girl's Love Song" who wonders about the very conception of her lunacy. We affirm her sanity and create a discursive space for the exploration of identity and self-actualization. In doing so, we are decolonizing the mind, decolonizing the dominant discourse, as Spivak urges. Ironically, the madwoman is heard through discourse, the same way she is formed.

But hearing the madwoman is not enough. A key tenant of Spivak's framework for identity is the fact that the subaltern always exists because the subaltern is someone who is essentially voiceless. Thus, with the knowledge of the madwoman and her voice, her ability to speak and be heard, to continue to tell her story, we must now broaden the dialogue. Having

already considered Plath's and Esther's experience as a microcosm of the feminine experience in 1950s America and England, we must now identify who cannot speak. This paper alone contributes to the dominant discourse insofar as Plath tells one, limited story of a middle-class, American-born, cisgendered, heterosexual white woman. But we can take this critical knowledge of oppressive systems, this concentrated study of patriarchal influence on discursive identities and extend to other discourses. We must ask ourselves: who is the next madwoman? Who, in ignoring or commodifying their "Love Song" and denying their agency of actualization, are we marginalizing and relegating to subalternity?

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