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MAD WOMAN IN THE BELL JAR:
ESTHER'S STRUGGLE FOR LITERARY AUTHENTICITY WITHIN THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVE

Courtney Kratz

Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar relates the tragic coming of age story of a young woman named Esther who aspires to write in a culture where female literary ambition is stifled by patriarchy. Plath writes semi-autobiographically through her literary alter ego, Esther. For both women, writing establishes agency, transmuting suffering into art as public testimony, which allows them to “rebel against the values and practices of a dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in the world.” This rebellion takes place in a patriarchal society, however, and more specifically, a historically patriarchal literary canon. In The Madwoman in the Attic, feminist theorists Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar complicate literary critic Harold Bloom’s Freudian theory of literary genealogy. Bloom suggests that the artist has an “anxiety of influence,” a feeling that he is not a creator and that his predecessors assume priority over his work; it is an Oedipal struggle between authorial “father” and “son” that Gilbert and Gubar point out is “intensely (and

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even exclusively) male.”

Gilbert and Gubar complicate Bloom’s theory by providing a feminist counterpoint: rather than “anxiety of influence,” they argue, the female artist experiences an “anxiety of authorship—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘pre­cursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her.” This anxiety is then exacerbated by the seemingly insurmountable authority of male precursors and their relegation of the female body to that of the muse. Though Gilbert and Gubar present this anxiety as unique to female authors in the 19th century, “anxiety is of authorship” is palpable in 20th century works such as The Bell Jar. Plath’s life and novel articulate this struggle for female literary authority. Path shows how claiming one’s voice through narration is important for women writing against patriarchal socialization, which makes it doubly damaging when women are excluded from written forms of expression. Esther, for example, struggles to find narratives that articulate the female experience or female precursors who prove it is possible to do so. As a result, Esther is alienated from the language that gives her expression. She loses authorship over her life as if she were a female character in a male-authored novel, playing at hegemonic social scripts that usher her towards stifling, domestic destiny. The effects of this domination and its protest are present in the text of Esther’s body, the locos of domination and rebellion. Tragically, what Gilbert and Gubar propose as a Victorian concept is present in The Bell Jar, and both its protagonist and its author are driven to suicide as a way to reclaim female authorship over body and narrative.

Esther strives to find agency through writing despite the fact that she does so in a culture dominated by patriarchal narrative. Unlike her male counterpart, the female writer

must first struggle against the effects of a socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile, or even...self-annihilating."\(^3\) Such struggle is exemplified by the challenges Esther faces to become a writer. When she fails to gain admission to her desired writing course, she considers taking other English classes until she realizes that the course prerequisite is in the eighteenth century. Esther says, "I hated the very idea of the eighteenth century, with all those smug men writing tight little couplets and being so dead keen on reason."\(^4\) The prospect of studying exclusively male writers sickens Esther, so she abandons her plan to take summer English courses. Later, when her boyfriend Buddy Willard tells her that a poem is just "a piece of dust," she cannot respond in the moment to refute his assertion.\(^5\) Instead, she answers with a characteristic "I guess so" and imagines her rebuttal later. She admits that she often takes what Buddy says as the "honest-to-God truth" and is thus frustrated when he demeans the value of literature. He unwittingly plays into the patriarchal presumption that he can participate in Esther's literary world without struggling to perfect his craft as she has. In fact, he hardly seems to recognize that it would be a struggle at all, and he is proud of his published but poorly written poem. Buddy illustrates how literary authority is easily imagined as masculine, and he fails to take Esther's feminine literary authority seriously, particularly by presuming he can write poetry without formal training. Such moments illustrate the stifling and patriarchal social milieu in which both Plath and Esther struggle to establish their authorial voice.

In addition to the struggle of establishing her literary authority, Esther struggles to find literature that articulates

\(^3\) Gilbert and Gubar, 451.
her female experience. The narratives Esther encounters are more like the technicolor “football romance” she views with her friend Betsy.⁶ She describes the film as a predictable imitation of other narratives, with heroines/actresses who appear to be imitations of other actresses. Esther describes the movie as “poor,” and when it becomes clear that the “nice girl” and the “nice football star” would end up together, she begins to feel “peculiar.” She looks around at a slack-jawed audience of “stupid moonbrains” and leaves the theater.⁷ Esther ultimately tires of interchangeable, indistinguishable “heroines” who can only star in the love story.⁸ Even professional trajectories for English majors, according to Esther’s mother, end in marriage. Esther’s mother tells her that no one wants a plain English major but that everyone would want an English major who knew shorthand.⁹ Plath writes, “Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter.” Here, Esther’s mother implies that the best use of Esther’s English major is in the service of men, a service that would better position Esther to find a husband. Esther retorts, “The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters...” Such an exchange demonstrates that fictional narratives such as the “football romance” are accepted as social reality. Yet even as a formally trained writer, Esther struggles to verbally articulate her female experience to people in her life. When she tells Buddy Willard she never plans to marry and why, his response is dismissive: “You’re crazy. You’ll change

⁶ Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar, 42
⁷ Plath, 43.
⁹ Plath, 7.
your mind.” Buddy also tells her that her mental and physical ailments are psychosomatic, and Dr. Gordon later echoes this kind of dismissiveness when he says, “Suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong.” Esther justifiably responds, “What did I think was wrong? That made it sound as if nothing was really wrong, I only thought it was wrong.” Though she still tries to articulate her thoughts and experiences to Buddy and Dr. Gordon, their patriarchal authority overrides her narrative with a narrative of their own: that her experience as she describes it is inaccurate or psychosomatic. These dismissals are demoralizing for Esther, who comments on an article she reads about marriage that “the one thing [it] didn’t seem to me to consider is how the girl felt.” Esther is thus surrounded on all sides by patriarchal narrative in fiction, social reality, nonfiction, and even her own verbal expression.

Esther vainly attempts to seek solace in female literary figures as an alternative. But “anxiety of authorship” is inevitably passed down, and much of her “literary matrilinage” does not exist in the way patrilinage does. A literary precursor would “prove by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.” Thus, Gilbert and Gubar argue, a female author searches for a female model “not because she wants dutifully to comply with male definitions of ‘femininity’ but because she must legitimize her own rebellious endeavors.” Despite their importance, Esther lacks female role models for much of the novel. Mrs. Willard, for example, comes close as someone who once taught at a private school and married a university professor, but to Esther, she represents the “kitchen mat” role of women

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10 Plath, 93.
11 Plath, 87.
12 Plath, 29.
13 Plath, 81.
14 Gilbert and Gubar, Anx i ety of Authorship, 453-454.
15 Gilbert and Gubar, 452.
in domesticity, where all she does is "cook and clean and wash."\textsuperscript{16} Esther's own mother, too, betrays her intelligence by teaching shorthand, and Esther comes to hate her despite what she has done to keep them afloat financially. Esther fails to find a model even at Smith College, where being a scholarship student regarded as an "experiment" of the dean cannot make up for the fact that the institution is just as performative as the word she thought she left behind. Esther's peers regard her as abnormal for devoting herself to her work; she can only find solace when she visibly confirms her femininity by dating Buddy Willard. The social capital of being "practically engaged" and Buddy's convenient diagnosis with tuberculosis are what permit Esther solitude; her relationship to an absent boyfriend give her the appearance of heteronormativity. After college, Esther finds a potential model in Jay Cee, who oversees Esther's magazine internship, and Esther admits that she "wished she had a mother like Jay Cee."\textsuperscript{17} Jay Cee runs a magazine that is mostly fashion and short articles, however, making her written legacy part of performative, artificial femininity within patriarchal culture. Ultimately, the closest Esther comes to a mentor is Philomena Guinea, a wealthy novelist whom Esther's scholarship is named after. Esther "had read one of Mrs. Guinea's books in the town library—the college library didn’t stock them for some reason—" and finds it "crammed full" of predictable, suspenseful questions about the characters' love lives and their relationships with men.\textsuperscript{18} Not only does Esther find that her university does not regard her precursor highly enough to carry her novels, but she also discovers that even Philomena Guinea has not escaped narrative dominance of patriarchy, which leaves few plots to women aside from love stories. Esther is thus disappointed by the literary role models

\textsuperscript{16} Plath, 84.

\textsuperscript{17} Plath, 39.

\textsuperscript{18} Plath, 41.
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in her life and asks, “Why did I attract these weird old women? ...[T]hey all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them.”¹⁹ Esther sees that the continued “anxiety of authorship” and struggle against feminine socialization would be passed onto her, and instead she tries to create her own models of false, performative selves made out of sanctioned cultural images. But personas like her pseudonym Elly Higginbottom are two-dimensional and leave Esther wanting to “crawl into” other women, such as a Russian interpreter, so she can habit alternative realities. This, too, fails, and Esther fails to situate herself in society because she is unable to find a feminine role model who has escaped the patriarchy’s hegemonic narratives.

Esther’s tenuous conviction of her own literary authority is rendered artificial at her Ladies’ Day photoshoot, where the women will be photographed “with props to show what we wanted to be.”²⁰ Esther is photographed as a poet and given a fake rose to pose with. A grotesque artifice over-takes the scene, as Esther looks through “a frieze of rubber plants” in the window, where “a few stagey cloud puffs were travelling from right to left” in the sky. The photographer says, “Show us how happy it makes you to write a poem,” and Esther feels committed not to smile, to maintain her seriousness, until at the photographer’s insistence, she “obediently, like the mouth of a ventriloquist dummy,” begins to smile and burst into tears.²¹ Esther’s genuine emotion breaks the scene, and the photographer and Jay Cee vanish. Esther is left feeling “limp and betrayed, like the skin shed by a terrible animal, but it seemed to have taken my spirit with it, and everything else it could lay its paws on.” This is a poignant scene in which Esther’s authentic desire and competence as a

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¹⁹ Plath, 73.
²⁰ Plath, 91.
²¹ Plath, 92.
poet are rendered meaningless and commodified by the theatrics of the photoshoot. Gilbert and Gubar write that women are more often depicted as the muse than as the author; both sexes learn that as part of a woman’s subjugation, she becomes representative of nature, sexuality, and the chaotic, spontaneous, intuitive male creativity she inspires.\(^\text{22}\) In the artifice of the photograph, Esther’s claim to being a poet is made performative. She becomes the muse, a complying marionette meant to sit on the shelf and inspire. In this way, the image of Esther as an author, which she models in the fashion magazine, undermines the authenticity of her literary authority. It is not the actual Esther, but the cliché image. She has become “no more than a cipher in the... mass-circulation magazine, plucked momentarily out of anonymity to be invested with the fraudulent charisma of ‘celebrity’ whose image then returns to its place or origin divested and purified of circumstantial history.”\(^\text{23}\) This is the culminating moment of Esther’s internship, one in which she is stripped of the literary authority she struggles to maintain, left only with the artifice of her gender performance and the authenticity of her depression.

Esther’s breakdown at the photoshoot and the emotional trauma of her internship leave her feeling alienated from language. She cannot take English courses because she does not want to study eighteenth century men, and she despises the idea of taking shorthand in the service of male dictators. Though she resolves to write a thesis on Finnegans Wake, “the white chalk curlicues blurred into senselessness.”\(^\text{24}\) Words twist like “faces in a funhouse mirror” and grow

\(^{22}\) Gilbert and Gubar, 450-451.


\(^{24}\) Plath, 122.
“barbs and rams’ horns” to the point of becoming “untranslatable.” They being to “jiggle up and down in a silly way” on the page, and the lines of her letter to Doreen “sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally, as if they were loops of string lying on the paper, and someone had come along and blown them askew.” This is partly instigated by Esther’s rejection from the writing course. In her own life, after getting rejected from Frank O’Connor’s writing class at Harvard, Plath wrote the following in a letter: “I was sterile, empty, unlived, unwise and unread. And the more I tried to remedy the situation, the more I became unable to comprehend one word of our fair old language.” This alienation from language, for Esther and likely for Plath, comes from being rejected as a writer and feeling like her authenticity as a poet has been put on display and violated. Being a writer is an intrinsic part of Esther’s identity, which is “bound up in language, [since] ...her psyche expresses itself as a text and as a desire to compare text.” Esther’s alienation from language thus comes from her anxiety of authorship, exacerbated by rejection from (an illustrious man’s) writing course and the cheapening of her identity as a poet.

In addition to worsening her anxiety of authorship, Esther’s breakdown signifies the silencing of her voice, linguistic capacity, and means of articulating and understanding her female experience. While in New York, Esther writes, “The silence depressed me. It wasn’t the silence of silence. It was my own silence.” She describes herself as feeling like a “dirty-scrawled-over letter,” as if a more dominant narrative has written over her experience and that she has let it. Gilbert and Gubar write, “Rejecting the poisoned apples her culture

25 Plath, 130.
28 Plath, 18.
offers her, the woman writer often becomes in some sense anorexic, resolutely closing her mouth in silence.”29 Esther, in response to repeated challenges to her authorship, becomes silent. Part of her silence, particularly toward the other women in her internship and to Buddy Willard, is due to her marginalized status as both a working-class woman in a wealthy environment and as a woman in a heterosexual relationship.30 While in New York, Esther’s friend Doreen returns from an outing with a man and vomits in Esther’s room, much like Esther does after a lavish Ladies’ Day dinner and heteronormative technicolor film. Krizanich writes, “Instead of speaking words, these women can only regurgitate garbage. Neither Esther nor Doreen has a voice.”31 The poisoned female body becomes analogous to “stilled language,” for neither woman has found her voice, yet others fill them with repressed discourse.32 This lack of voice, a voice that has been written over, drives Esther to silence. Psychoanalytic feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver writes that depressed, marginalized individuals, such as an ambitious, intellectual female writer in the 1950’s, “are reduced to silence because they have given up on words to express the painful affects...” of losing the “authentic self.”33 Oliver writes, “With depression, the split between words and affects can become so extreme that it leads to catatonia and even suicide.” Esther’s depression and silence ultimately derive from her “anxiety of authorship,” which silences her authentic self. Without words to express her experience, Esther begins to view herself outside of her body, often through the

29 Gilbert and Gubar, 458.
31 Krizanich, 403.
32 Boyer, “The Disabled Female Body,” 203.
33 Kelly Oliver, “The Depressed Sex,” Colonization of Psychic Space (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 123.
male gaze. Kelly Oliver writes that the silence of marginalization "constitutes the identity of depressed women...[it] results in a sense of double or debilitating alienation from one's own experience that is directly related to one's social context and position as marginalized or excluded within mainstream culture." As a depressed woman, Esther feels "flawed or defective in [her] very being." Her hatred is directed inward rather than outward at the society that shames her. Esther writes at the very beginning of the novel, "I knew something was wrong with me that summer...I was supposed to be having the time of my life..." Esther concerned about she is "supposed" to feel and instead she feels shame for being sickened by children, her own culturally sanctioned biological imperative. She "started adding up all the things [she] couldn't do," such as cook or perform other domestic tasks, and her shame is ultimately damaging to her agency. Oliver writes, "Domination infects those oppressed with the punishing superego that excludes and abjects them...[it] creates a sense of double alienation...commands self-destruction and undermines that seat of agency." Both Oliver and Susan Bordo write that this sense of shame is opposed to autonomy and renders a subject unable to make effective change in their life. Esther writes that she "wasn't steering anything, not even [herself]," that she moved along like a "numb trolleybus" or a character in someone else's fiction. The normative force of society and the influence of its patriarchal

34 Kelly Oliver, "The Depressed Sex," 112.
35 Oliver, 105.
36 Plath, 2.
37 Plath, 75.
38 Oliver, 105.
39 Oliver, 113.
41 Plath, 2-3.
gender norms put Esther in a paralyzing position of shame and self-perceived abnormality. When she returns home from New York, the telephone becomes a “puppet string that can be tugged to call her to attention and performance.” She speaks in a hollow, “zombie” voice with its own imperious autonomy, cancelling her desire to attend summer school. As Smith points out, Esther “comes up against the glass of the bell jar, as if some external narrator, who had just spoken through her, had also prescribed the limits of her freedom.” Esther writes, “My hand advanced a few inches, then retreated and fell limp. I forced it towards the receiver again, but again it stopped short, as if I had collided with a pane of glass.” In revolt, Esther resolves to write a novel about her literary persona Elaine, but she can do little but transcribe her own experience of socially imposed ennui. Smith suggests that Esther “cannot progress, and no doubt if she could, she would set up an infinite regress of heroines writing about heroines,” a depressing rendition of absent female precursors. When her mother urges Esther to get dressed, Esther responds that she lacks the time; she is busy with her novel, but she cannot move when she hears her mother put away her typewriter in preparation for supper. Like Elaine, Esther feels herself to be the “puppet of powers she cannot comprehend, as if she were a character in a novel,” much like Esther is for Plath. Esther’s true author, however, is “a whole matrix of social forces, of conventions and norms” that reinforce Esther’s sense of shame and lack of agency. Esther feels like a character in a novel written by a man because she exists in a society coded by men, and the literary narratives available to her do not articulate her female experience. Radical feminist Joanna Russ writes, “The

42 Smith, “Irony of Artifice,” 252.
43 Plath, 125.
44 Smith, “Irony of Artifice,” 254.
45 Plath, 130.
46 Smith, 255.
lack...of acceptable dramatizations of what our experience means, harms much more than art itself...[Women] interpret our own experiences in terms of them...[and] perceive what happens to us in the mythic terms our culture provides." The traditional plots afforded to women often teach them that to mature is to live up to the social expectations of one's gender role, and Esther is suffocating under these pressures. Like Gilbert and Gubar, literary theorist Jean Kennard writes about Victorian narrative tropes that hold unfortunate sway over the world in which Plath wrote. Kennard points out that the female coming of age novel ends with marriage, where the young protagonist grows out of her adolescent idealism or rebelliousness and into the reality of correct social values. Kennard writes, "[S]ince in order to reach maturity the heroine must accept certain values and since the repository of these values is the 'right' suitor, at the end of the novel the heroine inevitably appears to have subordinated her own personality to that of the hero." Due to the lack of narratives articulating Esther's experience—and the abundance of narratives subordinating women to their romantic suitors—Esther experiences what Kelly Oliver calls "social melancholy," in this case resulting from the "unavailability of positive representations of [womanhood]." Because Esther's mainstream culture provides "only abject images of the self," the resulting malaise causes Esther to lose her "lovable self" and positive self-image.

Since available articulations of the female experience—at least those available to Esther—all revolve around romantic relationships and woman's domestic destiny, and since Esther has refused the possibility of marriage and what it represents, she is left with nothing. She writes blankly, "I

49 Oliver, 110.
50 Plath, 115.
had nothing to look forward to. Even in her own writing, Esther cannot escape the love story. She cannot give Elaine a narrative other than the suburban ennui that spurs Esther to write because she does not believe she has the necessary experience. Esther asks herself, "How could I write about life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or even seen anybody die?" Esther views the narrative potential of her life, and the lives of her characters, as inscribed by the dominant, patriarchal narratives of mid-century America. With her friend Doreen, who Esther views as a more conventional, attractive protagonist, Esther marginalizes herself as a side character. In the company of Doreen and her male friend Lenny, Esther feels "gawky and morbid as somebody in a slide show." Esther laments her height and appearance, describing Doreen's romantic entanglements in the spotlight rather than her own. She pushes her body, both physically and verbally, to the periphery, and she describes Doreen "with her white hair and white dress" reflecting the "neon lights over the bar" as if she is center stage. Esther encounters the woman-hater, Marco, as a woman would encounter the "wrong suitor" in a marriage plot. She begins the encounter, as usual, narrating Doreen, but when she betrays her interest in the diamond stickpin that Marco gives her, she is compromised. Smith writes, "Marco's attentions are dehumanizing and reductive, and the glass of the bell jar does not protect [Esther] from his thinly veiled malevolence." Esther compares Marco to an aggressive snake, and he "assumes proprietary, authorial power over her," and makes her dance "without any will or knowledge of her own." Like the end of a marriage plot, Esther has been engulfed by the overpowering masculinity of Marco, and she almost lets him succeed

51 Plath, 117.
52 Plath, 121.
53 Plath, 25.
54 Smith, 253.
55 Plath, 108.
when he attempts to rape her. Later, she seems to fall into the trap of the marriage plot when she loses her virginity. She feels “part of a great tradition,” though Marilyn Boyer wonders whether the tradition is of sex or of sexual abuse.\textsuperscript{56} Esther writes that she experiences a feeling of belonging to “the stories of blood-stained bridal sheets and capsules of red ink bestowed on already deflowered brides” after she has sex with Irwin and hemorrhages.\textsuperscript{57} It seems that Esther does not want to be engulfed by Marco, Buddy, or Irwin, but she cannot author her own experience and instead interprets her interactions in relation to patriarchal literature, thus relegating herself to the singular representations of women available to her.

The internalization of this male, authorial perspective overwrites Esther’s authentic, lovable self on her own body. Esther becomes Foucault’s “docile body” regulated by cultural norms.\textsuperscript{58} Her depression can be read as a pathology of embodied protest, a way of communicating dissatisfaction. Gilbert and Gubar write that patriarchal socialization “literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally.”\textsuperscript{59} This is visible on Esther’s body, a medium and metaphor for culture where culture is inscribed and reinforced “through the concrete language of the body.”\textsuperscript{60} For Esther, her body is both the text of patriarchal socialization and the locus of her rebellion. Krizanich argues that Buddy “teaches” Esther to ski as punishment for her refusal to marry him. He tells her that she was doing fine until a man stepped in her way, which “could be the theme of the entire book, as the patriarchy repeatedly wounds Esther and takes away her voice.”\textsuperscript{61} Krizanich argues that Buddy exhibits a “queer, satisfied smile”

\textsuperscript{56} Boyer, 219.
\textsuperscript{57} Plath, 229.
\textsuperscript{58} Susan Bordo, “Reproduction of Femininity,” 745.
\textsuperscript{59} Gilbert and Gubar, 451.
\textsuperscript{60} Bordo, 754.
\textsuperscript{61} Krizanich, “Writing as Agency,” 422.
because he has written his revenge on Esther’s body, knowing that she would passively accept his instructions and fail. Esther interprets this encounter as textual, seeing Buddy in front of “black dots” swarming on “a plane of whiteness” like the printed word. In a similar way, she lets the blood Marco wipes on her after the assault remain on her face, interpreting it as a metaphor for her experience. Krizanich writes, “It is in some ways a mark of victory for her; it is her trophy as a survivor. Yet, it is also the mark of how he has wounded her psychologically, much more deeply than Buddy has.” After the attack, Esther returns home to work on a novel about her life and find her voice, yet she gives up because she thinks she lacks “experience,” showing that she chooses to stay silent about those experiences that have traumatized her. After Dr. Gordon’s violently painful electroshock therapy, which leaves her feeling “dumb and subdued,” Esther goes home and cuts herself with Gillette blades. She experiences “a small, deep thrill... The blood gathered darkly... and rolled down [her] ankle into the cup of [her] patent leather shoe” like ink on paper. Krizanich writes, “In a perverse way, [Esther] is trying to take control of language. Instead of letting men mark her, she desires to write her own already victimized body into annihilation.” Esther is frustrated by her body’s weakness, by how she fears the cold water of the ocean or the continued beat of her heart. She decides she will have to “ambush” her body, or it will “trap me in its stupid cage for fifty years without any sense at all.” Esther thus declares war “on the very body that men have been writing their script upon.”

62 Plath, 98.
64 Krizanich, 402.
65 Plath, 145.
66 Krizanich, 404.
67 Plath, 149.
68 Krizanich, 404.
This pathological protest and war on her own body lead Esther to the conclusion that the best way to overcome “anxiety of authorship” and end men’s image of her, the image she cannot escape, is to commit suicide: the ultimate act of authorship. As a woman in a societal text authored by men, Esther feels “wrinkled” in pages that “perpetually tell her how she seems.” Gilbert and Gubar argue that the female writer’s battle “is not against her (male) precursors’ reading of the world but against his reading of her.” Esther must “redefine the terms of her socialization,” even if the protest is ultimately “counterproductive, tragically self-defeating (indeed, self-deconstructing.” Smith writes, “Esther sees suicide not so much as self-destruction as a theatrical ritual which will free her from her ‘factitious’ identity and restore her to singularity. It is her ‘image’ that she wishes to murder, the fraudulent twin which is her public persona.”

On suicide, Esther writes:

But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn’t do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at... I moved in front of the medicine cabinet. If I looked in the mirror while I did it, it would be like watching somebody else, in a book or a play.

Esther cannot reach the part of herself that she wants to kill because it was authored by men: she has no authority over

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69 Gilbert and Gubar, 454.  
70 Gilbert and Gubar, 452.  
71 Gilbert and Gubar, 452.  
72 Bordo, 753.  
73 Smith, 258.  
74 Plath, 147.
that image, but she recognizes that her feminine body, her skin, is not it. Her body is something men have colonized and written upon, something they have attempted to define, but it exists independently, autonomously even, of their definition. Though Esther still views suicide like a spectator of her own body, her double alienation and critical superego that incites her shame are effects of patriarchy and the lack of narratives representing the female experience. When Esther reads the narrative of her own suicide attempt in the newspaper, she reads in the third person, an omniscient narrator reading about the “missing scholarship girl.” The great irony of Esther’s suicide narrative, driven by lack of autonomous female narratives, is that she has created one, one that inadvertently makes her a precursor for Joan Gilling, Esther’s companion in the mental hospital who also attended Smith College and dated Buddy Willard. The repeated failure of Esther’s matrilineal role models to escape patriarchal narrative hegemony is a tragedy put in stark relief by the fact that it creates a narrative representation for women like Joan. Though self-destructing, it expresses the ultimate dissatisfaction and protest of a shared female experience.

Joanna Russ writes that “culture is male” and that “[o]ur literary myths are for heroes, not heroines.” The mid-century society in which Esther exists is thus authored for men, by men. While Gilbert and Gubar attribute “anxiety of authorship” to Victorian female writers, it is a clear instigator of both Esther and Sylvia Plath’s depression more than a hundred years later, and this depression has tragic consequences. Esther’s conscious and unconscious protest to patriarchal paradigms is at the self-destructive expense of her own female body. In some ways, this is Esther’s way of escaping her socially constructed identity by setting her own terms. Bordo writes, “[M]uteness is the condition of the silent, un-
complaining woman—an ideal of patriarchal culture. Protest-
ing the stifling of the female voice through one's own voice-
lessness—that is, employing the language of femininity to
protest the conditions of the female world—will always in-
volve ambiguities of this sort.” 77 Esther’s tragic means of
protest are not particular to her, as she discovers that her
mentor, Philomena Guinea, was also institutionalized at the
peak of her literary career, as is Esther’s friend Joan. Kelly
Oliver attributes this kind of self-destructive protest and loss
of the lovable self to the lack of “positive images of women
that are not always tinged with abjection,” without which it is
“difficult to avoid depression.” 78 Given the autobiographical
nature of the The Bell Jar, it seems that both Plath and Esther
sought authenticity to escape the performative patriar-
chry required of them. Though the book ends on a note of
Esther’s hopeful recovery, Plath ended her own life shortly
after the book was published. Krizanich writes, “Perhaps the
fact that Esther is allowed release from the institution only
after she has internalized the dominant discourse of the patri-
archy contributed to the work’s failure to heal its author.” 79
Yet despite Plath’s tragic death, and the implication that Es-
ther may be destined for the same, much of their social mel-
ancholy stems from, as Oliver points out, a lack of narratives
accurately expressing the female experience. Though it could
not save its author from “anxiety of authorship” and patriar-
chal socialization, Plath’s novel is well-positioned to express
this struggle. Perhaps The Bell Jar, then, is the articulation
that establishes Plath as the much needed matrilineal precur-
sor for future female writers.

77 Bordo, S753.
78 Oliver, 122.
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