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IDENTIFICATION AND ENTERTAINMENT EDUCATION IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*: BRIDGING COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND LITERARY ANALYSIS

by

Bailey Quanbeck

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

Identification and Entertainment Education in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*:
Bridging Communication Studies and Literary Analysis

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Sylvia Plath's semiautobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, has continued to engage audiences since its initial publication in 1963. Combining the disciplines of communication studies and literary studies, I argue that this popularity is in part due to readers' identification with the novel's protagonist, Esther. *The Bell Jar* serves as a piece of entertainment education—media that relays prosocial messages to consumers—and encourages readers to lose their sense of self in exchange for Esther's identity. By emphasizing the novel's prosocial messages, I suggest that Plath utilizes readers' vicarious involvement in the narrative to provide education about mental health and gender roles. My close reading of the text and application of communication theory ultimately serve to bridge two disciplines and reveal the space they share; reflecting my journey navigating interest in two departments, this thesis highlights the benefits of interdisciplinary work in which literature serves as a laboratory for applying evidence-based theory.

KEYWORDS: Sylvia Plath, Entertainment Education, Identification, Mental Health, Gender

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PREFACE

As an ambitious and naïve sophomore, I quickly decided that I would write my honors thesis about my favorite novel: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar.* Throughout the following year, I contemplated what unique, literary interpretation of the renowned book I could offer. I began researching Plath's self-prescribed "madness" and, thanks to funding from the Carlson Research Grant, traveled to Smith College to read original Plath materials in the Mortimer Rare Bookroom. There I met Karen Kukil, a Plath archive curator and editor of *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath.* Karen beamed when revealing Plath's archives, sharing numerous boxes filled with letters that revealed a more humorous and jovial side of Plath. Hearing Karen describe Plath as a misunderstood individual who did indeed feel happiness inspired me to abandon the "madness" concept; I wanted to present Plath in an honest manner that also refrained from fixating on her suicide. However, I lacked any specific direction to adopt in the absence of my first topic.

I became increasingly confounded with the project as my coursework in communication studies infiltrated my academic interests; I adored learning about communication and feared that my shifting interests would result in my disillusionment with *The Bell Jar.* Even so, I was reluctant to abandon the topic that I had invested my own and others' time in—and the novel I still felt drawn to. Determined to retain my thesis' literary angle, I envisioned a project that elegantly blended literary criticism and communication studies by applying theory to the text. While enrolled in a communication theories course, I wrestled with social scientific methods that might elucidate additional layers of meaning in *The Bell Jar.* Throughout the course of *The Bell Jar,* Plath crafts

Esther's identity to be a compilation of her relationships with others, the groups she was involved in, her own perceptions of herself, and her communication—a varied approach to identity consistent with the communication theory of identity (CTI) (Hecht, 1993). By emphasizing the multifaceted nature of identity, Plath encourages readers to understand the complexity of the individual experience. While the argumentative angle my thesis currently inhabits does not emphasize a CTI approach, this theory reignited my initial interest in studying Plath's work.

Initially articulated by Michael Hecht (1993), the communication theory of identity explains that the formation of identities is a complex process involving the individual, their community, and society. Therefore, identities cannot be created independent of one's environment; rather, individuals and society negotiate identities through communication, an idea that serves as the focal phenomenon of this theory. Hecht (1993) divides this conceptualization of the self into four tiers of identity: *personal*, *relational*, *enacted*, and *communal*. Personal identity is one's perception of their identity. Relational identity takes into account the influence of relationships on one's identity; individuals discern how others perceive them, adapt their behaviors to fit those roles, and come to define their selfhood based on their multiple relationship statuses. A third locus of identity, enacted, expresses that individuals perform their identities through communication. Finally, the communal identity frame explains that members of a group develop a shared sense of identity. As explained by Jung and Hecht (2004), these four components of identity reveal that identity is a multifaceted concept and that communication is essential to not only the formation of identity, but identity's very existence.

Integral to CTI is the understanding that while these four layers of identity are distinct and certain layers may be more salient in some cultures than others, all are present in the composition of one's identity. The multiple loci of identity are interconnected and are best understood when analyzed in conjunction with each other. Different components of one's identity might fit more clearly under a certain subheading of the theory than another, but the boundary conditions of CTI prevent the theory from being used to examine only one loci of identity. CTI does not seek to isolate one's identity in a single category; instead, this theory describes the phenomenon of identities being formed as a result of the linkages between the individual and their environment.

In perhaps the most straightforward application of Hecht's (1993) theory to *The Bell Jar,* we can identify instances in which the four foci of identity—*personal*, *relational*, *enacted*, and *communal*—interact with each other and coexist in the novel. Sylvia Plath translates her own experiences into those of Esther, a successful student and writer who has acquired a prestigious internship with a women's magazine, *Ladies' Day*. As an introspective yet reserved character, Esther carefully attempts to communicate in a way that presents the identity she wishes others to perceive—a struggle between Esther's personal and enacted identity components. When Esther is preparing to pose for a photograph in the office of Jay Cee, the strict and uncouth woman directing the fashion industry at *Ladies' Day*, she feels on the verge of tears. Only two scenes prior to the photoshoot, Esther considers the possibility of suicide. Under the pressure to smile for the cameras, Esther attempts to hide her sorrow and instead present her desired self. She writes, "I had tried concealing myself in the powder room, but it didn't work" (Plath, 1967, p. 100). Esther attempts to enact an identity distinct from her personal identity. She

goes on to say that she felt the need to keep her lips straight as Jay Cee and the photographer prepped her for a photograph. Right before collapsing in tears, Esther compares herself to “a ventriloquist’s dummy” (p. 102). Since Esther perceives this lack of agency and moves her mouth into a feigned smile to please others, she evidently feels the discrepancy between her personal state and her enacted identity.

After being reprimanded by Jay Cee, Esther focuses on her critical perceptions of herself. She shares: “I felt very low. I had been unmasked only that morning by Jay Cee herself and I felt now that all the uncomfortable suspicions I had about myself were coming true, and I couldn’t hide the truth much longer” (p. 29). Here, Esther’s personal identity and relational identity are inextricable; both Jay Cee’s evaluation of Esther’s character and Esther’s own evaluation of herself join to form a defeated sense of self. If Esther’s identity was comprised only of her own perceptions, she might not feel the pressure to “hide the truth” about herself (p. 29). However, relational components are irrevocably tied to her personal understanding of self; thus, Esther adapts her understanding of herself to include the gaze and perceptions of others. Similarly, Esther’s companion Doreen contributes to the relational element of Esther’s identity. Doreen is a fellow intern at *Ladies’ Day*, a girl whom Esther regards as cynical, mysterious, and interesting. While Esther eventually distances herself from Doreen, that relationship impacts how Esther carries herself: “Doreen singled me out right away. She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others” (p. 5). Esther withdraws herself from the innocent intern mold because of Doreen’s influence, abandoning intern programs for wild adventures with men and viewing the other interns through Doreen’s cynical perspective. Esther creates a conceptualization of self through Doreen’s gaze and adapts her behaviors

accordingly, thereby speaking to the power of relational identities on one's selfhood. Jay Cee and Doreen are among the first people Esther communicates with in the novel, and even within the first few chapters Esther's identity evolves based on the people she maintains relationships with.

To round out the ways in which *The Bell Jar* illustrates Jung and Hecht's (2004) theories at work, we can see how the impact of the communal element of identity is continually illustrated through Esther's involvement with *Ladies' Day.* Esther consciously identifies and disparages the power of group identification when attending a movie with the other young women in positions similar to her own. She remarks, "I looked round me at all the rows of rapt little heads with the same silver glow on them at the front and the same black shadow on them at the back, and they looked like nothing more or less than a lot of stupid moonbrains" (p. 42). Here, Esther notes that—regardless of their individual characteristics—people who form a group together come to share identifying features. When coming to this realization, Esther experiences what Jung and Hecht (2004) describe as an identity gap. An identity gap is a contradiction or discrepancy between two frames of identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004). While identity gaps may be present, the identity frames still coexist and contribute to an individual's whole identity. The particular identity gap Esther experiences in the movie theatre involves a contradiction between the group Esther is a part of and Esther's views of herself.

As these instances in the novel illustrate, *The Bell Jar* reveals the multifaceted elements of Esther's identity in support of CTI. Perhaps more significantly, though, *The Bell Jar* contributes to a more intimate understanding of CTI by articulating Plath's perceptions of identity through poetic and personal descriptions. Questionnaires such as

those used by Jung and Hecht (2004) to explore CTI certainly provide valuable information for identity research. However, since identity is an inherently personal topic, analyzing identity construction and performance through a writer's introspective observations illuminates an alternative perspective. Writers like Plath who articulate their thoughts throughout the course of a novel are engaging in identity studies under drastically different conditions than study subjects. Therefore, including Plath's voice in the master narrative of identity communication studies will result in a more diversified discourse regarding identity.

Plath may not be intentionally attending to each tier of identity as explained by Hecht (1993); however, using CTI as a lens with which to understand Plath's experience and Esther's identity allows for a close investigation of how identity is conceptualized by individuals and constructed beyond the self. As noted by Carbaugh (1989), American culture tends to essentialize identity, supposing that the self is developed internally and is not a product of outside forces. This approach to Plath's work could lead to false assumptions that Plath was solely responsible for her identity and the trajectory of her life. In contrast, viewing identity as a combination of influences including groups and relationships allows for a more empathetic perspective and complex analysis of one's being. Through her sometimes brutal honesty and thoughtful recounts of lived experiences, Plath positions Esther as a complex individual whose identity cannot be determined by a single characteristic. Furthermore, by following Esther through contrasting environments like the *Ladies' Day* internship and her time in the hospital, *The Bell Jar* explores how identities adapt to and exist in different spaces.

Applying CTI to *The Bell Jar* provided me with a foundational understanding of how literary criticism and communication studies can overlap. By using the dimensions of CTI as a guiding framework, I practiced weaving the logical approach I appreciated from the social sciences into the creative, interpretive work of literary criticism. While the eventual direction my project took followed a different theoretical model than CTI, I molded my thesis after that experience in which I blended two disciplines. The communication studies discipline seeks to observe, predict, and control human behavior—endeavors that provide us with helpful and sometimes striking evidence regarding how we navigate our communities and the world. Teachers, companies, media, and policy makers all draw from research in this area, responding to this knowledge about human communication. Also interested in humanity, literary critics instead uplift texts as harbors of culture—artifacts that speak to unique and universal experiences held by authors and readers. Therefore, the text is a time capsule passed between author and reader, and the process of analysis involves both investigation of implicit meaning and recognition that meaning exists beyond the author's intention. The communication studies discipline is founded on the idea that Truth exists and is knowable; literary critics often gravitate toward the idea that there is no single, knowable Truth. These two disciplines do operate differently, yet their approaches are complimentary. Theories developed through careful observation of human behavior can contribute meaningfully to literary studies by providing a research-based framework for creative interpretation. Inversely, literary studies can illuminate communication research by providing a space for the creative application of theory. Crossing the two disciplines in this thesis, I aim to view communication theory as a lens for creative application and literary studies as a

laboratory for evidence-based information. The space that exists between these two areas reveals how literature speaks to and impacts readers in tangible ways—a finding that speaks to the value of both communication studies and literary studies.

CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to Entertainment Education, Identification, and Sylvia Plath

I: Communication Theories of "Entertainment Education" and "Identification"

As articulated by Moyer-Gusé (2008), entertainment education refers to "prosocial messages that are embedded into popular entertainment media content" (p. 408). Narratives conveying prosocial messages that might influence an audience's behavior fit within this classification. Narrative media often focuses on entertainment rather than on prosocial messages, yet audiences often experience persuasion as a result of the media's entertainment appeal (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Intentional entertainment education experienced a rapid growth in popularity when a 1989 media campaign in the United States utilized 76 television programs as platforms with which to discuss the dangers of and methods to prevent drunk driving (Dejong & Winsten, 1990). Intentional efforts to persuade audiences through entertainment education persisted in the following decade, with 75 projects worldwide in 1997 (Brown & Singhal, 1999). In particular, television soap operas have served as effective vehicles for delivering prosocial messages to enact change; for instance, the Peruvian soap opera *Simplemente Maria* inspired women in Latin America to enroll in educational classes (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). Programs like *Simplemente Maria* identify an area of need, articulate a prosocial message that addresses that need, and implement a method for sharing that message. Through this process, entertainment education utilizes the power of media to reach and influence widespread audiences.

Scholarly accounts of entertainment education primarily focus on multimedia platforms (e.g., film and television); however, Brown and Singhal (1999) note that prosocial messages are also prevalent among print texts, citing Dr. Seuss's children's books and *Aesop's Fables: The Panchatantra* as examples. These books present messages that the authors presumably deemed desirable for educating audiences. Green and Kass (2008) add that print offers a unique set of opportunities for entertainment education in comparison to film. Film directors might face the challenge of relaying a character's thoughts and emotions without directly stating what the character is thinking or feeling; in contrast, print more commonly allows consumers to gain insight into a character's internal dialogue (Green & Kass, 2008). From this perspective, any media—including books—that relay messages that might influence an audience's behavior in favor of healthy actions constitute entertainment education.

A primary element contributing to the persuasiveness of narrative media is identification. Cohen (2001) explains identification as the process by which an audience member loses awareness of the self and instead "imagines being one of the characters in the text" (p. 252). Identification extends beyond a desire to be similar to a character; rather, viewers experiencing identification have taken an additional step by adopting the identity of a character (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). When individuals engage in identification, they become more susceptible to the prosocial messages presented in the media and are more likely to adapt their behaviors accordingly. A clear example of this process taking place appears in So and Nabi's (2013) study evaluating viewers' risk perceptions in response to television narratives discussing STDs. The results suggest that individuals who experience identification also perceive themselves to be less socially distant from the

characters (So & Nabi, 2013). That sense of similarity in perspectives is correlated with a positive impact on consumers' personal risk perceptions; individuals who identify with characters are more likely to view themselves as susceptible to health risks the characters are confronting. In So and Nabi's study, an increase in personal risk perceptions was correlated with greater intentions to prevent the pertinent risk through precautionary behaviors—in particular, intentions to receive tests for STDs. These findings demonstrate the potential impact of entertainment education to alter consumers' attitudes and beliefs; media consumers who identify with a character experiencing a particular risk event might feel a social closeness with that character and ultimately engage in healthy behaviors as a response.

Moyer-Gusé (2008) notes that while many instances of entertainment education are messages designed to accomplish prosocial goals, messages about healthy behaviors that are not intentionally crafted to persuade audiences can still be classified as entertainment education. A creator who does not aim to persuade their audience might send unintentional yet notable messages through their method of entertainment, thus resulting in a text that can have a profound impact on consumers' beliefs and behaviors. Therefore, all texts maintain the possibility of impacting audiences regardless of creators' intentions.

In this thesis, I propose that *The Bell Jar* is situated within the realm of entertainment education. The text—whether intentionally or unintentionally—addresses prosocial topics such as the importance of mental health care and gender equality. Plath's novel entertains readers by eliciting identification, a strategy that not only contributes to the book's persistent popularity, but also increases the likelihood that readers adopt the

perspectives presented in the book. Examining the novel's use of identification is a useful exercise for understanding how the novel has achieved sustained popularity and impacted countless women since its publication.

II: Critical Readings of Identification in *The Bell Jar*

An investigation of identification through entertainment education is applicable in literature, and existing Plath criticism helpfully establishes the justification for using this lens in a close reading of *The Bell Jar*. Although they may not explicitly draw from Cohen's (2001) work, literary critics are already referring to identification in their explorations of *The Bell Jar.* Literary critics approach *The Bell Jar* with a variety of perspectives, and yet a common thread exists: countless authors recognize that Plath's popularity is due in part to readers seeing themselves in Esther.

In her article "Before and After a Poet's Suicide: The Reception of Sylvia Plath," Egeland (2014) traces the public opinion of *The Bell Jar* and Plath's other works. Noting one of many causes of Plath's popularity, Egeland suggests that the troubling experiences shared by both the reader and the author provide ample grounds for identification: "Readers who struggled recognized their own problems in hers, identifying passionately" (p. 33). By expressing vulnerability and pain through a first-person narrative, Plath primes her audience to see themselves mirrored in her experiences. While Egeland does not situate Plath's work specifically within the realm of entertainment education when she describes readers' experience, the language she employs and the experience she articulates is consistent with the concept of identification as explained by Cohen (2001). In particular, Egeland's (2014) commentary relates to Cohen's (2001) belief that

identification involves "feeling with the character, rather than about the character" (p. 251). Egeland (2014) describes readers seeing their experiences mirrored in the text, an observation that matches Cohen's (2001) distinction between identification and empathy.

Greenberg and Klaver (2009) echo this idea of identification with Plath. Through a published email exchange, the professor and graduate student reflect on why girls and young women feel drawn to Plath. The authors recall feeling alone in their girlhood and wishing to find themselves represented in literature. When they did find a literary figure who resembled themselves in Plath's Esther, they formulated their own understanding of self around the "female artist" identity. As Greenberg (2009) puts it, "[Plath] was smart, ambitious, talented, strange, highly functional… like me, I wanted to believe" (p. 183). In their investigation of why girls and young women are attracted Plath's writing, Greenberg and Klaver (2009) isolate their own identification with the author as a key factor for Plath's popularity. Donofrio (2015) adds that career ambitions also contribute to Plath's appeal, arguing that young individuals interested in acquiring internships and beginning their careers used *The Bell Jar* as a laboratory in which to test out the life of an intern whose creativity and ambition were exploited by a company. The underlying similarity amongst these observations is the identification readers undergo when exposed to *The Bell Jar*—an experience of perceived likeness that transcends individual differences and manifests in Plath's ongoing popularity.

Critics have also pointed to the variety of interpretations of *The Bell Jar* as reason for its sustained popularity (Egeland, 2014). Egeland explains that readers claim *The Bell Jar* as evidence for whatever message they see in the book, regardless of whether or not Plath intentionally addressed such causes. She lists various subsections of Plath's

audience—including psychologists, academics, and general readers—who use *The Bell Jar* in ways that best suit their own needs. Banita (2017) furthers this idea in "'The Same, Identical Woman': Sylvia Plath in the Media" by suggesting that readers "appropriate" Plath's identity in an effort to justify their personal or political efforts (p. 41). From Banita's perspective, readers asserting *The Bell Jar* as evidence for their own cause results in a "full-fledged, sometimes tasteless dilemma" (p. 41). These accounts present *The Bell Jar* as an open text on which readers project their own self-interested interpretations. For instance, audiences famously received and still view the book as a feminist touchstone; with the publications of *The Bell Jar* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* coinciding in 1963, Plath's critique of gender roles surfaced during a time rife with feminist thought. While her book, poems, and journals demonstrate that Plath supported many feminist ideas, we cannot know how she would respond to her book's late reception as a feminist text.

Would Plath approve of how *The Bell Jar* has been used to justify a variety of movements and ideologies? What would she think of the various interpretations readers have made in the past five decades? Regardless of how Plath would answer these questions, she did craft a unique identification artifact—a book that, for better or for worse, has been interpreted in various ways and claimed by various causes. Readers who might otherwise have little in common see themselves and their struggles reflected in Plath's writing, and that universality makes *The Bell Jar* a profound example of how identification functions in the reader experience.

III: Plath's Own Desires for Identification

Perhaps it's unsurprising that critics so often emphasize the identification elements of Plath's writing, given how Plath herself consciously identified with poets and characters as a reader. When reflecting on a passage from *Macbeth* in her *Journals,* Plath (2000) writes, "[I] pick up poetic identities of characters who commit suicide, adultery, or get murdered, and believe completely in them for a while" (p. 104). The way Plath describes characters—not by her relationships with them but by her adoption of them as her own—perfectly matches the entertainment education tenant of identification. In her own words, Plath "[picks] up poetic identities of characters" (p. 104); translated into Cohen's (2001) words, Plath "imagines being one of the characters in the text" (p. 252). If Cohen was a poet, he might have described identification exactly as Plath did. These two thinkers are separated by decades and incomparable life experiences; even so, I see a distinct connection in how they observe the relationship between the reader and the character—or, perhaps, the reader and a fictionalized version of themself.

For Plath, the significance of identification with characters extends beyond being one with a character. Plath's (2000) personal account adds a sense of authenticity and unbridled openness to Cohen's (2001) definition. She writes: "Immerse self in characters, feelings of others—not to look at them through plate glass. Get to the bottom of deceptions, emotions" (p. 323). Here, Plath could be describing either the process of writing or the process of reading. Either way, her desire to "immerse [her]self in characters" highlights the profound importance Plath placed on identification; she believed in viewing characters and their emotions as extensions of herself. For her, seeing characters clearly through transparent glass is not enough; instead, she suggests that one

must go beyond mere observation and become the characters they wish to understand. By rejecting the idea of watching characters from afar even with an unobstructed view, Plath commits to identification as a primary objective of any dedicated writer or reader.

If we transpose these ideas to *The Bell Jar*, we can consider how identification with Esther not only engages readers in the story, but also contributes to the Plath's persuasive impact; Cohen (2001) notes that individuals experiencing identification with mediated characters can result in viewers being less circumspect to prosocial messages, which Moyer-Gusé (2008) observes can result in decreased counterarguing. When individuals are absorbed in a narrative, they are less likely to be skeptical of arguments presented therein. Furthermore, de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, and Beentjes (2011) found that identification can drive narrative persuasion. The specific experience of readers taking on the identity of a character can result in them being persuaded by the narrative. The reality of identification resulting in more persuasion justifies the idea that Plath's chosen genre—a narrative—also contributes to its powerful, persuasive impact. By presenting her work as a semi-autobiographical narrative, Plath utilizes a media form that increases the likelihood of her messages being accepted by readers. If Plath had openly presented her work as an autobiography, readers would likely be more circumspect to her messages. However, because Plath chose to deliver her messages in a narrative form under a pseudonym, she lessens the chance of readers critically evaluating her arguments. By embedding her persuasive message into a plotline and making Esther a relatable character whose perspective readers can adopt, Plath establishes an ideal foundation for persuasion.

As the following chapters of this thesis demonstrate, *The Bell Jar* serves to entertain readers through its engaging narrative while also sharing prosocial messages. I argue that Plath encourages readers to identify with Esther, and readers are therefore more likely to adopt the attitudes expressed in the text. In particular, Plath provides readers with templates for how to navigate mental health and gender roles. Regardless of whether or not Plath envisioned *The Bell Jar* as a piece of persuasion, she effectively crafted a novel that can and does persuade readers. She uses *The Bell Jar* to present readers with a mental health advocate and feminist with whom they can identify.

CHAPTER 2

Identification with Esther as Mental Illness Patient:

Unveiling the Harms of Stigma and Providing an Alternative

Wielding identification as a tool for influencing readers, Plath strategically mobilizes *The Bell Jar* as a rhetorical venue to address issues regarding mental health. In particular, she positions her protagonist—and therefore also her readers—in relationships and conversations that illuminate the problematic consequences of stigma. In their review of literature pertaining to mental illness and stigma discourse, Overton and Medina (2008) describe the social pressures, structural barriers, and intrapersonal challenges individuals with mental illness experience as a result of stigma. As they explain, stigma projected onto individuals with mental illness negatively affects their self-efficacy, self-esteem, access to opportunities, and likelihood of improvement:

> [People with mental illness] are often compromised in dealing with daily activities. After hearing negative feedback and experiencing an onslaught of negative actions, they begin to see themselves in a negative light… [and] often find that their self-image and confidence are sacrificed by living under the pressure and negative expectations generated by stigma. (Overton & Medina, 2008, p. 147)

When individuals perceive a lack of support, they not only feel less likely to overcome challenges, but also are more likely to experience aggravated symptoms of mental illness; Mickelson (2001) found that individuals who perceive they are the subject of stigma from others are more likely to experience symptoms of depression. The existing literature investigating the effects of stigma demonstrates the impact relationships can have on one's health status and sense of self.

As *The Bell Jar* unfolds, Plath presents several different contexts within which the stigmas surrounding mental illness negatively affect central characters. For example, Esther's relationship with Joan highlights the danger of concealing information from peers during emergencies; Esther's mother and Buddy Willard's father relay shameful messages about illness that their children internalize; and Esther's primary physicians present contrasting depictions of appropriate health treatment that hinge on stigma. Through these illustrations, Plath not only warns readers about the intersection of stigma and health, but also presents a positive example of a relationship addressing health (i.e., Esther's relationship with Doctor Nolan) to model appropriate attitudes about health.

I: Idealization Meets Shame: Esther's Peer Interactions

Following her internship at *Ladies' Day,* Esther struggles with her mental health. She swallows approximately fifty pills in an attempt to take her life and hides in a secluded crevice in her house's cellar. After being discovered, Esther is transported to a hospital and is eventually relocated to Doctor Nolan's ward. While Esther stays in the asylum, she reunites with Joan, another woman who is being treated following her attempted suicide. When Joan first arrives at the asylum, a nurse says to Esther, "'[Joan] says she's an old friend of yours'" (p. 194). Esther then follows the nurse's suggestion to visit Joan, and Joan greets Esther with an enthusiasm that surprises Esther—who would not have regarded her as an "old friend," but rather as an acquaintance. Once the two spend time sharing stories, Esther comes to realize that Joan has crafted an unhealthy idealization of Esther. Joan reveals her collection of newspaper clippings detailing Esther's disappearance and the discovery of her body in the woods. Joan's fixation

regarding the newspaper clippings—"You keep them… You ought to stick them in a scrapbook" (p. 199)—suggests that she views Esther's infamous disappearance as novel and mesmerizing. Joan speaks about Esther's mental health crisis as if the lowest point in her life is more prideworthy than any of her other experiences or relationships.

Talking about Esther as if she is a celebrity, Joan also attributes her own suicide attempt to Esther's disappearance: "'I read about you… Not how they found you, but everything up to that, and I put all my money together and took the first plane to New York… I thought it would be easier to kill myself in New York'" (p. 199). Joan's romanticization of Esther and her subsequent suicide attempt present an instance of metaidentification within *The Bell Jar*: while the two hardly know each other, Joan sees herself mirrored in Esther's experience. However, Joan's identification with Esther seems unhealthy. The newspaper clippings depict Esther in a tumultuous and harrowing time of her life. Perhaps Joan's obsession with Esther's suicide attempt reveals a sense of isolation she has felt in her struggle with mental health. While we do not know the details of Joan's struggles, readers are aware she has attempted suicide recently; Joan might readily identify with Esther because the former's raw and painful experiences with mental health finally seem valid and real when reflected in the story of a successful "scholarship girl" (p. 198). Joan might have felt alone in her depression, and finally seeing herself reflected in another person's life presents Joan with the validation necessary to follow in Esther's footsteps.

Here, identification plays a multidimensional role, as readers who already identify with Esther then perceive Joan identifying with them. By crafting this scene, Plath presents Joan as a stand-in for the reader, modeling a consumer's identification

interaction with media. Plath also reveals the powerful impact identification can have on one's life. Perhaps this scene serves as a warning—a signal to readers that while identifying with a character can be a mesmerizing and sometimes fruitful experience (as we saw in the numerous literary critics discussing Plath's impact on girls looking to find their struggles reflected in media), readers must ultimately recognize their agency. Through this identification duality, Plath not only uses Joan as a model for ideal reader engagement, but also highlights the limitations and potential danger of identification.

Despite Joan's harrowing reveal of her suicide attempt and the similar mental health experiences Esther and Joan share, the characters' conversation is burdened by shame surrounding mental illness. At the conclusion of their interaction, Esther seems to project a sense of normality and safety onto them both: "'But you're all right now.' I made it a statement. Joan considered me with her bright, pebble-gray eyes. 'I guess so,' she said. 'Aren't you?'" (p. 200). Joan is currently residing in an asylum, her wrists still swollen and red from self-harm, and she has presented no evidence that her health has improved. Even so, Esther definitively states that Joan is "all right," and Joan returns that assumption to Esther. This exchange of assumptions demonstrates the discomfort individuals feel admitting that they need treatment and assistance to improve their mental health; Joan serves as Esther's closest friend while under Doctor Nolan's care, yet the two cannot achieve honesty and empathy under the stigma of mental illness.

By implying that neither Joan nor Esther are "all right" yet placing readers in an interaction that states otherwise, Plath reveals the barrier that stigma upholds. Through their identification with Esther, readers are likely aware that neither character is healthy—despite Joan's apparent eagerness to discuss their similarities and glorify

Esther's experiences. The beginning of their conversation and the concluding lines provide a contrast between the self-disclosure the characters are willing to engage in and their reluctance to admit instability. Identification involves a loss of self and the adoption of a separate identity—an experience that inevitably makes one feel as if no barrier exists between one's true identity and the other person. Despite this close tie of identities, Joan's identification with Esther cannot overcome the social pressure of stigma. Readers are therefore confronted with the painful secrecy mental health stigma foments and are challenged to perceive that distance, and perhaps also engage in the difficult conversations Joan and Esther could not accomplish.

Esther and Joan's avoidance of sensitive topics applies to other areas of healthcare as well. Earlier in the novel, for example, Esther demands medical attention from Joan when her sexual encounter with Irwin results in excessive bleeding. Joan nervously complies, firing questions at Esther to piece together a narrative explaining why Esther is bleeding. Even though the two share a relatively close friendship, Esther refrains from mentioning that her injury is due to having sex: "I thought Joan would refuse to call a doctor until I confessed the whole story of my evening with Irwin and that after my confession she would still refuse, as a sort of punishment" (p. 231). Even though she is bleeding profusely and in need of emergency medical treatment, Esther withholds information about her injury due to shame surrounding sexual intimacy. Esther wonders if revealing this "impure" element of her story would result in Joan abandoning Esther in this moment of need; Esther assumes Joan will disapprove so vehemently that she would sooner watch Esther suffer than contact a doctor.

While not expressed directly in the text, Esther might also be withholding information to preserve her idealized image. Having Joan present during an emergency is valuable, but perhaps more important to Esther is being the model of Joan's romanticized ideas about mental health. Tarnishing her image with the truth could result in Joan severing her identification with Esther. Esther's decision to hide information from Joan could have been costly, as Joan was unable to properly inform doctors about Esther's condition. Later, when they arrive at the Emergency Ward, Esther "managed to tell [a nurse] the truth about [her] predicament before Joan came in the door" (p. 233). Esther is so concerned about Joan's judgment that she focuses energy on hiding the truth rather than ensuring all individuals helping her understand the situation.

Joan and Esther's stunted conversation following Esther's experience with Irwin reveals the depth of their difficulties discussing health due to stigma. Even when Esther considers the possibility that she is dying—"I remembered a worrisome course in the Victorian novel where woman after woman died, palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth. Perhaps… all the while I lay there on Joan's sofa I was really dying"—she still prioritizes her reputation in Joan's eyes over her health (p. 232). Similar to the messages Plath crafts regarding mental health stigma, the messages embedded in this scene speak to the risk of concealing potentially embarrassing details in emergencies under the weight of taboo. Plath encourages us to recognize the problematic and dangerous consequences of shame. By contrasting the concept of a close friendship with the risky secrecy Esther demonstrates, Plath emphasizes a prosocial message about the need to break down barriers regarding stigma and shame to improve conversations about health.

II: Mental Illness as a "Choice": Parental Messages in *The Bell Jar*

In addition to alighting upon how stigma impacts peer relationships, character interactions in *The Bell Jar* allow Plath to illuminate the harmful impact parents can have on children when stigmatizing mental illness. Esther's mother is a prime example of a parental figure casting stigma on her child, and—notably—she does so under the veil of support. When Esther begins feeling numb and motionless during the summer she spends with her mother, she visits the family doctor, Teresa. Teresa refers Esther to a psychiatrist who she believes will be better equipped to meet Esther's needs. Esther meets with Doctor Gordon on multiple occasions, and these sessions become increasingly repetitive and unproductive. After a visit with Doctor Gordon in which he asks redundant and irrelevant questions about Esther's college life, Esther announces to her mother that she will not seek treatment from him again. In response, Esther's mother responds in a superficially supportive way that seems to evaluate mental health as a choice: "My mother smiled. 'I knew my baby wasn't like that.' I looked at her. 'Like what?' 'Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital… I knew you'd decide to be all right again'" (pp. 145-146).

In this exchange, Esther's mother demonstrates several problematic behaviors in her response to Esther's decision. Initially, she expresses happiness—perhaps a manifestation of relief—when Esther denies further treatment. Rather than showing concern for her daughter's health, though, Esther's mother utilizes an expression of joy to discourage Esther from finding a more suitable doctor. The nonverbal elements of the conversation associate a lack of treatment with joy, thereby associating treatment with

disapproval. Furthermore, the verbal content of their exchange sends an unhealthy message about how Esther should view mental health; Esther's mother pointedly describes Esther's mental health status as a deliberate decision. She also refers to individuals receiving mental health treatment as "awful dead people" (p. 145).

This description is inarguably negative and unflattering, demonstrating a common yet destructive pattern of social behavior articulated by Goffman (1963) through social identity theory. Social identity theory explains how groups cast judgment on individuals who do not meet certain social standards, thereby creating outcasts. Overton and Medina (2008) apply Goffman's theory and his conceptualization of the *spoiled collective identity* to individuals who are discarded by society due to mental illness: "With spoiled collective identity, the stigmatized person is reduced in the minds of others from a whole and normal person to a tainted, discounted one" (p. 144). Esther's mother participates in this judgmental othering when she presents a problematic binary opposition between *good*, acceptable people who choose to be healthy and *bad*, unacceptable people who choose to be unhealthy.

This mentality about illness appears earlier in the novel, as well. Mr. Willard—the father of Esther's longtime love interest, Buddy Willard—drives Esther to visit his son. Buddy is ill at the time, taking months away from medical school to receive TB treatment. Buddy observes that Mr. Willard is unsympathetic towards people who are ill, stating that "his father simply couldn't stand the sight of sickness and especially his own son's sickness, because he thought all sickness was sickness of the will. Mr. Willard had never been sick a day in his life" (p. 91). Through this sentiment and his decisions to maintain distance from his son, Mr. Willard expresses a sense of superiority over

individuals who are ill while also demonstrating a lack of empathy; he evaluates other people's experiences based on his life as a healthy man, and that myopic view precludes him from empathizing with his own son. Even Buddy's bedridden state does not prevent his father from claiming that sickness is a choice.

Their parents' expressed judgment towards individuals with illness serves as a foundational similarity between Esther and Buddy. Both individuals recognize their parents' disapproval regarding a state of being beyond their control. Esther's mother and Buddy's father project a sense of otherness onto people who are ill, and that sense of superiority and perceived difference is still evident when their own children are struggling with their health. Importantly, the judgment their parents express is reflected in Esther's and Buddy's attitudes regarding health; when Buddy calls Esther to tell her about his illness, Esther observes, "I had never heard Buddy so upset. He was very proud of his perfect health and was always telling me it was psychosomatic when my sinuses blocked up and I couldn't breathe" (p. 73). Buddy's idea that ill health is self-induced precisely mirrors his father's sentiments, thus suggesting the harmful impact his father has had on his conceptualization of health.

The parental figures in these relationships—individuals whose roles imply they will provide their children with unconditional love and security—send a message of judgment that extends beyond themselves to represent societal stigma surrounding illness. By emphasizing the parents' negative judgment of their children's noticeable health struggles, Plath brings attention to harmful messages that place blame on individuals. Identification allows Plath to humanize the recipients of these messages, thereby amplifying the sense of injustice readers feel regarding such stigma. Vicariously

experiencing Esther's shame and emotional isolation from her mother places readers in a position to critically evaluate negative messages about illness that they might encounter in their own lives. When readers achieve their vivid identification with Esther by the end of the novel, they are left with a lingering sense of injustice that can then translate into increased awareness of positive and negative health messages.

III: Disinterest versus Empathy: Physician-Patient Interactions

As a complement to the explorations of intimate relationships as seen in the peer-focused and parent-child interactions, the problematic presence of stigma in healthcare practice appears in several of Plath's scenes. Overton and Medina (2008) note that the presence of stigma surrounding mental illness can hamper the effectiveness of treatment for those who are able to obtain treatment services (p. 146). More significantly, they observe that some health practitioners perpetuate and aggravate the stigma clients experience. Therefore, Overton and Medina argue, "It is imperative to address stigma in the mental health field and work to decrease the stigmatizing beliefs that practitioners hold to be true" (p. 148). Health practitioners exist in a space that is still detrimentally impacted by stigma despite intentions to help patients, and Plath responds to that reality through her commentary on stigma in physician-patient interactions. Two of Esther's doctors—Doctor Gordon, whom she visits towards the beginning of her mental health treatment, and Doctor Nolan, whom she is in the care of after her suicide attempt—demonstrate opposing attitudes about mental health and different approaches to patient care.

To Esther, Doctor Gordon is a decidedly ineffective and uncaring health professional. Initially, Plath describes the dichotomy of Esther's anticipated ideal treatment and the actuality of her encounter with the physician. Esther says, "I had imagined a kind, ugly, intuitive man looking up and saying 'Ah!' in an encouraging way, as if he could see something I couldn't, and then I would find words to tell him how I was so scared…. And then, I thought, he would help me, step by step, to be myself again" (pp. 128-129). Through this internal monologue, Esther articulates her vision of healthy and helpful care: a physician expressing support, earning trust, and drawing out Esther's emotions to achieve progress. In contrast, Doctor Gordon appears skeptical, uninterested, and uncaring. At the beginning of their interaction, he prompts, "'Suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong'" (p. 129). The word "think" serves as an integral word in the conversation; Esther notes that Doctor Gordon's language "made it sound as if nothing was *really* wrong"—that Esther had fabricated the illusion of a problem rather than genuinely experiencing pain (p. 130). Plath emphasizes this fault in Doctor Gordon's practice by using italics when Esther reflects on his prompt; within two sentences, Plath uses italics on three occasions for the words "think," "really," and "thought." Plath uses typeface emphasis sparingly in the novel, so her choice to emphasize Doctor Gordon's skepticism suggests that this interaction is significant in Esther's relationship with him and her mental health treatment narrative. This scene presents an illustration of mental health stigma penetrating healthcare services and preventing effective care for the patient.

Plath elaborates on Doctor Gordon's uncaring nature by bringing attention to his casual and subpar interpersonal skills. During their first interaction, he asks Esther where she attends college. Esther alludes to her dissatisfaction with the appointment by

wondering how her school is relevant to her diagnosis. Doctor Gordon goes on to make mundane small talk about the WAC station at Esther's school. At a subsequent appointment, Doctor Gordon asks, "'Which college did you say you went to?... They had a WAC station up there, didn't they, during the war?'" (p.144). This repetition of two questions implies Doctor Gordon does not care enough about his patients—and Esther, in particular—to remember details about their lives. This repetition also relays the monotony and apparent pointlessness of Esther's appointments; she notes that her appointments seem fruitless yet cost more than her family can easily afford. Rather than making progress in his understanding of Esther's situation, Doctor Gordon spends Esther's time and money on repeated questions and no promise of recovery. Considering Doctor Gordon does not recognize Esther's struggles as real, he might feel justified in overlooking his patients and providing "care" through fruitless conversation. After all, if he does not believe Esther is actually being afflicted by illness, he likely lacks a sense of urgency or the motivation to help her.

By placing readers in dull, uncomfortable appointments with the uninterested Doctor Gordon, Plath encourages us to vicariously experience Esther's frustration with her treatment. Having already achieved identification with Esther, readers are confronted with a medical practitioner who does not recognize their struggles as legitimate or express care about them as individuals. This relationship with Doctor Gordon might result in readers feeling betrayed, ignored, and misunderstood, thus sparking distrust in medical professionals while simultaneously increasing a reader's desire to feel understood.

In contrast, Doctor Nolan demonstrates effective and appreciated healthcare, largely due to her caring persona and recognition of Esther's experiences as valid. Following her interactions with Doctor Gordon, Esther is skeptical about health professionals and fears that Doctor Nolan is working alongside Doctor Gordon. However, Esther quickly opens up to Doctor Nolan when she begins to notice the caretaker's genuine concern. One of Doctor Nolan's most effective techniques is asking leading questions to draw out Esther's feelings. Doctor Nolan begins by saying, "'Tell me about Doctor Gordon… Did you like him?'" (p. 189). Later, when Esther remarks, "'I didn't like what he did to me,'" Doctor Nolan adopts an empathetic interpersonal communication approach. Doctor Nolan paraphrases Esther's comments, repeating Esther's words as a question to simultaneously express that she is paying attention and encourage elaboration: "'Did to you?'" (p. 189). Rather than filling the conversation with her own words, she attends to Esther's input and encourages her to explore and share her feelings. In this way, Doctor Nolan rectifies a fault in Doctor Gordon's practice: she guides these appointments in a way that makes Esther feel like she can be vulnerable and honest, which in turn increases Doctor Nolan's understanding of the situation so she can provide the best possible care.

Doctor Nolan also expresses an understanding and recognition of Esther's likes and dislikes. During one of their earliest interactions, Doctor Nolan announces that Esther will no longer have visiting hours. Esther is relieved by this news; she writes, "I hated these visits, because I kept feeling the visitors measuring my fat and stringy hair against what I had been and what they wanted me to be, and I knew they went away utterly confounded. I thought if they left me alone I might have some peace" (p. 202). Esther

further demonstrates this attitude by throwing away a bouquet of flowers her mother had brought that morning for her birthday. Doctor Nolan evidently takes note of this exchange, and upon announcing the visiting hours cancelation, she appears to genuinely care about Esther's happiness: "'I thought you'd be pleased.' She smiled" (p. 201). Doctor Nolan has not been overseeing Esther's care for a substantial amount of time, but she is already communicating with Esther in a way that expresses understanding and hope. Unlike Doctor Gordon, who did not care to remember what school Esther attended, Doctor Nolan attends to and acknowledges the intricacies of Esther's life and identity beyond her symptoms.

While Doctor Nolan serves as a better healthcare practitioner than Doctor Gordon, Plath crafts the character to be complex and somewhat problematic despite her caring nature. Doctor Nolan betrays Esther's trust when she arranges for Esther to receive shock therapy without substantial warning. Esther's internal response demonstrates the conflicting feelings she experiences at this moment: "I liked Doctor Nolan, I loved her, I had given her my trust on a platter and told her everything, and she had promised, faithfully, to warn me ahead of time if ever I had to have another shock treatment" (p. 211). Because the story is told in first person, thus limiting readers' knowledge to Esther's frame of reference, readers experience the surprise and betrayal alongside Esther. Plath sets up this moment to reveal the painful experience of being subjected to decisions of healthcare providers who, despite their friendliness, are still doctors fulfilling their duties. Even so, Doctor Nolan's emotional response is redeeming. She consoles Esther, promises to stay by her side through the treatment, and appears invested in Esther's wellbeing: "I looked at her. [Doctor Nolan] seemed very upset" (p. 212). We

soon learn that Doctor Nolan avoided discussion about the upcoming treatment in an attempt to protect Esther; following Esther's outburst, Doctor Nolan tells Esther that she withheld prior notice because she knew the warning would keep Esther awake at night. The hurtful betrayal Esther feels is met by Doctor Nolan's genuine empathy, which tempers Esther's reaction.

When Doctor Nolan explains to Esther that all her decisions have been executed with Esther's wellbeing in mind and promises to stay with Esther throughout the process, Esther musters enough trust in her provider to go through with the electroshock therapy. Doctor Nolan further confirms her concern for Esther through small expressions of support through physical contact: "Doctor Nolan took out a white handkerchief and wiped my face" (p. 212). As the two walk to the room where Esther will receive electroshock therapy, Esther notes that "every so often she gave me an encouraging squeeze" (p. 213). Furthermore, by remaining beside Esther as she awakes, Doctor Nolan regains her position as a trusted and positive influence in Esther's life.

Doctor Nolan's significance in Esther's relationship with medical personnel is highlighted by the doctor's role in the final scene of *The Bell Jar,* which ties in with the peer and parent scenes this chapter has explored. To conclude the novel, Doctor Nolan escorts Esther towards a room filled with health practitioners who will decide whether or not she will be released from the facility. Doctor Nolan provides reassurance, touches Esther's shoulder, and offers the last dialogue in the novel—"All right, Esther" (p. 244)—just before the two enter the room. These final spoken words in the book include an affirming phrase, relaying encouragement and anticipation as Esther prepares to hear her fate. Doctor Nolan's short statement simultaneously acknowledges Esther's

personhood by ending with her name. While Doctor Nolan's careful words and actions might not have required significant thought, they reveal a stark difference between Doctor Gordon's and Doctor Nolan's practices; Doctor Gordon is uncaring and ignorant, whereas Doctor Nolan treats Esther as a valued individual whose experiences are valid. Finally, the words "all right" alone are significant, given how they echo Esther's conversation with Joan in which she says, "'But you're all right now'" (p. 200). That conversation was marked by an absence of genuine conversation—an illusion that mental illness dissolves immediately once individuals seek treatment. The final dialogue in *The Bell Jar* reflects the idea of being "all right"; however, instead of falsely declaring that another person is "all right" as Esther once did under the weight of stigma, Doctor Nolan seems to infuse the words with hope—or, at the very least, support. Doctor Nolan rejects the mental health stigma that burdened Esther's relationships with Joan, her mother, and Doctor Gordon, as well as Buddy's relationship with his father. Plath does not leave readers with the sense that everything is surely "all right," yet her inclusion of Doctor Nolan as a loving presence in the final scene suggests that overcoming stigma is possible with support.

Through Esther's relationships with peers, parental figures, and healthcare practitioners, Plath articulates many of stigma's implications for individuals with mental illnesses. The *education* component of this entertainment education text is evident in this exploration; initially, Plath brings awareness to the issue of stigma in a variety of contexts, demonstrating how people in all sectors of one's life might have a negative impact if they carry judgment fueled by societal norms. Furthermore, Plath demonstrates how to empathetically navigate the challenges of mental health by concluding the text

with Doctor Nolan's understanding and nonjudgmental role in Esther's life. Because Doctor Nolan looks beyond stigma and emphasizes Esther's humanity, she seems to serve as Plath's model for all readers navigating the intersection of relationships and mental illness. As readers, we are confronted with the messy realities of stigma and also left with a message: to view people as *people,* not as their mental health symptoms. The latter option can result in unhealthy romanticization of mental illness by peers, dangerous messages from parents, and ineffective treatment from healthcare providers. In contrast, Plath's first-person narration and introspective accounts reveal the humanity of people that exists beyond (and in tandem) with their mental health.

CHAPTER 3

1950s Femininity Across the Domestic and Professional Spheres: Speaking to Readers' Concerns About Gender Roles

The gender difference between Doctor Gordon and Doctor Nolan is not coincidental. Plath explores the intersection of gender and healthcare by contrasting an uncaring and disinterested man with a considerate and empathetic woman. By encouraging readers to perceive they have a positive relationship with Doctor Nolan and a negative relationship with Doctor Gordon, Plath establishes a palpable contrast between the care men and women provide. Plath further emphasizes this point in a conversation between Esther and Doctor Nolan:

> "'I don't see what women see in other women,' I told Doctor Nolan in my interview that noon. 'What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?' Doctor Nolan paused. Then she said, 'Tenderness.' That shut me up" (p. 219).

At a surface level, this conversation is about intimate relationships rather than patient-provider interactions; however, the conversation also articulates the difference between Doctor Nolan and Doctor Gordon—"tenderness"—and associates that distinction with gender rather than personality differences. This gendered distinction between the uncaring Doctor Gordon and the empathic Doctor Nolan is only one facet of Plath's messages regarding gender that comes into focus through the lens of identification theory. Plath also creates a sense of likeness between Esther and readers through self-disclosure and motivational reveals. This emphasis on girls' identification with Esther

results in girls engaging with the text, which then introduces an opportunity for Plath to relay broader persuasive messages about gender and mid-century feminism.

I: Identifying with Esther: Plath's Media Representation of the Independent Woman

As I noted in Chapter 1, Greenberg and Klaver's (2009) conversational article about girls seeing themselves mirrored in Plath's writing points out how *The Bell Jar* functions as a text ripe for identification. Returning to their argument, we can look further into their collaborative correspondence to see particularly how Greenberg and Klaver call upon *gender* as a key component of the identification they experienced with Esther. Greenberg, for instance, articulates why women and girls feel implicated in Plath's writing when she states:

> I'm thinking of the cultural studies/queer theory notion of the process of writing yourself into a book or film, of the importance of feeling 'called out' or represented by a cultural text. Recognizing yourself, using the text as a mirror. Part of why Plath has had the impact she has had on young women is because of the way we feel mirrored by her, by the way she writes about her life as a disillusioned young middle-class woman. (p. 186)

These lines offer important insight into the phenomenon of middle-class, white women and girls identifying with Plath and her characters. Their reflection acknowledges *The Bell Jar* as a text that not only engages with readers, but also brings particular attention to the ways in which Plath speaks to young women and girls by giving them representation. When the authors were young girls navigating the impact of gender on their lives, *The Bell Jar* provided them with a reflection that legitimized and commented on their experiences.

Plath encourages this type of gendered identification with Esther by positioning identification as a normal, legitimate means of envisioning possibilities for oneself. Esther herself models identification when thinking about the differences between her friends Betsy and Doreen. Both Betsy and Doreen are interning at *Ladies' Day,* though they represent what Esther sees as binary oppositions of womanhood; Betsy is innocent and pure, Doreen is wild and tainted. Esther recognizes this contrast after she and Doreen go to a bar and then let a man, Lenny, take the two to his home. Esther grows tired of witnessing Doreen and Lenny's infatuation with each other, so she returns to their hotel and later is left with the responsibility of caring for Doreen when she returns in a drunk stupor. Esther then decides, "Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart" (p. 22). In this instance, Esther comments on how she sees herself and her femininity mirrored in Betsy—or, perhaps more accurately, sees herself mirrored in Doreen and is horrified by that realization. Only moments later, Esther comments on her unwanted identification with Doreen: "I think I still expected to see Doreen's body lying [in the hallway] in a pool of vomit like an ugly, concrete testimony to my own dirty nature" (p. 23).

This contrast between Esther's identification with Betsy and Doreen speaks to her concerns about her own femininity and sexuality. By describing her understanding of self through moments of identification with other characters, Esther validates readers' experiences of identification and encourages readers to recognize themselves in others. In light of this invitation, women reading *The Bell Jar* might feel a willingness to share in Esther's self-reflection by imagining Esther mirroring themselves and their struggles with gendered notions of purity. Wrestling with the pressure of being "pure" and her

inclination to reject traditional gender roles, Esther holds up a metaphorical mirror that both she and the readers can see into; Esther might see Betsy and Doreen in her reflection, while readers peering into the mirror see Esther in their reflections. Through these layered relationships, Plath simultaneously illustrates and encourages the experience of identification.

In addition to presenting identification as a legitimate means of seeing oneself, Plath elicits identification in her readers by revealing personal stories that young women can relate to, making Esther a character that reflects the experiences and emotions of readers. Within the first chapter of *The Bell Jar,* Plath presents readers with the image of a young woman from a small town who finds success. Esther imagines how others would view her situation: "A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car" (p. 2). This background information is likely to resonate with many readers; the countless young women who have similar lives and hope for an escape might feel implicated in the story and desperate from the reprieve of a rural, domestic life. Before even hinting at the novel's plot, then, Plath establishes a character whose background allows for readers with similar lives to experience identification with Esther and engage in an alternative reality for themselves—one that reveals an exciting and inspiring take on a woman's potential for success. Plath simultaneously appeals to women who grew up in cities by situating much of the novel in New York City. Esther navigates New York City transportation, attends social gatherings, and visits universities. Esther and Doreen go to a bar with men they have never met before, and Esther visits Buddy Willard at Yale and Constantin at

the UN. Through these excursions, Esther provides relatable stories for women who have had similar experiences in the cities and transporting stories for those who would like to live vicariously through her character. Therefore, Plath's decision to have her plot stretch across both urban and rural areas successfully presents a protagonist with whom many people can identify.

Esther also elicits identification through similarity by illuminating self-deprecating elements of her character, a strategy that might reveal intimate similarities between Esther and readers while also establishing a sense of honesty. Esther self-discloses about her unflattering characteristics that might be common amongst readers. In particular, these elements of self-disclosure may resonate with adolescent girls struggling to meet expectations. Esther informs readers that she "was a terrible dancer" when she was in her college years (p. 76). Women who feel the societal pressure to appear feminine and conceal flaws are more likely to identify with Esther because of this personal reveal—one that seems to give readers permission to fall beneath societal expectations. Even if individuals cannot relate with Esther based solely on the fact that she cannot dance, they might feel a likeness with the character because they recognize the similarity between Esther's dancing abilities and their own perceived shortcomings. Another moment of self-deprecation occurs when Esther comments, "I knew something was wrong with me that summer," attributing her suspicions about her wellbeing to anxieties about the Rosenbergs, unnecessary clothing purchases, and dwindling successes from college (p. 2). By pointing out criticisms about herself, Esther acknowledges her own faults, thus engaging in self-disclosure to form a sense of trust and honesty with readers. Her concerns about achieving ideal, feminine characteristics—the unfailing

smile, flattering clothing, and unwavering success—speak to the pressure women feel to maintain an aura of perfection. Additionally, readers will almost certainly acknowledge that no individual is perfect; therefore, they can see criticisms of themselves reflected in Esther. Readers are able to view this story through the consciousness of an imperfect character, thus adopting the persona of someone who has a complex identity and calls attention to the flaws women are told to conceal.

Furthermore, Plath encourages "poet girl" readers to identify with Esther on a motivational level (Greenberg & Klaver, 2009, p. 182). Cohen (2001) noted that identification involves audiences taking on a character's goals, and if a reader shares goals with a character prior to identification, it stands to reason that those goals will be strengthened in the reader's mind. Similarly, if a reader and a character share similar attitudes prior to identification, identification will strengthen those attitudes (Cohen, 2001). Plath capitalizes on this opportunity for identification by presenting goals and attitudes that young women might already possess. Plath presents Esther as a writer, an identity that "poet girls"—a group discussed in detail by Greenberg and Klaver (2009)—can relate to (p. 182). Esther's position as an intern for *Ladies' Day* magazine is anchored by her strong writing abilities, and Esther's ambitions to become an acclaimed writer might resonate with readers who consider themselves writers. Plath even alludes to the experience of writing a novel, therefore providing young writers with a space in which their own writing endeavors are given legitimacy. Young women who write poems or stories can live through the persona of an individual hired to be a writer—a scenario that could potentially be a personal dream for readers.

Through her first-person narration and intimate reveals, Esther places herself in a vulnerable position while simultaneously encouraging others to recognize themselves in Esther. Plath makes Esther a more accessible character through such moments of disclosure, encouraging readers to feel as though another person shares their experiences and fears; through these strategies, Esther's character serves to recognize and legitimize the experiences of girls navigating difficult experiences and seeking representation in media. By sharing her experiences in this way, Plath ensures that a wide swatch of readers, especially women, will view Esther as relatable. Consequently, girls become active participants in the text, sharing Esther's thoughts and struggles.

II: Domestic versus Professional Success: Esther's Persuasive Appeal and 1950s Feminism

Throughout the novel, Esther criticizes men's sense of superiority over women. When reflecting on the idea that women fluent in shorthand are expected to work for men, Esther writes, "I hated the idea of serving men in any way" (p. 76). In this statement, she directly challenges the gendered systems of power established in American society, articulating an aversion to occupational inferiority that might result in readers feeling understood and liberated. This blatant rejection of the career categories available at the time for women provides readers not only with encouragement to challenge gender roles, but also informs them that they are not alone in their unrest. Esther serves as a reflection of any woman who feels uncomfortable in her allocated position of inferiority, and Plath gives those readers validation and encouragement to challenge the system that divides men and women.

By wrestling with gendered notions of sexuality and rejecting masculine dominance in the workplace, Plath articulates a reality that girls might have recognized yet not seen reflected in public discourse. Plath also showcases a character who, in many ways, defies expectations. Ghanderharion, Bozorgian, and Sabbagh (2015) note that *The Bell Jar* reflects life for American women in the 1950s. They write, “The America of the 1950s seems to be under the impression that childbirth is a miraculous event because woman, the symbol of birth and procreation, is reborn while giving birth to another human being” (p. 65). The authors go on to observe how Esther navigates this reality, proposing that Esther believes that “marriage and having children, instead of becoming a means for the woman to nurture her true potentials and to blossom as a human being, have turned into a state in which she becomes trapped” (pp. 65-66).

Ghanderharion et al.’s (2015) analysis is perfectly reflected in Esther’s thoughts on marriage and childrearing. When dating a man named Constantin early on in the novel, for example, Esther contemplates the idea of being his wife and settles on the idea that marriage wastes a woman’s potential. Thinking about the married women she knows and the days they spend washing dishes, she decries, “This seemed like a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s, but I knew that’s what marriage was like” (p. 84). She then recalls a conversation with Buddy Willard in which he told her she would someday have children and then abandon her poetry: “I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (p. 85). These reflections on marriage revolve around Esther’s desire for independence and her conviction that a domestic life is antithetical to that freedom.

In addition to the loss of creativity and talent Esther fears, the possible presence of a gendered power imbalance in marriage is not lost on her. She recalls watching Buddy Willard's mother spend weeks crafting a rug out of her husband's clothing. Esther regarded this rug as a beautiful piece of art and was then disappointed to see the rug be relegated to the kitchen floor. She writes, "And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (p. 85). By pointing out the tragedy of Mrs. Willard's artwork going unrecognized and suggesting that husbands want their wives to experience the same fate, Esther identifies a lack of agency and a position of inferiority to which women in the 1950s were often subjected.

This battle between Esther's desires and expectations of women in the 1950s is not unique to our protagonist; by positioning Esther as an independent woman in a society hyper focused on women's traditionally domestic roles, Plath presents readers with a text that reflects their own discomfort with societal expectations. Esther sees readers' unease about marriage—their worry that a wedding will sacrifice their potential and discard their agency—and validates that uncertainty through representation. However, neither Esther nor many readers of the 1950s were fully confident in their rejection of traditional gender roles. Ghanderharion et al. (2015) point out that the novel's emphasis is on "the heroine's feelings of despondency and inadequacy" (p. 64), commenting on the phenomenon that women in the 1950s were unable to articulate the oppression that haunted them. While some women may have felt unrest regarding the subservient roles they were expected to accept, they did not have access to widespread

messages of defiance that would have validated their concerns. As a result, woman readers identified with Esther because she articulates a struggle they had not publicly—or, perhaps, personally—defined. *The Bell Jar* speaks to women's insecurities about their independence in a way that readers of the 1950s (or even of today) might not have been exposed to through other media.

Through her rejection of gendered expectations, Esther becomes the picture of a young feminist to whom similar readers can feel a connection. Plath positions *The Bell Jar* as a feminist text by commenting on the gendered power structures in the United States, and that decision emboldens readers whose identification with Esther results in them finally feeling understood. Esther does not wholly reject her femininity, yet she also expresses a desire to live independent of gender expectations. Ghanderharion et al. (2015) suggest that women in the 1950s felt incomplete unless they perceived cohesion between their domestic and independent selves. The impossibility of this cohesion was trumpeted in the media, limiting women's ambitions and hopes for a compromise between their conflicting selves. *Mademoiselle* magazine is a prime example of a media source telling women they could not "have it all." Smith (2010) points out that the magazine gave women the impression of choice while also setting limitations. *Mademoiselle* informed its audience that women could embrace their domestic selves or their independent selves, but could not have both.

The influence of *Mademoiselle* is reflected in *The Bell Jar*'s presentation of *Ladies' Day*. Both the real and fictional magazines gave women the impression of choice in their lives, yet also expressed that women could not truly realize their ideal lives. 1950s society in the United States limited women's agency, and Esther expresses this

lack of agency when reflecting on how she was pulled between locations during her internship. After commenting that people might assume she is "steering New York like her own private car," Esther writes, "Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus" (p. 3). Esther feels a palpable lack of agency, even when she is living in New York City with an internship that women across the country had aspired to attain. By describing herself as a "numb trolleybus," Esther suggests that she lost the ability to fully appreciate and enjoy her exciting life because her every movement was being dictated by a predetermined course. Like a trolleybus, Esther was placed on an immovable track. The cohesion of the domestic and independent selves Esther longs for seems like an impossibility when her agency is restricted due to societal gender expectations. That sense of hopelessness might resonate with readers, particularly those of the 1950s, who struggled with feelings of inadequacy resulting from a lack of agency.

Burdened by this lack of agency, Esther carries readers through the moments of uncertainty and inadequacy she faces. When observing Constantin and "a stern muscular Russian girl with no makeup who was a simultaneous interpreter like Constantin," Esther reflects on her feelings of inadequacy (p. 75). She comments that she cannot cook, write in shorthand, dance, or recite idioms like Constantin's Russian companion. Precisely reflecting the attitude of women in the 1950s that Ghanderharion et al. (2015) describe, Esther writes, "I felt dreadfully inadequate" (p. 77). Even more poignantly, Esther notes the impossibility of salvaging each of her ambitions when they seem to conflict. She describes various futures—some emphasizing the domestic ideal and some highlighting career ambitions—as figs on a fig tree. Plath use this famous metaphor to describe that a

source of anxiety for Esther is her inability to have the complex version of womanhood she longs for: "I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest" (p. 77). Esther believes she cannot achieve a sense of cohesion, and that worry serves as a touchstone for reader identification.

Despite Esther's feelings of inadequacy and her belief that her ambitions cannot coexist, she does manage to find a compromise between her domestic and independent aspirations. She demonstrates success at retaining the domestic half of her identity by being a mother and wife. Within the first chapter of the book, Esther mentions the gifts she and the other interns received while working for the magazine. In this recollection, she brings attention both to her enjoyment of wearing makeup and her role as a mother: "I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with" (p. 3). Esther still owns and occasionally wears the makeup given to her during her internship, and she is also a mother who cares for her child. Through Esther's reflection on these small possessions, readers are given a sense that Esther's identity is marked in part by her femininity and domesticity.

While embracing the elements of her identity that fit societal expectations for women, Esther also succeeds at establishing a version of womanhood distinct from traditional gender roles. In particular, she succeeds with a career that differs from shorthand. Esther is recognized as one of the most intelligent and talented women in the United States when she accepts an internship at the magazine. That status is reiterated in the newspapers upon Esther's disappearance: "Scholarship girl missing" (p. 198). Her academic accomplishments are essential to Esther's public identity as a successful and capable woman. Furthermore, Esther's career as a writer is evident in references to her

writing process. She discusses the process of writing a novel, and—because readers are familiarizing themselves with Esther's story by reading a novel—they can garner that Esther is a successful, published author. Therefore, Esther's story is hopeful—one of discovered cohesion (Ghanderharion et al., 2015). Consequently, readers in the 1960s could imagine themselves accomplishing this cohesion and finding satisfaction in their own lives.

By presenting girls and women with a character who is experiencing the same concerns about marriage and gendered expectations they are feeling, Plath perfectly sets up the potential for identification. In turn, this reader-protagonist connection increases the reader's entertainment, decreases the possibility for counterarguing, and thus capitalizes on an opportunity to present prosocial messages about gender. Through Esther's voice, Plath is challenging readers to confront gender roles, expose the problematic elements of marriage, and consider how they can combine their domestic and independent selves. *The Bell Jar* reaches out to girls and women, tells them that they are not alone, and asks, "What will we do to maintain our independence in a patriarchal society?" The text is a mirror for women through which they can see themselves, including their struggles and their desires.

CODA

Using an interdisciplinary approach, this thesis aimed to investigate how Sylvia Plath inspires readers to identify with Esther in *The Bell Jar* as a means of sharing prosocial messages. My research in communication studies had already presented me with opportunities to uncover interesting findings about how people connect with narratives; I was intrigued by the possibility of that conversation continuing in Plath's famous text. Entertainment education literature, which views texts as vehicles for persuasive messages and investigates how media elicits responses like identification, serves as an ideal framework for exploring Plath's communication with readers. By observing Plath's efforts to connect with women reading her work and unpacking the novel's messages, I sought to articulate why readers are continuously drawn to her work while also exploring the impact she had on readers' understanding of health and gender.

In order to provide a detailed framework for the theoretical application, Chapter 1 presented an overview of both entertainment education and identification. Furthermore, this chapter detailed a pivotal starting point for this thesis: reader identification with Esther. The critical testimonies and observations provided reveal how women see themselves reflected in the novel's protagonist, and Plath's own penchant for identification with characters adds credence to the idea that identification strategies are present in the text. With this understanding that readers are vicariously living through Esther, Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 both reveal the variety of messages Plath imbues in her novel.

Chapter 2 explores how *The Bell Jar* relays messages about stigma when Esther is navigating her mental health, highlighting the impact of peers, parents, and physicians. Consequently, we can see how Plath encourages readers to notice the harmfulness of stigma; Plath even provides readers with a model of identification through Joan and a model of proper attitudes and behaviors through Doctor Nolan. Readers are confronted with prosocial messages about mental illness and stigma, and their identification with Esther primes them to adopt these attitudes.

Following a similar analysis of the novel, Chapter 3 reveals how Plath elicits identification to relay messages about gender. This chapter uncovers moments in which women might see themselves reflected in Esther because of the protagonist's views on gender roles. Plath expertly crafts her protagonist to appeal to women readers, and she employs various strategies for eliciting identification. Esther articulates concerns about traditional womanhood that likely resonate with women reading the novel; when paired with readers' identification with Esther, Plath's persistent critique of gendered power dynamics and marriage perfectly sets up the opportunity to persuade readers to resist traditional gender roles.

Once I began exploring how entertainment education concepts could fit into a discussion of *The Bell Jar*, my goals shifted to become more personal than the initial literary analysis project had been. In some ways, this thesis reflects *me*; the way I think is informed by my education in both communication studies and literary studies. By adapting my understanding of each discipline to work in harmony with the other, I uncovered a more nuanced understanding of myself. I enjoy the freedom of creative and curious thinking in discussions of literature, and I also appreciate having the tools to

logically examine human interactions and make meaning from those observations. Since beginning this thesis, I have sought out other avenues for blending my interests, such as by doing a content analysis study in my university's writing center. This thesis has inspired me to identify the space my communication studies and English majors inhabit together—the space between them and the areas where they overlap. This discussion of how identification is evident in *The Bell Jar* speaks to the impact literature can have on individuals, the ways in which media can persuade audiences, and the ways in which my two areas of study join each other in conversation.

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