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THE CASE OF LIMBO: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN SYLVIA PLATH'S SHORT
FICTION AND *THE BELL JAR*

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature & Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment of Honors

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English Honors-in-Discipline Program

by

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Since Sylvia Plath's untimely death in 1963, her poetry and only novel, *The Bell Jar*, have become highly controversial magnets for literary analysis and psychological debate. *The Bell Jar's* thought-provoking power statements and *Ariel's* raw confessions mix with an insatiable interest in Plath's personal life to amass a following of supporters and critics; along with its popularity came a plethora of scholarly research. As a result, Plath's hard-headed protagonists have become overshadowed by her over-romanticized personal tragedies, and *Sylvia Plath's death* has become synonymous with *Sylvia Plath's fiction*. Her works with the most tragic backstories receive the most attention, but her short stories found in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* are much lesser known, despite their insight to her career as a writer and her lifelong use of protagonists in search of identity.

It is vital that the reader makes a clear distinction between Plath and her prose. They are not simply autobiographical, journalistic accounts; rather, they showed Plath's creativity, world-building talents, and figurative prowess. Despite the common conception that Plath only wrote about herself (although she frequently did), she was critical of her confessional writing habits. She constantly tried to implement more made-up scenarios and detailed, objective observations. In one journal entry, she wrote, "I shall perish if I can write about no one but myself" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 3). She never detoured from subjective topics, however; her most effective works, such as "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," *The Bell Jar*, and *Ariel*, were strengthened by her connection to the protagonists and speakers. However, she struggled creating storylines and implementing themes that have made her prose more appealing to everyday readers.

It is nearly impossible to properly study Plath's stories without noting the autobiographical influence which forced their creation. Some of her fiction—most notably

“Stone Boy with Dolphin,” “Mothers,” and *The Bell Jar*—stem from real events from Plath’s life and reflect her state of living at their respective times written. As a devoted journal-writer, Plath often wrote the events of her day, not leaving out any detail as to how she felt. After her death, these journal entries were edited by Ted Hughes, and some of her worst moments were omitted as to protect her privacy as well as those she spoke about sharply. Despite these edits, Plath’s struggles with her identity remain throughout. In the beginning of one of her downward spirals, Plath admitted her closeness with her protagonists and speakers. “I feel like Lazarus,” she writes, “. . . Being dead, I rose up again”; she continues, “. . . I identify too closely with my reading, with my writing...I do want to have a husband, lover, father and son, all at once . . .” (*The Journals of Sylvia Plath* 99). Her journal writing sounds eerily similar to Esther’s fig tree daydreams in *The Bell Jar*, stuck between the idea of dozens of futures, all beckoning for her (77). Seeing as Plath noted serious struggles with her identity and a feeling of lack of control on her life, it makes sense that her protagonists share similar troubles.

Perhaps the least studied of all her fiction is her collection of short stories, most of which were written in the late 1950s, a few years before *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* solidified her literary esteem. Some of her short stories are juvenilia compared to her more well-known writing, but they are littered with the seeds of what would become her longer works, and the themes she explores in her short fiction feed their way into everything she published toward the end of her life: femininity, death, mental illness, and detachment. Plath herself was overly critical of her prose, and she often resorted to critiquing her fiction in self-deprecating journal entries that deemed herself a failure (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 3). In her journals, she wrote, “I have written one or two unpleasant psychological stories: ‘Johnny Panic’ and ‘The Mummy’ . . . My wanting to write books annihilates the original root impulse that would have me bravely and

blunderingly working on them. When Johnny Panic sits on my heart, I can't be witty, or original, or creative" (*The Journals of Sylvia Plath* 327). Part of her discontent with her prose stemmed from the sting of magazine rejections and her desire to create perfection. Before acquiring publishers in both the United States and the United Kingdom, most of Plath's published work was sent to magazines such as *Mademoiselle*, *Seventeen*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic* (Wagner-Martin 12). Throughout the 1950s, Plath—despite winning fiction prizes in *Mademoiselle* and working as a guest editor for a month—received a disheartening mixture of rejection slips and acceptance letters. Her prose subsequently underwent many shifts in tone and direction. To appeal to young, modern readers in magazines like *Seventeen*, she began writing happier, more romantic stories littered with clichés—namely “Day of Success,” one of her most noticeable attempts at including popular magazine tropes (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 7-8).

Most of Plath's short fiction is published in a collection of various short stories, prose, and diary excerpts titled *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, which is named after a short story of the same name. In 2019, Harper Perennial released a paperback short story of Plath's that has not yet been featured in any anthology—a short story written in 1952 as an assignment for a creative writing class at Smith College, which was later sent to and rejected by *Mademoiselle* (“Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom” vii). Originally written about a friend of hers, Plath rewrote the story several times. Harper Perennial's edition is the story in its original form (viii). It shows the voice of a younger, more inexperienced writer, but contains seeds of the literary icon Plath became.

She wished to write stories much larger than what we have of hers—or any of her contemporaries—today; in a journal entry dating from 1958, she wrote, “I ran through my

experience of ready-made ‘big’ themes: there were none . . . All paled, palled—a glassy coverlid getting in the way of touching them, too undramatic” (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 3). Perhaps it is the protagonists’ understated and undramatic numbness paired with lofty, fantasy-like storylines that gives her stories a strikingly surreal sheen. Plath’s writing documents and alludes to certain major events in her life, such as her suicide attempts and mental health treatment in *The Bell Jar* and her first meeting with Ted Hughes in “Stone Boy with Dolphin.” To simply label these stories autobiographical, however, undermines the intense metaphors, clever world-building, and carefully constructed heroines who float in an unidentified, detached space between comfort and misery.

It is her similar female protagonists that connect each story, and the themes presented through each woman gains momentum throughout Plath’s career as a writer. In “Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom,” first written while Plath was still a student at Smith College, Mary is restless, but she sits still and anxious, allowing the train to guide her into “the kingdom of the frozen will” (Plath 30). Through the years, her all-female ensemble of protagonists pursue similar paths: a health clinic secretary giving her all to an all-encompassing entity she calls Johnny Panic (“Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams”), to a wife whose lack of imagination leads to her suicide (“The Wishing Box”), to a Cambridge student constantly at war with her femininity and sexuality (“Stone Boy with Dolphin”), and finally in 1963 to Esther Greenwood, a student whose mental illness overshadows everything else in her life (*The Bell Jar*). Even her work that seems the most un-Plath, such as “Day of Success,” presents a protagonist who struggles with her identity and wrestles with conforming to the space in which she occupies.

Plath’s protagonists undergo several changes in their identities, and they alter their actions to fit the mold set for them by their families, husbands, places of living, and societal

values. As each woman wrestles with her true self, readers must follow closely to grasp onto the psychological journey in which the protagonists embark. At times, it is difficult to discern which of the protagonists' methods of expression reflect their true identities, or if they are merely products of their environments. "Many of Plath's protagonists are postmodern characters," claims Luke Ferretter, author of *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study*, "whose identity endlessly receded layer after layer of image and identification, without a clearly distinguishable original over which these images are laid." Each of these protagonists express their discontent with themselves in similar manners, such as derogatory remarks toward herself, reckless behaviors, and, most commonly, a detached sense of self. Each woman has a slipping grasp on her own identity; she continuously wrestles with labels and questions her place within her society. Their lack of an identity exudes a sense of numbness and issues with space and direction. These struggles stem from the characters' observations about societal roles, femininity, and psychological wellness. As Sylvia Plath's writing progressed, so did her dark themes of mental illness and identity struggles, and her protagonists continuously find themselves stuck in their own personal limbo, floating endlessly in a vat of nothingness and grasping at tangible thoughts and fleeting adventures to give them any minor sense of self.

The death of Plath's father Otto when she was only eight changed Plath's view of the world and remained a reoccurring topic throughout her writing. Being an expert on bees (He was a biology professor and author of *Bumblebees and their Ways*), Plath associated beekeeping and nature with her father and wrote a series of bee poems, which concluded her posthumously published collection *Ariel*. Of all her writing about Otto, one of the least studied pieces about him is a short story written in the early 1950s, likely in 1952. "Among the Bumblebees" follows Alice, a young girl (presumably around eight) admiring her father and reflecting on the memories she

has with him—watching him grade papers, swimming in the ocean, playing in the sand, and catching bumblebees. Throughout “Among the Bumblebees,” Alice describes her father as proud, arrogant, and unwavering. He “fear[s] nothing” and admires power and authority (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 324). He represents the archetypal depiction of early/mid-20th century man: hypermasculine in both private and public spheres, authoritative, and emotionless. Alice is the only exception to his brutish demeanor, and he treats her with more kindness than he gives anyone his other family members. Even Warren, his youngest child who suffers constant sickness, faces the father’s no-nonsense attitude, but his demeanor changes when Alice speaks. Soon, the father falls ill, and Alice refuses to believe he becomes anything other than the strong man she idolizes.

At eight years old, Alice’s identity is one-dimensional, and she performs only one purpose: to be the perfect, picturesque father’s daughter. After pressing her ear against his chest and hearing his faint heartbeat, Alice finally admits her father is weakening and fading, which leaves her feeling “lost and betrayed” (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 327). The duo’s father-daughter dynamic takes a dramatic shift. Before, Alice viewed her father as a pinnacle of strength and herself as a weaker being, in need of his protection and companionship. During a thunderstorm, Alice finds protection in his arms as he laughs at the thunder, finding his heartbeat “reassuring,” and “that through him, she could face the doomsday of the world in perfect safety” (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 325). After his death, Alice must navigate her life without her leading companion.

In “Among the Bumblebees,” Alice becomes the stronger character during her father’s sickness. When the doctor injects a needle into her father’s arm, Alice’s mother warns her to look away, but she makes herself watch, blinking back tears her father would never dare to leak.

Elisabeth Bronfen claims in her Plath biography that many of Plath's protagonists identify themselves through their obsessions with imitating or beating their husbands in their personal endeavors (*Sylvia Plath* 102-105), and the same claim extends to Alice's relationship with her father. Where Alice sees strength in her father, she sees weakness in herself. Her only hobbies are closely associated with her father; throughout the story, Alice's only character descriptions stem from anecdotes and memories of him. Without him, Alice must rearrange her idea of herself and the activities she enjoys. With no one to share her favorite pastimes with, she feels lonely and astray. Plath writes, "She did not know then that in all the rest of her life there would be no one to walk with her, like him, proud and arrogant among the bumblebees" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 327). Before her loss, young Alice has a clear idea of who she is, but she loses a piece of her identity following her father's death. Her adolescence is subsequently altered by his passing, and Alice feels an emptiness in the spaces her father used to fill: their walks, the place she was raised, and the other half of their father-daughter relationship.

In her journals, Plath often shares similar feelings toward the death of her father, pondering about its influence in her affections toward men. She questions herself as to the extent in which her father's death affected her love life and debates if his death molded her desire to constantly be surrounded by men, an idea which she famously expressed in her poem "Daddy." Referring to herself in the second person, she once wrote, "You remember that you were his favorite when you were little . . . you wonder if the absence of an older man in the house has anything to do with your intense craving for male company and the delight in the restful low sound of a group of boys, talking and laughing . . ." (*Journals* 26). It seems that, even years after his death, Plath could not shake the ghost of her perfect-daughter self-image, and she ridiculed herself at times, regretting that she had not learned any of the subjects Otto loved. In 1956,

around four years after writing “Among the Bumblebees,” she wrote, “. . . I cry so to be held by a man; some man, who is a father” (*Journals* 100). Many of her short stories, such as “The Wishing Box,” “Stone Boy with Dolphin,” and *The Bell Jar* provide additional insight to her protagonists’ search for a masculine counterpart, as if each character’s search for wholeness depends on or is hindered by her relationship with male figures.

Written as an assignment at Smith College, “Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom” is another one of Plath’s short stories that picture a woman whose relationship with masculine figures is complicated. Although it varies in tone and structure than most of her fiction, it contains the earliest snippets of the leading female lost in limbo. Although Mary does not seem keen to come aboard the train, her authoritative father (whose attitude closely resembles the brutish, stoic side of Alice’s father in “Among the Bumblebees”) urges her to go, and, without so much as a heartfelt goodbye, they usher her onto the train, to the Ninth Kingdom—a destination with no trips back. Mary begins the story feeble and timid, unlike Plath’s other female protagonists, who tend to have quick tongues and a short temper. Mary’s demeanor comes across as passive, and she is, at the beginning, “complacent, unafraid” (Wagner-Martin 21). Rather than responding to her father’s demands with a sharp wit, as Esther Greenwood or Dody in “Stone Boy with Dolphin” may do, she acquiesces his wishes, despite her fears of the unknown. The train has nine stops, the Ninth Kingdom being the last, and Mary receives no definite answers about her destination. An older woman takes a seat beside Mary, and throughout the ride, Mary pesters her with fearful questions, and eventually, she grows frustrated and tired of receiving mystic answers. There are no returns from the Ninth Kingdom, yet the woman beside Mary has unexplainably made the trip several times before. She resembles an all-encompassing entity, much like Johnny Panic, as she knows the employees, recites the policies from memory, and

gives Mary cryptic advice about her future. Guests demand not to leave the train—either because of its luxury and allure, or because they become terrified by the unknown kingdoms at each stop.

In the first half of the story, Mary appears stuck in a limbo in which she is given no power, will, or agency, and she, like Alice, begins as the obedient, soft-spoken daughter. As the story progresses, however, Mary becomes more dynamic, and she takes control of her journey, despite the train's rules and her father's no-nonsense sternness. Mary first notices the passengers' underlying fear when a woman refuses to leave the train, instead hiding her ticket in her coat and pretending it is lost. When the woman tells her there are no more stops, Mary cries, "You don't understand. It's not my fault I took this train. It was my parents. They wanted me to go" (31). She then admits, "Even in the station I wanted to go back" (32). The woman lectures her on her lack of will and strength, forcing Mary to face the choices she passively makes. The woman states, "But you didn't go back. You chose not to go back and now there is nothing you can do about it" (32). Mary becomes frantic and realizes a loophole for an exit: the emergency chord. Finally, the woman breaks into a grin, content Mary tricked the train and its employees. Her will had not yet been frozen, she realizes, and Mary exercises her free will rather than passively obeying the demands of authority figures. Upon realizing her stagnant and passive behavior, Mary gains a sense of agency, finally taking initiative and losing her numb subservience.

Unlike Plath's later stories, "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom" presents somewhat of a clear moral lesson in which the protagonist learns to take control of her own path, and she focuses on exercising free will as she does so. It also contains unsubtle religious allusions, which reveal the inexperience of her short fiction writing to that point (Wagner-Martin 21). Plath's later prose is not quite as hopeful or heroic. They soon took on a darker tone, and the protagonists often experienced tragic fates in their searches for identity. Mary comes into herself, obtains a

greater grasp on her identity, and runs away from the limbo she rode in; Plath's other heroines are not so fortunate. "Mary Ventura" was written after her most formative years, when Plath's heroines became more conscious of their personal desires. In *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, Plath biographers Sally Bayley and Kathleen Connors claim Plath experienced three years of self-discovery, in which her journal writing shifted; instead of listing only daily troubles, she became obsessed with who she was and who she wished to become (*Eye Rhymes* 52). Her writing became more self-aware, and in her later high school years and early college years, she wrote short stories that reflected her growing self-image, philosophical ideals, and mental states. Despite her personal discoveries—and her seemingly back-and-forth vision of her identity—her short stories were often rejected by magazines, and she developed an insecurity that would follow her and appear in her stories for the rest of her life.

Following her studies at Smith College, Plath travelled to Cambridge in 1955 as a Fulbright Scholar to study at Newnham College. During her two years in Cambridge, Plath wrote many of her deepest and most popular stories. These years seem transformative in Plath's writing styles, but the lost female protagonists feel even more so apparent. Of the stories she wrote in Cambridge, the most notable are "The Wishing Box," written in 1956, "Stone Boy with Dolphin," written around 1957/1958, and "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," written in 1958.

In "The Wishing Box," the protagonist, Agnes, feels like a second thought to her husband Harold. He remains enthralled and captivated by only his dreams and neglects Agnes' needs and feelings. Feeling her husband's rejection, Agnes becomes jealous—not only for her desire for her husband, but for her own need to think creatively. Soon, she detests her husband's dreams and enters a one-sided rivalry with him, in which he pays no attention. Agnes spirals out of control,

quickly reading about popular culture in magazines to gain more ideas for her imagination. She also acquires an addiction to alcohol and television, and soon, she stops sleeping. Although she tries to share her daydreams with Harold, he waves them off, far too interested in his own fantasies. After seeing the doctor for her insomnia, he prescribes her fifty sleeping pills. Two days later, Harold returns from work to find Agnes dead, “dressed in her favorite princess-style emerald taffeta evening gown, pale and lovely as a brown lily . . .” (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 220). Her corpse smiles slyly, as she imagines waltzing with “the prince of her early dreams,” likely reaching for the version of Harold she once admired early in their relationship.

Even in death, Agnes plays with the ideal housewife role she never truly adapts to, despite her attempts to adapt for archetypal domestic roles. Agnes’ actual cause of death is suicide, insecurities brought on by marital life drove her state of mental unwellness. The dress she wears to commit suicide not only nods to the fantasies she imagined; rather, she dresses so to make a statement to Harold. To him, states Elisabeth Bronfen in *Sylvia Plath*, “the self-absorbed daydreamer, privileging his own fantasy world over their shared domestic reality, she had always been nothing more than a doll” (105). While Harold idealized everything Agnes wanted, merely represents a trophy, showcasing to the world all the ways in which she falls short compared to him. Although Agnes pushes her boundaries in her marriage, constantly trying to shape into someone her husband may find more desirable, she fails to fit into a conventional wifely role expected of her. Her wishes to please her husband are like Mary’s and Alice’s desires, always concerned with obeying the most powerful men in their lives. Ultimately, however, Agnes cannot live up to the standard she sets for herself, and her disappointment and smothering insecurities ultimately lead to her death.

Throughout her life, Plath documented her dreams and nightmares, often writing about Ted's dreams and comparing their imagination and creativity—much like Agnes. She began her own “dream book” in the 1940s, and her dreams shaped her fiction and even led to conflict in her personal life (*Eye Rhymes* 40). Whereas Ted dreamed highly imaginative dreams and writing ideas, Plath could not help but compare their abilities to create stories, which subsequently led to her losing the picture of herself as an accomplished writer. She criticized her own writing up until the month she quickly wrote *Ariel* and felt insecure in the wake of Hughes's success. Throughout her marriage to Ted, Plath wrote about his work overshadowing hers, fearing she will be forced to rely on his sold work rather than her own (*Journals* 327). Even later in her life, Plath was comparing her success to Hughes's.

Plath's protagonists continue their journeys for identity throughout her writing, most often comparing themselves to standards placed by men. “Stone Boy with Dolphin,” written around 1957 and 1958, also presents a numb and detached protagonist, who gives herself with detrimental labels based on how she believes she appears through the male gaze. Out of all of Plath's short stories, “Stone Boy with Dolphin” is perhaps the most recognizably subjective, and Dody, the protagonist acts most similarly to Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, with her criticism on double standards and expression of her sexuality. Based on Plath's first meeting with Ted Hughes, the story follows Dody on a night out in Cambridge. Upon meeting Leonard, an appealing writer whose poems she reads in magazines, Dody begins reciting his own poetry back to him, drunkenly stating, “Not all their ceremony can patch the havoc” (which is an almost direct line from one of Plath's own poems, “Conversation Among the Ruins”) (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 190). Dody fixates on a statue in the garden outside her college dormitory of an angel boy with his tongue sticking out and holding a small dolphin. While

dancing with Leonard, she asks him to break it for her—a nod to her virginity she hates, much like Esther Greenwood. Later that night, Dody has a sexual encounter with her friend Hamish and immediately labels herself a “bitch” and a “slut” (198). Hamish proceeds to ask Dody if she had learned her lesson. After, Plath writes, “. . . But Dody hadn’t learned her lesson, unless it was the lesson of this limbo where no one hurt because no one took a name to tie the hurt to like a battered can. Nameless I rise. Nameless and undefiled” (198). Dody continually battles with her self-image, and her labels all stem from gender roles that attempt to control women’s sexual identities.

Despite being stuck in a limbo, Dody is, perhaps more than any other protagonist in Plath’s short fiction, more in tune with her desires, fears, and power. Knowing she has an influence over men, she uses her femininity to assert herself into their affairs. Instead of cowering away when Leonard reveals he has “obligations in the next room” (meaning another woman awaited him), Dody lashes out, biting Leonard’s cheek so deeply it drips blood (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 192). Despite her power over men, Dody still worries about how she must appear through the male gaze. “. . . Such depictions of the self and body can, logically enough, be seen as co-extensive with sexual identity and with a concomitant social identity that is obliged to armour or disguise itself for living as the object of a possessing male gaze,” says William Wooten (*The Alvarez Generation* 103). She imagines men see a bitchy, slutty-yet-virginal, nameless girl with immoral principles. She mainly concerns herself with insecurities surrounding sexuality and femininity and chastises herself for not identifying with the picturesque Cambridge girl she believes men want.

Dody, like Mary, has a moment of self-realization near the end of the story, only more anticlimactic and much colder. She strips naked in front of her dorm window and sits in the

windowsill, overlooking Newnham College's snow-covered garden. Nakedness, claims Kathleen Lant in "The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," represents facets of the self and the soul in Plath's writing. "For her," she states, "the [naked] body stands not as a shimmering emblem of the soul's glory, but seems, rather, an embarrassing reminder of the self's failures" (625). Lant argues Plath writes the male body differently than the female body; Plath's depiction of female nakedness frequently matched with insecure mental states "reminds us only that the female self is unworthy, inadequate, and—ultimately—vulnerable rather than ascendant" (625). For Dody, her nakedness expresses her vulnerability as she reflects on her self-image, and though she eventually claims her identity, she laces her words with malice. Plath writes:

. . . [The milk] would stay to become part of herself, inextricable, Dody. Dody Ventura. And then slowly, upon this thought, all the linked consequences of her words and acts began to gather in her mind, slowly, like slow-running sores. The circle of teeth marks hung out its ring of bloodied roses for Dody Ventura to claim. And the invariable minutes with Hamish would not be spat out like thistles, but clung, clung fast. No limbo's nameless lamb, she. But stained, deep-grained with all the words and acts of all the Dody's from birth cry on. Dody Ventura. She saw. Who to tell it to? Dody Ventura I am. (203)

She reflects on her hot-headed temperament with Leonard and clings to her moment with Hamish, despite having labeled herself too promiscuous just pages before. Though she declares herself, repeatedly stating her name, she uses negative words and haunting imagery to describe her experiences, comparing them to "slow-running sores," "a circle of teeth marks," and "a ring of bloody noses." Even after asserting her identity, she still speaks through the male gaze, as if she

sees herself as grotesque and dangerous. Having no one to confess her thoughts to but herself, she feels separated from everyone else.

Although stories from *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* include personal experiences that can be traced in Plath's journals, perhaps none have as much autobiographical influence as "Stone Boy with Dolphin." A journal entry dated February 26, 1956, details the party in which Plath and Hughes met in an almost scene-by-scene description of the night. In it, Plath meets with Hamish (whose name she did not bother changing in the story), sets out to find Hughes, and eventually bites him in the face after learning of his other obligations. Like Dody, Plath labels herself harshly, having acted out what she deems promiscuous behavior. The words and phrases she uses to label herself are nearly identical to the ones Dody identifies with. She imagines Hughes sees her as a "drunken amorphous slut" (*The Journals of Sylvia Plath* 112), reflects on her drunken behavior ashamedly, and pines after Hughes. Like "Stone Boy" Hamish, real-life Hamish scolds her, talks down to her, and asks when she will finally "learn her lesson" (*Journals* 114).

Throughout the journal entry, Plath describes her night as a catalyst for an interest in Hughes and a trigger for self-deprecating thoughts. In the story, however, Dody sees herself floating in a limbo; the word appears in the story five times and is alluded to several more. She never obtains a true grip of everything happening around her; the plot unravels around her clearly, but she lies in a web of self-deprecating insults, insecurities, and attempts to reject the "limbo of unlove" (204). Dody exhibits a numbness, yet a painful need to feel loved and wanted. Her detached attitude stems from issues she notes regarding femininity and labels, but eventually lead to her acceptance of her identity—an act which many of Plath's protagonists do not achieve.

Following “Stone Boy with Dolphin, Plath’s 1958 story “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” presents a surreal account of a mental hospital’s secretarial assistant who worships an overseer named Johnny Panic. The protagonist’s only sense of identity comes from her devotion to Johnny Panic, and she lacks the self-awareness to realize she displays mannerisms similar to the patients’ habits she overhears. The story shows many real-life events from Plath’s life: secretarial work, struggles with mental illness, and traumatic electroshock therapy treatments. Working in the out-patient department of a mental hospital, the unnamed protagonist listens to dreams patients reveal to the psychiatrist and records them in notebooks. Although her job requires notetaking, she copies the notes for her own personal use, and they become her obsession. Unlike her coworkers, the protagonist identifies with the patients, as they suffer from varying mental illnesses. They too are devoted to Johnny Panic, the all-encompassing god that governs their deepest fears.

The protagonist states, “. . . I figure the world is run by one thing and one thing only. Panic with a dog-face, devil-face, hag-face, whore-face, panic in capital letters with no face at all—it’s the same Johnny Panic, awake or asleep” (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 156). She feels an ardent pull toward Johnny Panic, describing herself as a “dream explainer . . . A lover of dreams for Johnny Panic’s sake, the Maker of them all . . . This is my real calling” (156-157). Johnny Panic’s followers worship him through their subjection to his power and their inability to ward off his wrath on their own. The protagonist describes Harry Bilbo, an old patient whose fear of cancer follows him everywhere, leaving him unable to lift weights, blow on whistles, and more, as he fears cancer spreads like a virus. She says, “Day and night Harry Bilbo lived in holy worship of Johnny Panic, devout as any priest among censers and sacraments. He had a beauty all his own” (166). When he receives treatment for his ailment, she views his

recovery negatively, describing his face as being void of Panic's light and his life "doomed to the crass fate these doctors call health and happiness" (166). Harry Bilbo's escape from Johnny Panic makes her paranoid, for she fears the medical staff will inevitably realize her behavior and exorcise Johnny Panic from her.

Following Harry Bilbo's story, she soon becomes manic and obsessive, scheming about ways to get her hands on the facility's dream books. Johnny Panic completely consumes her, and soon, the hospital staff forcefully admits her into the psychiatric ward, where they attempt to administer electroshock therapy. However, she remains faithful to him, rejoicing when his face appears when she "is most lost" (172). When he visits her, she experiences a compelling divine awakening, feeling Johnny Panic's spirit shaking through her, as one might experience during a religious ceremony. The protagonist is so consumed by her love—or fear—of Johnny Panic that she makes no choices or distinctions for herself. She talks down upon patients who are as obsessive as she, but she lacks the self-awareness to realize her obsessions are as serious as theirs. Even when she is placed on a hospital bed, restrained, and shown the electroshock therapy equipment, she lacks any notion of fear for her own physical and mental health. Rather, she thinks only of Johnny Panic, her complete devotion to him, and her sacrificial surrender to his demands.

Like her unnamed protagonist, Plath personified her anxiety in her journals, often calling it "Johnny Panic" (*Journals* 326) and often reminding herself of the botched electroshock therapy treatment in 1953 (At the time, she worked as a secretary in the same psych ward that administered the treatment) (*Eye Rhymes* 41). Plath wrote diligently about the job positions she upheld, and even more so about the all-encompassing feeling of melancholy with which she was intimately accustomed. Plath frequently wrote about her dreams of being a successful writer in

her journals, but her endless comparisons to others' writing abilities fueled a lifelong struggle, and she criticized her capacity to properly claim the image she strived for. "Johnny Panic" and "The Wishing Box" present wildly similar protagonists, whose struggles appear differently, but are caused by insecurities about their creative abilities—a theme that reoccurred frequently in her journal writing. "Johnny Panic's" protagonist shows similarities to Esther Greenwood, too, as Esther suffer the effects of electroshock therapy and experience mental health crises, leaving their actions not the result of their own desires necessarily, but of the Panic that ruled over them.

Plath continued to write magazine fiction following "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," and she experimented with tone and direction. "Day of Success," written in 1960, reads more feebly than her other published prose; written to please a mass audience, it fails to showcase the imaginative efforts incorporated in earlier stories such as "Mary Ventura" and "Johnny Panic." However, the protagonist, Ellen, represents Plath's archetypal heroine. Every one of Ellen's struggles result from societal-driven domestic duties, femininity, and marital unhappiness. In stories such as "The Wishing Box" and "Day of Success," Plath "presents scenarios in which her female protagonist can define her sense of self only in rivalry to her masculine mate's artistic work" (Bronfen 102). Ellen's drive focuses solely on her relationship to her husband, which leads her to question her writing abilities, complete housework, and compare herself to other women and her husband.

Ellen's sole job is to perform her wifely duties, and she seems to only express her identity when placed against her husband. Her physical insecurities lead her to study other women's appearances and to imagine his infidelity. Even the mere sound of other women's voices strike anger in Ellen; she flares up in jealousy and wishes Denise, a young television producer, would be "struck by lightning or spirited to Australia" at the thought of her in a rehearsal with her

husband, Jacob (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 80). Ellen's primary concern is for herself, Jacob, and their baby daughter to live happily as a seemingly co-dependent trio, so when Denise reveals her boss wants to buy Jacob's play, Ellen's mood changes, as she fears it would be "the beginning of the end" (81). She even refers to herself as a secretary to her husband, promising to behave well and allow him to write as she took care of Jill and the house (81). She wishes to become the image of a picturesque family, but she cannot help but feel threatened by Jacob's success. Each day, as she cleans and cares for the baby, Ellen anxiously waits for the postman to come with an acceptance letter for one of her poems, but she becomes haunted by the rejection slips she receives. Magazines publish Jacob's poems, and though he spends his earnings on lavish dinners and champagne, Ellen hides embarrassment over her own lack of published writing.

Rather than focusing on her poetry, however, Ellen begins comparing herself to her friend Nancy Reagan, stating, "I'm a regular jet-propelled, twentieth-century model of the jealous housewife, small-minded and spiteful. Like Nancy Reagan" (83). Nancy's husband, a stage actor named Keith, entered an affair with a leading lady and soon left Nancy. Upon Jacob's announcement about his new play being purchased, Ellen imagines her marriage will end like Nancy's, fearing Jacob will fall in love with Denise and divorce her. Throughout the story, Ellen obsesses over fitting into the literary world. However, her discussion with Nancy strengthens her insecurities and causes her to question her judgement. Like Dody, Ellen characterizes herself through the male gaze, as she constantly bases her physical attractiveness and creative prowess through men's standards of beauty and talent. She judges her rationing of perfume rather than wholehearted indulgence, studies fashion magazines, and compares her life to the lives of models and Denise. Eventually, in defeat, she claims she lacks imagination (88). By busying herself with

housework, toiling after Jacob so he can jumpstart his career, and scouring through fashion magazines, Ellen does not allow herself to express herself comfortably in a physical sense. Like Plath's protagonists in her other magazine fiction (specifically deeply insecure Lynn in "Platinum Summer"), a facet of Ellen's self is explored through her relationship with women's ideal beauty at the time. The protagonists "identity exists on the surface of her body, in her appearance to the ultimately male gaze" (*Representing Sylvia Plath* 158). Before Jacob returns home, Ellen douses herself in French perfume, dresses in her nicest dress and jacket as she and their daughter, Jill, wait for Jacob to return, and Ellen finally senses she may make her husband truly happy (although he has never expressed any unhappiness).

Ellen's story, however, ends much happier than Plath's previous stories, as Plath wrote its ending to appeal to *Seventeen Magazine*'s target audience. Jacob finds her housewife-like appearance more attractive than her sought-after model beauty, and he purchases a cottage for them in Cornwall. Instead of moving to London to produce the play, Jacob ultimately decides to stay with Ellen and Jill. His decision reassures Ellen, and although Ellen no longer worries about her looks, her only sense of self and validation comes from her husband rather than her own conclusions, and she drops mentions her poetry-writing dreams or her jealousy of her husband's success.

Although Ellen's life differs from Esther Greenwood's, Ellen's insecurities are similar to Esther's in *The Bell Jar*; at her summer internship, Esther felt out of place next to the wealthier girls in the program, and she could only truly identify with Betsy, who the other girls call a "cowgirl" (*The Bell Jar* 6). Esther, too, has dreams she feels are too far from her reach, dreams that appeal to different facets of her identity. She sits, staring at all of them until she imagines they are no longer attainable (*The Bell Jar* 77). Like Esther, Ellen struggles making choices that

will affect her future (hiding information from her husband, changing her physical appearance), and she is often overcome by her inability to inhabit multiple personas at once. Ellen's struggle with her self-image also corresponds with Agnes' in "The Wishing Box." Although Ellen does not dwell on her dreams like Agnes, she feels overshadowed by her husband's creative endeavors—for Agnes, his dreams, and for Ellen, his success in writing. Plath often disclosed the same afflictions throughout her marriage to Hughes. After multiple rejection letters from magazines and seeing Hughes' own poetry being so well received, Plath became self-critical. Her picture of herself as a writer seemed to be a prominent portion of her identity, and she obsessed over her writing's potential reception (*The Journals of Sylvia Plath* 326-327). Plath also wrote critically of women around Ted, and she became nervous whenever women hang around him (a result of Hughes' infidelity she often shared in her journals). In late December 1958, after explaining the couple's struggles as writers, she wrote, "Jealously over men: why jealous of Ted? Mother can't take him. Other women can. I must not be selfless: develop a sense of self. A solidness that cannot be attacked" (*The Journals of Sylvia Plath* 279). Since Plath repeatedly expressed concern over fitting in with the role she inhabits, many of her short stories—especially those written later in her life—show the insecurities she battled at the time.

One of Plath's latest pieces of published fiction, "Mothers," narrates a woman's journey with accepting place among other mothers. Reading the story, one cannot help but notice the characters' stark similarities to Plath's own family. "Mothers" follows Esther—not to be confused with Esther Greenwood—a mother of a young child and expectant mother of another. There are only a few brief mentions of a husband named Tom; in the beginning, they argue "loudly and freely" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 11). Before Esther leaves with her friend Rose to the local church's Mothers' Union, Tom and Esther have a short, unloving

goodbye, as she shouts her goodbye at him and he “straightened and shouted some world of encouragement that foundered between them in the dense November air” (11). Esther’s relationship with Tom feels tense and distant. At the end of “Mothers,” Rose and Esther walk home together, gossiping about the women at the meeting. To Esther’s surprise, Rose reveals the Union does not allow divorcees. Immediately after, Rose asks if Esther wants a dog, and Esther quickly states, “Tom *hates* dogs,” without considering her own feelings (20). The only scenes in which mention Tom describe a tense marriage with little affection. Having recently moved to Devon, England with only Tom and their child (a place in which Plath and Hughes relocated in to 1961), she feels aloof, detached, and alienated from the women at the local church’s Mother’s Union.

While leaving for the Mother’s Union, Esther meets Mrs. Nolan, who knew no one in Devon despite living there for six years. Her conversation with Mrs. Nolan leaves Esther feeling lost and hopeless. She asks, “If Mrs. Nolan, an Englishwoman by her looks and accent, and a pub-keeper’s wife as well, felt herself a stranger in Devon after six years, what hope had Esther, an American, of infiltrating that rooted society ever at all?” (12). Esther identifies herself as an American, a mother, and a wife, but her views toward each facet of her identity are expressed either negatively or as if she is a member of a club she is not quite welcome in. She exhibits a sense of numbness toward the other mothers and her pregnancy, and she seems detached from her own identity as a mother.

Despite already having a child, Esther describes no closeness with her child, simply describing her as “the baby.” At eight months pregnant, Esther still dresses to hide her pregnancy, and she shows anxiety over the Mothers’ Union meeting. During the meeting, she and Mrs. Nolan giggle as they push away from the other mothers’ rules and the rector’s prayers.

Esther initiates in quiet pep talks and reassurances, continually convincing herself she could rightfully be part of the meeting. As the baby kicks, she reassures herself, “I am a mother; I belong here” (15)—her first real acknowledgement of her motherhood. Like Ellen in “Day of Success” and Esther Greenwood, Esther in “Mothers” offers herself reassurance, as she feels insecure about the environment she is in and the contributions she may make to such a space. In addition, her American upbringing leaves her feeling remote and othered by the ladies in her town. Just after moving to Devon, Esther attended church frequently despite her indifference toward Christianity. She attended to integrate herself into the community, meet members of the church, and feel more at home, but she never quite feels like she is in the right place. At church, the bells “made [her] feel left out, as if from some fine local feast” (13), and she considers “[blurting out] she was an atheist” (14) when welcomed by the rector.

Before becoming pregnant with the couple’s first child, Frieda, Plath shared her conflict with motherhood, though it differs somewhat from Esther’s concerns in “Mothers.” Esther fears she does not fit in with other mothers, and she is overwhelmed by her insecurity. Plath felt insecure about motherhood, too—as shown in her journals—but because she believed she was barren, despite wishing desperately to have children. After being tested by a doctor, Plath wrote, “I have turned from being an intellectual, a career woman: all that is ash to me” and “If I could not have children . . . I would be dead. Dead to my woman’s body” (*Journals* 312). She feels insecure, fearing Ted will leave her. Plath notes someone named Esther—perhaps inspiration for Esther from “Mothers”—writing she is envious of Esther because she has children. (*Journals* 313).

Plath’s earlier stories were filled with many more imaginative qualities and fairy-tale like tones; her later work, however, such as “Mothers” and “Day of Success,” shows a turn in her

writing style, and it becomes much more confessional. It is not surprising that Plath wrote “Mothers” after becoming a mother herself—when her daughter, Frieda, was two, and she was pregnant with her son, Nicholas. The year before writing “Mothers,” Plath and Hughes relocated to Devon, England. At the time, her internal crises mirrored Esther’s domestic reality. Luke Ferretter claims, “In both *The Bell Jar* and her late poetry, Plath uses [the] image of a journey, at some moment of crisis, back through all the external accretions of false appearances that make up the image of a person, to the pure self beneath” (*Sylvia Plath’s Fiction: A Critical Study* 81). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther gains a sense of self clarity at the moment of her first crisis: a ski trip on Mount Pisgah that resulted in broken bones. In “Mary Ventura,” Mary is faced with a terrifying fate—which ultimately leads to a moment of clarity and effort. In “Johnny Panic,” the protagonist is laid on a hospital bed ready for electroshock therapy, yet she thinks only of her devotion to Panic. Esther Greenwood’s thought process coincides with Plath’s streams of consciousness in her journals. Esther constantly makes statements that lay out her wishes for life: to never marry (*The Bell Jar* 93), to “dictate her own life” (76), to have dozens of versions of herself to live dozens of lives (77), and the opposite—to end her life and all possibilities of her much dreamed-about futures.

Perhaps the most recognizable image from *The Bell Jar* is the fig tree Esther imagines herself sitting in, picturing each individual fig as a different future. She writes,

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor . . . and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn’t quite make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest . . . (*The Bell Jar* 77)

Before, Esther's self-image seemed disoriented, but here, her struggles become magnified. Because Esther cannot choose which future she wants most—or the future that would best fit her—she envisions losing the opportunities to fully achieve any of the titles in which she yearns.

Esther is most noticeably at odds with her femininity, specifically the various domestic and romantic notions popularized by 1950s standards for women. As Plath repeatedly wrote for magazines like *Mademoiselle* that pushed this narrative—that of the put-together, maternal, domestic wife who effortlessly balances the public and private spheres—her fiction understandably mirrors some concerns arising from such pictures. In *Representing Sylvia Plath*, Luke Ferretter notes, “[The] magazines of the 1950s, which Plath read and for which she wrote, are vehicles of the feminine mystique. Plath . . . has to struggle against the messages she absorbs from these magazines in order to express herself as the creative woman she wants to be” (148). However, he recognizes magazine stories may be more complex than many previously believed, as they highlighted women's discontent with marital roles while simultaneously selling those ideals (148). During her month-long internship at *Mademoiselle*, Esther studied these magazine articles, advertisements, and stories, which causes her to compare herself to the other interns. Esther's internship with *Mademoiselle* catapulted her self-image concerns and sprouted her feelings of alienation.

Though Esther criticizes socially accepted beauty and etiquette standards for women, she compares herself to other women's achievement of those standards. According to Caroline Smith, Esther attempts to embody the image both society and the magazine perceived to be

properly feminine. She claims, “As a result, she devotes much time throughout the novel to watching other women perform femininity—a femininity prescribed, yet simultaneously confused, by women’s magazines” (“The Feeding of Young Women”). She studies Doreen, a cynical intern with a taste for fun and fashion, and picks apart all the ways in which they differ. Interested in her cynic demeanor, Esther befriends Doreen, and they meet two men named Lenny and Frankie at a bar. Frankie leaves, and Esther and Doreen visit Lenny’s house. While Esther watches Doreen and Lenny dance, she grows lonely and eventually leaves. Later, Doreen drunkenly wakes Esther, and Esther realizes she identifies with the internship’s outcast, a small-town girl named Betsy, and claims loyalty to her (*The Bell Jar* 22). Throughout her friendship with Doreen, Esther notes Doreen’s privileged upbringing, her fashion, and uniqueness, claiming, “I’d never known a girl like Doreen before” (4). In “The Woman is Perfected,” Gary Leonard notes Esther’s draw to Doreen, who encapsulates the magnetic woman pictured in the media and the opposite of Esther’s self-perception. Esther also scrutinizes the magazine’s materialistic propaganda, as she deems philosophical exploration as important and advertisements for cosmetics as superficial (Leonard). However, she holds onto the makeup kit and sunglasses the magazine gifts the interns. “On one hand,” claims Leonard, “she understands that the beauty industry . . . pretends to care for her development as a person . . . [H]owever, she invites and participates in in this process of commodification because it is such a relief to masquerade as a thing . . . instead of enduring the painful ambivalence of uncommodified subjectivity” (“The Woman is Perfected”). By indulging in material items, Esther allows herself to shape into someone less like Betsy and more like Doreen, who fits the magazine’s standards. When she compares herself to other women, however, Esther feels lost and cynical.

Esther undergoes several rites of passage, reworking her self-image as the novel progresses. She criticizes the feminine image the magazine sells, highlights double standards for sex, and contemplates career paths. As she spirals into a deeper depression, she grows further away from the magazine's standards, abandoning the world perfumes and fashion and replacing them with philosophical observations. However, Esther returns to the physical image she portrays in the beginning of the novel to be released from the asylum, as she must prove to the board she has sufficiently molded into the image of perfect feminine well-being (Leonard). Upon visiting the board, she wears a new outfit, polished and straightened to perfection. She wonders, "There ought . . . to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreaded and approved for the road . . ." (*The Bell Jar* 244). She rebuilds herself to fit the public's superficial ideals about females' health, despite being critical of those standards.

Esther also concerns herself with contemplating patriarchal values involving marriage and sexuality. When she imagines marriage, she fears she must abandon her intellectual dreams and instead be contained to the kitchen. The domestic housewife is ingrained in her as an image of marriage and motherhood—an image which she relates to her own mother. Like Dody in "Stone Boy with Dolphin," Esther is troubled by her virginity; furthermore, she analyzes the double standards given to men and women regarding sex. Esther's boyfriend Buddy Willard, after having a summer affair with a waitress, wishes for Esther to be abstinent (Plath writes this dynamic in "Stone Boy with Dolphin," as well. Dody chastises herself for expressing her sexuality, while Leonard is pictured as the sought-after college boy, flirting with Dody despite having a woman in the other room). After having sex with a man named Irwin, Esther hemorrhages and later discovers Joan, another patient, has committed suicide. Feeling punished for straying outside the normative ideal, Esther "resigns herself to behaving appropriately to

secure her freedom,” says Caroline Smith (“The Feeding of Young Women”). In this way, Esther’s loses her fight for and her questioning surrounding her identity and succumbs to the image she yearned for, yet contrarily fought against.

In all her fiction, Plath’s protagonists grapple with a common idea: what choices do I make, and how will those choices affect who I am and what I become? Those thoughts and the way there are expressed differ from character to character, but they alter the ways in which each protagonist acts and views herself. Their obsession with image and identity gives the feeling of women who are lost in their own limbo, floating around in their own thoughts and notions of femininity and sexuality. Like her fiction, Plath also struggled with the choices she made and continuously contemplated her upcoming paths. She identified most ardently as a writer, a wife, and a mother, but could not grasp the confidence that allowed her to claim those identities with full-fledged confidence. Her short stories varied in genre and audience, a tactic which Luke Ferretter states as her belief that both non-literary and literary writing had equal value. However, other scholars believe her popular and literary works were another facet of Plath’s expression of the self, claiming they “[represent] a split in her self-consciousness that she tries and fails to identify” (Ferretter 153). During her first year at Smith college, in the fall of 1950, Plath wrote, “God, who am I . . . someone believes I am a human being, not a name merely. And these are the only indications that I am a whole person, not merely a knot of nerves, without identity” (*Journals* 17). Her fiction united her ideas surrounding identity offered an outlet for creative self-discovery.

In “Among the Bumblebees,” Alice inevitably must change the ways in which she acted with nature, having no one to teach her about the world as her father once did. For Mary Ventura, choosing meant embarking on her own path or remaining a passive, obedient daughter.

For Dody, choosing to express her sexuality caused an influx of self-deprecation spewed by 1950s-era ideas of purity and femininity. Although “Johnny Panic’s” protagonist had no choice in her devotion to Panic—as she could not control her mental illness—her deviation from her standard work commitments and inability to cope led to her eventual downward spiral. Esther in “Mothers” could easily adopt the unkind beliefs of the Mother’s Union, but she chooses to embrace the women who are often excluded and ridiculed, all because she feels she also does not belong. Esther Greenwood’s most obvious obsession is her search for her own unique identity in a society with a strict, set ideal for women.

Each protagonist’s sense of self comes from comparisons to other people or societal standards—whether it be against a husband’s success or another woman’s appearance—and popular values of the 50s and 60s. Femininity and sexuality are, throughout her collection of fiction, the subjects which bring Plath’s protagonists the most self-image issues, and magazine fads of the time remained a center for the archetypal female which her protagonists idealized. The male gaze shifted their self-perceptions and resulted in the suppression of sexual expression, domestic desires, and image insecurities. Plath explores this idea of the detached woman in all her fiction, through various outside structures which alienate each woman and dictate their choices. Ultimately, their quests for a personal identity lead to their detached attitudes, numbed accounts of mental traumas, a sense of limbo, and, in many cases, a deterioration in mental well-being.

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