

Stressed, Depressed, and Sexually Repressed: Patriarchy and  
Depression in *The Bell Jar*

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*The Bell Jar* is Sylvia Plath's only novel and ubiquitously her most famous work. The novel follows protagonist Esther Greenwood, a rising college senior, as she spends her summer first on an internship program at a women's magazine in New York City and then at home in the Boston area. Esther suffers from clinical depression, which gets worse as the novel progresses; whereas her condition is evident in the beginning of the novel from symptoms like lethargy and hopelessness, it worsens and by the second half of the novel, Esther has attempted suicide and been hospitalized. Plath began writing *The Bell Jar* in 1961 at the age of 29, according to her husband Ted Hughes (Dunkle 60), and it was published in 1961 under a pseudonym. After Plath died by suicide in 1963, the novel was republished and received with great acclaim in the United States and England, despite that mental illness was still completely stigmatized at the time.

The novel is widely regarded as a feminist text in that it is critical not only of the typical situation of young women in 1950s America, but also in that it contains "major themes of women's literature: madness, powerlessness, betrayal, and victimization" (Budick, 201). Despite Esther's prestigious position as a guest editor at a popular magazine, her probable future as a housewife leads her to assume she will eventually need to choose between family and career; such a predicament was common at the time and continues to be today (Wagner-Martin, "America," 3). Esther's depression, which is at the forefront of the novel, is made worse not only by her presumed domestic future, but also by the men with whom she interacts, both socially and medically. Almost every single male character in the novel serves to do Esther some sort of harm, whether it is emotional, mental, sexual, or physical. This prominence of negative, damaging male presence, as well as the overarching patriarchal society in which Esther exists, do not necessarily cause Esther to be clinically depressed, but increase the magnitude and number of

her symptoms. Specifically, Esther's internalized misogyny, sexual repression, and problematic relationships with men are the factors which contribute to the worsening of her depression. *The Bell Jar* is a literary manifestation of the ways in which gender norms, specifically in terms of the patriarchy, can exacerbate pre-existing mental illnesses. In that *The Bell Jar* is a semi-autobiographical novel (Coslett, et.al, 79), Plath's expression of this extends beyond the novel and opens up a discussion about real world effects of social factors, specifically gender-related ones, on psychiatric disorders.

As *The Bell Jar* is a household name in novels about female depression, there is already ample scholarly work on the role of patriarchy in the novel. First, it is important to establish that the working definition of patriarchy for the purpose of this paper is the following one by Sylvia Walby: "A system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (Walby, 214). In "*The Bell Jar* and the Patriarchy," Linda Wagner-Martin explores the ways that patriarchal society harms Esther throughout the novel. Her argument is largely based on the idea that Esther's father's death is an early trauma and that Esther's problematic relationships with men throughout the novel are a result of that trauma. That is certainly true, especially given the ways in which childhood trauma can affect mental illness later in life (Beck and Alford, 60), but this paper is concerned with the worsening of Esther's depression, not its root cause. Wagner-Martin's more general claim, though, is important for the foundation of this paper. She writes, "The damage the patriarchal system has done to Esther, as Plath describes it in *The Bell Jar*, is both real and frequent. It is a physical and an emotional reality" (Wagner-Martin, "Patriarchy," 50). This paper will explore that claim specifically in relation to Esther's depression and its symptoms.

Most of the academic discussion surrounding the topic of patriarchy and *The Bell Jar* fails to delve into the intersection between the feminist themes of the novel and Esther's depression. In "The Domesticated Wilderness: Patriarchal Oppression in *The Bell Jar*" Allison Wilkins explores oppressive nature of the male characters in the novel and relates them, as well as the female characters, to nature. Whereas male characters are surrounded by images relating to conquered and toxic elements of nature such as chemicals and hunted animals, female characters are associated with live nature such as flowers and figs. Wilkins's work, as she states herself, falls into an ecofeminist critique category in that while the article is intensive in terms of its outlining of patriarchal oppression, the focus of the argument is concerned with imagery and metaphor relating to botanical and environmental aspects of nature as opposed to human nature and medical science as is the focus of this essay (Wilkins). Kim Bridgford's essay comparing *The Bell Jar* to Susanna Kaysen's 1993 memoir *Girl, Interrupted* more closely examines Esther's psychiatric treatment as it relates to the patriarchy; Bridgford writes, "The issue of gender informs both texts, particularly the role of female protagonists in a largely patriarchal world" (Bridgford 75). Bridgford's work, however, is focused more on the similarities between the two works than *The Bell Jar* itself. Since *Girl, Interrupted* primarily takes place in an inpatient psychiatric facility, Bridgford's essay focuses on the portions of *The Bell Jar* in which Esther is hospitalized as opposed to the novel as a whole.

Though monumental, *The Bell Jar* is not the first work of fiction to feature a young woman suffering from debilitating depression as a result of male oppression. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a precedent for Plath in that its unnamed protagonist, who presumably has either postpartum depression or simply major depressive

disorder, is subjected to a worsening disorder due to misguided, ill-informed male treatment. The protagonist's husband, a physician, orders her to remain in the former nursery of an isolated summer home, where her depression transforms into a mental breakdown. Like Esther, the woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" has a mental illness from the outset that is exacerbated by a combination of male factors, both societal and personal. Unlike "The Yellow Wallpaper," though, *The Bell Jar* is a novel as opposed to a short story, and offers the reader a more detailed look into the protagonist's depression, treatment, and worldview.

In addition to critical analysis of the novel itself, there is research that supports the notion that there are differences between male and female depression, and multiple factors that contribute to depression in women. According to a 2015 article in *Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience*, Paul R. Albert establishes that the rates of depression globally are much higher among women than men. In 2010, the global annual prevalence of depression was 5.5% among women and 3.2% among men (Albert). More importantly, Albert writes "Indeed, starting at puberty, young women (ages 14-25) are at the greatest risk for major depression and mental disorders globally" (Albert). Esther, a rising college senior who is probably about 21 years old, falls into this category and as such is especially susceptible to depression. Physicians and scientists have hypothesized that women, especially young women, are more vulnerable to depression because of the constant hormonal shifts going on throughout their lives associated with puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, the postpartum stage, and menopause (Albert). Ronald C. Keller, though, in "Epidemiology of Woman and Depression" takes an epidemiological approach as opposed to a biological one:

Although the gender difference first emerges in puberty, other experiences related to changes in sex hormones (pregnancy, menopause, use of oral contraceptives, and use of hormone replacement therapy) do not significantly influence major

depression. These observations suggest that the key to understanding the higher rates of depression among women than men lies in an investigation of the joint effects of biological vulnerabilities and environmental provoking experiences (Keller).

Keller notes that there are in fact “environmental experiences” which contribute to the prevalence of depression in women, including but not limited to “family history, childhood adversity, various aspects of personality, social isolation, and exposure to stressful life experiences” (Keller). For Esther, social isolation, aspects of her personality, and stressful life experiences are contributors to the decline of her mental state in the novel, but additional factors that Keller leaves out like problematic relationships, sexual trauma, and low self-esteem are external contributors as well.

The purpose of this paper is not to state that Esther Greenwood suffers from clinical depression or major depressive disorder. To claim that she does would be obvious in that her symptoms--loss of interest and appetite, insomnia, suicidal thoughts and attempts, social isolation, etc--clearly align not only with a depression diagnosis, but with Plath’s own depression diagnosis (Cooper). The treatment which Esther receives--shock therapy, insulin treatments, talk therapy, and medication--also align with a diagnosis of major depressive disorder (Tsank). It is therefore established that the decline of Esther’s mental state is due primarily to her worsening medical condition in that her depression gets worse as the novel progresses.

There is an important distinction between the cause of Esther’s depression and factors which exacerbate it. In the 1950s, the public conception of mental illness was drastically different from that of the current era. Studies from 1952 and 1955 concluded that at that time, the general public attitude towards mental illness was that it was a character or personality defect as opposed to a disease affecting an otherwise healthy, normal person (Link et al. 189). In the

medical field, mental illness was considered a legitimate issue, but physicians were likely to only associate depression with patients who had another diagnosis (Horwitz). Today, the conception of mental illness and specifically depression has shifted to a “mental illness is like any other medical illness” approach in that it is taken as seriously as a diagnosis like diabetes (Malla et al.). As such, depression is treated as a condition which is caused by neurobiological and hereditary factors; therefore, Esther’s clinical depression is not caused by patriarchal elements, it is caused by a combination of neurotransmitter imbalances and external adverse experiences among other things (Beck and Alford xviii). This paper operates under the assumption that Esther indeed suffers from major depressive disorder. Additionally, the argument in this paper is not that her depression is brought on solely by the patriarchy. Rather, her condition is worsened and her symptoms are triggered by the negative presence of the male influences in both her life and in society.

One of the largest detriments to Esther’s depression is, as previously mentioned, her harmful relationships with the men in her life. Dana C. Jack is a psychologist renowned for her “silencing the self” theory in the study of women and depression. According to Jack, women are more susceptible to depression because they tend to suppress their thoughts and emotions in order to avoid conflict. Jack writes,

Self-silencing is prescribed by norms, values, and images dictating what women are ‘supposed’ to be like: pleasing, unselfish, loving ... These self-silencing relational schemas create a vulnerability to depression by directing women to defer to the needs of others, censor self-expression, repress anger, inhibit self-directed action, and judge the self against a culturally defined ‘good woman’ (Jack 5).

Jack emphasizes that women who are self-silencing do so because of socially constructed norms that dictate how they should act. Though Jack wrote this in 2010, almost fifty years after Plath

wrote, her theory significantly applies to Esther in *The Bell Jar* especially in that in the 1950s, womens' roles were limited and oppressive. I will attempt to argue that this model of female susceptibility to depression applies to Esther's case of worsened depression due to patriarchy, since the roles to which Esther must conform are created by a patriarchal system.

As an aspiring writer, Esther is at odds with what is expected of her as a college student in 1953. Her professional aspirations clash with the typical contemporary path for someone her age; to marry a nice boy, settle down in the suburbs, and have multiple children. This is exactly what her neighbor Dodo Conway does; she is one of the first people Esther sees when she returns from New York. Plath writes, "Dodo interested me in spite of myself" (Plath 116). Esther has previously expressed apprehension about living a life like Dodo's and will continue to do so as the novel progresses. Nonetheless, she is fixated on Dodo and continues to watch her through the window. Esther sees Dodo as her potential future, as what will happen to her if she marries a bland man like Buddy and submits to life of being a wife and a mother. After watching Dodo, Esther returns to bed. Plath writes,

I felt her gaze pierce through the white clapboard and the pink wallpaper roses and uncover me, crouching there behind the silver pickets of the radiator. I crawled back into bed and pulled the sheet over my head. But even that didn't shut out the light, so I buried my head under the darkness of the pillow and pretended it was night. I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to (Plath 117).

At this point in the novel, Esther's depression is beginning to worsen; that she has to spend the rest of the summer at her mother's home, and not in a writing program at Harvard, does not help. Seeing Dodo and feeling her gaze through the window, as well as imagining her future as a housewife, are immediately followed by a mention of a symptom of depression: an excessive desire to stay in bed and shirk responsibilities, and a general feelings of hopelessness. Esther



expresses right after her interaction with Dodo that she has nothing to look forward to; while that can be interpreted simply as a clinical manifestation or symptom of Esther's depression, it can also be read as a direct response to Dodo. Esther does not see the point in living if that means her life will be like Dodo's.

In that Dodo represents the typical oppressed housewife of the 1950s, her presence in Esther's life is, though female, patriarchally imposed. Dodo's life and existence, whose purpose is to carry children and to maintain her husband's home, is perhaps of her own choosing, but the prototype which she represents is a product of a society which primarily values women in supportive roles for the men in their lives. This type of society restricts women from fulfilling professional goals or personal ones which do not concern domestic pursuits, and is male-created, male-dominated, and male-perpetuated. In short, Esther's view of marriage is the following:

I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So 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 (Plath 85).

For Esther, Dodo is a visual, physical representation of what will happen to her if she does what she is supposed to as a young woman in the 1950s, and seeing her triggers her depression symptoms. As Dodo is a pawn of the patriarchy, it is the presence of the patriarchy in Esther's life which causes her mental state to decline.

In contrast to Dodo, Doreen represents the opposite end of the continuum not only in her carefree lifestyle but also in how she criticizes her and Esther's peers. Esther has never met anyone like Doreen, and the two more than once separate from the rest of the interns on nights out, finding themselves in the homes of strange men. Doreen frequently insults the other women

on the magazine program, calling Betsy “pollyanna cowgirl” (Plath 6), calling Esther’s boss Jay Cee “ugly as sin” (Plath 5), and anyone who goes to Yale “[stupid]” (Plath 7). These slurs have an effect on Esther, who begins to think of Buddy, who goes to Yale, as stupid. After hearing these remarks, Esther thinks, “Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones” (Plath 7). Whereas Dodo represents Esther’s future should she follow the typical path, Doreen is the part of Esther who wishes to break from expectations. It is more than aspirational for Esther, as she relates to Doreen’s intuition and feels the same things, but cannot express them like Doreen can. Inside Esther there is a duality: she is consistently torn between her desire to spend her life writing, yet feels pressure from Buddy and his family, as well as from her peers and from society, to submit to the status quo and settle down, forgoing writing for children. Plath was able to do both, as is Esther; in the beginning of the novel she refers to her child: “Last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with” (Plath 3).

Though Doreen is Dodo’s polar opposite both in her character and what she represents in regards to Esther, she too is a product of the patriarchy. Whereas Dodo is the type of woman with whom a man settles down, Doreen is the object of male desire. Though she is “hard and polished” (Plath 4), she is also beautiful, with blond hair and blue eyes. On one of her nights out with Esther, she wears a “snug corset affair that curved her in at the middle and bulged her out again spectacularly above and below, and her skin had a bronzy polish under the pale dusting powder” (Plath 7). Doreen wears outfits which she knows will grab mens’ attention, but she is young enough that her flirting is appealing and not desperate. She has large breasts, which Esther sees at Lenny’s apartment. Though she is sexual, she is pure and virginal; on that night, she

wears a strapless lace dress, seemingly reminiscent of a wedding dress. She is angelic; Esther describes her hair as a “halo of gold” (Plath 47). When she is being flirted with, her edges are no longer sharp and she begins to play dumb, leaving Esther to do all the talking. In that she is both pure and sexy, both dumb and cynical, both flirtatious and aloof, she is a typical sex object about which men fantasize. She continues to play this role as she dates Lenny and takes Esther along on her nights out.

Despite Doreen’s differences from the other women on the magazine program, she is similar to someone like Betsy in that they are both women who are shaped by men’s desires. Betsy or Dodo is the type of woman who men want to marry, and Doreen is the type of woman with whom men want to have sex. As such, they are both women who are products of patriarchal oppression; their characters and personalities are constructed by men. Though Doreen helps Esther in that when they are together Esther is not worrying about becoming a mother as she does with Dodo, Doreen has a different detrimental effect. When Esther goes out with Doreen, she is either ignored or abused. The first time they go out, Esther must watch Doreen and Lenny engage in romantic and sexual activity, after which she returns to the hotel feeling filthy. The next time, when Esther is socially thrust upon one of Lenny’s friends, Marco, he sexually assaults her, an event which is especially harmful in its effects on her depression. Doreen, in that she is a human result of the patriarchy, ultimately is a bad friend for Esther and causes her mental health to decline. Esther’s interactions with both extremes of prototypical idealized women are detrimental for her depression, and signify one of the ways in which the patriarchal society in which Esther lives causes her depression to flare. Wagner-Martin, in “*The Bell Jar and the Patriarchy*” argues that “Plath’s real brilliance in crafting *The Bell Jar* is in having a number

of the older women characters become spokespeople for the patriarchal view” (Wagner-Martin, “Patriarchy,” 51). Though that is perhaps true, the younger women characters whom Esther considers peers are just as important as spokespeople, if not pawns, of the patriarchal view.

Esther’s relationships with male characters are perhaps even more detrimental to her mental health than those she has with women. Buddy Willard, Esther’s ex-boyfriend, is mentioned throughout the novel and is almost always depicted in a negative light. He is hypocritical, cruel, and unfaithful, but he is the type of man who Esther is expected to marry and his presence in her life triggers Esther’s depression on multiple occasions. At first, Esther is smitten with Buddy and their first interactions elate her; Plath writes, “I thought he was the most wonderful boy I’d ever seen. I’d adored him from a distance for five years before he even looked at me, and then there was a beautiful time when I still adored him and he started looking at me” (Plath 52). That “beautiful time” is brief, though, as it is a short amount of time between when Buddy and Esther go to the Yale Junior Prom and when he begins to disgust her both emotionally and physically.

When Buddy is a medical student, he takes Esther on a tour: the two see cadavers, dead fetuses, and finally, a live birth. Witnessing the birth emotionally scars Esther in that what she witnesses is not a beautiful scene where a woman brings life into the earth, but a gruesome one wherein a woman is drugged yet in pain and cut open. Mrs. Tomolillo, the woman giving birth, is more of a vessel at this moment than a human, and Esther thinks,

It sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again (Plath 66).

Though it is impossible to determine if this event, which took place a few years before the setting of the novel, is what caused Esther's aversion to having children, it undoubtedly contributes to the aversion. Esther notes the patriarchal qualities of the birth: the woman is unconscious but writhing in pain connoting that the anesthesia is not to make the birth painless, but to prevent the woman from remembering the birth so she will have more children. Mrs. Tomolillo is called "good girl" (Plath 66), which is condescending in that she is a fully grown woman delivering a child. She is described in animal terms: she has a "spider fat stomach" and makes an "unhuman noise" (Plath 66). Will, Buddy's medical student friend, performs an episiotomy without even notifying her; granted, she is asleep, but the doctor has instructed her to push just a moment earlier. This birth signifies incredible oppression in that men delivering babies wield their power to the detriment of the woman giving birth. They tear into her body without her consent, speak to her as though she is a child, and treat her body as a vessel for carrying children. Esther realizes this, and it is the beginning of her disinclination to have children; she thinks "I didn't feel up to asking him if there were any other ways to have babies" (Plath 67). She knows that if this is what birth is like, she does not want to participate. Later, when the sight of Dodo triggers her depression, it is this incident that propels that because it is the foundation of her anxiety about childbirth and child rearing, all thanks to Buddy and the patriarchy's influence on the process.

Esther's sexual relationship with Buddy is also a contributor to her worsening depression. The night after she witnesses the birth, she is with Buddy in his room when he asks her if she has ever seen a man naked. Esther thinks for a moment, recalling character references that praise Buddy's honor. She concludes that seeing him naked will do no harm, for she intends to stay a

virgin until she marries, and agrees. Buddy undresses. Plath writes, “Then he just stood there in front of me and I kept staring at him. The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed” (Plath 69). Quite literally, Buddy’s genitals depress Esther. A few paragraphs earlier, Esther was thinking about how Buddy is her future; Plath writes, “All I’d heard about, really, was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the kind of a person a girl should stay fine and clean for” (Plath 68). At this point, Esther still thinks she will marry Buddy, but seeing his penis and realizing that it is what she is staying a virgin for makes her feel depressed. His genitals are not necessarily what depress her; rather, it is what the phallus represents that cause that reaction. When she realizes that a life with Buddy, or any man like him, will subjugate her and put her into situations like the birth she witnessed, she becomes depressed: why is she living if being subordinate to Buddy is her fate? This instance is also important because it is the first out of only five times that the word “depressed” is mentioned in the novel. Not many things can make Esther say she truly feels depressed, but seeing Buddy’s penis is one of them because of what its implications about her future.

Buddy is an important figure in Esther’s depression because of how their relationship fits into Dana Jack’s self-silencing theory. As aforementioned, Jack theorizes that women are more susceptible to depression because of their tendency to stifle their emotions in order to be more agreeable to men. When she is with Buddy, Esther is constantly suppressing her thoughts and true feelings in order to please Buddy and be the kind of woman he would want to be with. After the birth, Esther is appalled, telling Buddy, “I could see something like that every day” (Plath 67) even though it will scar her for the rest of the novel. She lies because she wants to seem as though childbirth is something she not only looks forward to, but also values and finds beautiful,

as a future wife and mother should. Rather than expressing her own opinion, she expresses that which she thinks Buddy wants to hear. When Buddy and Esther discuss poetry, Buddy explains poetry to her despite that she knows just as much about it, if not more than he does given that literature is her field of study and passion. Plath writes, “Do you know what a poem is, Esther?” “No, what?” I said. “A piece of dust” (Plath 56). Esther is an English major as well as a writer, but when Buddy reduces her entire field of study to a pseudointellectual cliché, she does not retort. When Esther converses with Buddy, she not only allows her emotions to be suppressed, but she also allows her intellect to be belittled. According to Jack, this only happens because as a woman, Esther has been conditioned to act in a way Buddy will find appealing. As a token of the patriarchy, Buddy wants to be with a girl who listens to his tirades without refuting. When Esther tries to be that girl, she is making herself more vulnerable to her symptoms of depression according to the self-silencing theory. Linda Wagner-Martin summarizes it nicely: “In the case of Buddy, Esther’s duty as his girlfriend is to listen and to obey” (Wagner-Martin, “Patriarchy,” 51), and not to burden Buddy with her own emotions and opinions.

Esther continues to conceal her true thoughts around Buddy as their relationship progresses. Soon after the day at the hospital, he is diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent to a sanatorium in upstate New York. When Esther hears the news, she is awash with relief, but expresses: “I told Buddy how sorry I was about the [tuberculosis] and promised to write, but when I hung up I didn't feel one bit sorry. I only felt a wonderful relief” (Plath 73). Her insincerity here is minor compared to her actions over the next period of time in that instead of breaking up with Buddy, she continues to string him along, visiting him in the sanatorium. Once Buddy tells Esther he is not a virgin on the night of the medical school visit, she decides she is

no longer invested in their relationship and the tuberculosis diagnosis is a chance for her to finally end their communication. Esther, however, continues to keep Buddy, his family, and her family under the impression that she is still romantically interested in him. Buddy's father drives Esther upstate for a visit, and she considers backing out at the last minute. Plath writes,

I was tempted to tell Mr. Willard to go ahead alone, I would hitchhike home. But one glance at Mr. Willard's face -- the silver hair in its boyish crewcut, the clear blue eyes, the pink cheeks, all frosted like a sweet wedding cake with the innocent, trusting expression -- and I knew I couldn't do it. I'd have to see the visit through to the end (Plath 87-88).

What makes Esther commit to the visit at that moment is not her own internal moral compass but external guilt about letting Mr. Willard down. She sees his face, which, though feminine, is reminiscent of Buddy's in the light eyes and crew cut, and decides to stay. Her commitment is not to Buddy, or even to Mr. Willard per se, but to live up to male expectations which are embodied in this moment by Mr. Willard. That his face is "frosted like a sweet wedding cake" implies that Esther agrees to continue because even though she is not married to Buddy, she is still expected to act like his wife not only in unwavering commitment to him, but also by acting agreeable and easygoing. Once she is with Buddy at the sanatorium, she acts kindly towards him, only coming to a breaking point and revealing her true feelings when he implies that they get married. Esther's self-silencing tendencies may not lead to a reluctant "yes" to Buddy's marriage proposal, but their perpetual existence throughout her relationship with Buddy establish her as more vulnerable to depression.

Esther's interactions with more minor male characters are also detrimental for her mental health mainly in the ways in which they inflict sexual trauma and highlight how Esther has been sexually repressed. Throughout the novel, she obsesses over her virginity, attempting to lose it



multiple times to different men. Much of Esther's sexual experience, or lack thereof, comes from her relationship with Buddy; that he cheats on her with a waitress and is no longer a virgin sparks her obsession with losing her virginity. Operating under a definition of sexual repression as a state in which an individual cannot express their sexuality, Esther is being sexually repressed by the patriarchy. In "Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution," Ellen Willis writes

The suppression of women's sexual desire and pleasure, the denial of our right to control reproduction, and the enforcement of female abstinence outside marriage have been - together with our exclusion from equal participation in economic and political activity - primary underpinnings of male supremacy. Conversely, a restrictive sexual morality inevitably constrains women more than men (Willis 4).

Similar to the way that aspects of Dodo and Doreen both exist within Esther, there also exists within her a sexual dialectic. On the one hand, Esther must adhere to the first part of Willis's statement, that she must repress her own desires in order to remain chaste until marriage. This aspect is patriarchally mandated. On the other hand, Esther strives to keep up an appearance of sexiness and experience; Plath writes,

From the first night Buddy Willard kissed me and said I must go out with a lot of boys, he made me feel I was much more sexy and experienced than he was and that everything he did like hugging and kissing and petting was simply what I made him feel like doing out of the blue (Plath 70).

Esther's purported "experience" attracts Buddy to her but she must carefully tow the line between sexy and whorish: too experienced, and she is not pure enough to be considered marriage material. Not experienced enough, and she will not attract the attention of men in the first place. This balance is completely extrinsic in that Esther keeps it up not in order to uphold her own moral standard or find sexual pleasure without breaking societal rules too much; she keeps it up in order to be attractive to men. Her own sexuality is never expressed in that what she

wants sexually is always excluded; rather, her sexuality is used as a tool for male sexual pleasure and desire. The repression of Esther's desire is, Willis would argue, a result of male supremacy.

Even when Esther is on a quest to lose her virginity, she seeks to do so for logical reasons in that she does not believe that only men should be able to have premarital sex. She does not seek out sex because she is curious about how it will feel, or simply because she knows it will feel pleasurable and chases that pleasure. Plath writes,

It might be nice to be pure and then to marry a pure man, but what if he suddenly confessed he wasn't pure after we were married, the way Buddy Willard had? I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not.

Finally I decided that if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn't pure either. Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well (Plath 81-82).

Esther recognizes the moral double standard which Willis points out, that men can express their sexuality outside of marriage but women cannot. She then decides to try to lose her virginity for equality's sake, because the hypocrisy of societal sexual mandates that discriminate based on gender seem unfair to her. Absent from her stated desire to sleep with a man is any sort of sexual desire or curiosity; the quest only begins because this patriarchally induced double standard exists. While Esther at this point is perhaps no longer completely repressing sexuality as she had before due to her upbringing which emphasized purity, the sexuality that she expresses is the result of patriarchal values.

Despite that she is willing to lose her virginity, Esther continues to associate sex with marriage, which is evident of the effect that patriarchy that has had on her conception of sex. While she lies next to Constantin, the simultaneous interpreter, wishing he would sleep with her,

she begins to think about what it would be like to be married to him (Plath 84). Plath writes, Even though Esther is trying to have premarital sex, she cannot completely separate sex from marriage because that is how she has been conditioned to think. In a patriarchal society, according to Willis, women are only free to express their sexuality within the confines of marriage, making sex and marriage effectively interchangeable. Esther has also internalized the heteronormativity of patriarchal sexuality; when she accidentally interrupts Joan and DeeDee engaging in sexual acts in the psychiatric facility, she is both confused and disgusted. Esther says, "I don't see what women see in other women" (Plath 219) and thinks in reference to lesbian sex, "I had thought I would have some revelation of specific evil" (Plath 220). Since she has been conditioned to think of heterosexuality as the only true form of sexuality, she expects lesbian sex to be a devilish perversion and is surprised when it is not very different from heterosexual sex. Finally, when she considers Joan after the encounter, Esther realizes how little the two have in common. Plath writes,

I looked at Joan. In spite of the creepy feeling, and in spite of my old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me. It was like observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own (Plath 219).

Esther has always slightly disliked Joan, but once she witnesses her sexual relationship with DeeDee, the dislike turns into alienation. Joan disgusts Esther, who sees her as a toad or an alien, and Esther feels that the two of them are separate entities but she considers her thoughts a distorted image of Joan. Esther does not elaborate on how their thoughts are similar, but perhaps in that this passage directly succeeds her discovery of the relationship, she is referring to their different attitudes about sex. Joan has demonstrated that she is a woman with sexual desires who

acts on those desires, whereas Esther continues to associate sex with marriage and virginity. Joan's sex life, in Esther's mind, is a "black" version of her own: they both seek sex, but for vastly different reasons.

An important turning point both in Esther's sexual development and the decline of her mental state is her encounter with Marco, the Peruvian woman-hater who attempts to rape her. It is Doreen who sets Esther up with Marco, perhaps Plath's implication that women too can be complicit in the perpetuation of sexual assault. When they first meet, Marco gives Esther a tiny diamond pin in front of numerous other party-goers--this diamond handoff is a sign that Esther still associates sex with marriage in that the diamond represents an engagement or wedding ring. Conversely, though, Esther is also playing the role of a prostitute to a certain extent in that Marco says to his peers, "'Perhaps,' the spark in Marco's eyes extinguished, and they went black, 'I shall perform some small service. . . .' Somebody laughed. '. . .worthy of a diamond'" (Plath 105). Quickly, Marco transforms from chivalric suitor to creepy solicitor. The diamond transforms from a symbol of commitment or love to one of transaction: he is giving her an object in exchange for sex. It was initially meant to buy her affection, but then reels her in so that she will perhaps feel she must allow Marco to have sex with her because he has given her an object of value. Esther is both Dodo, a woman to whom a man wants to give a diamond, and Doreen, a woman whom a man feels is an easy target for sex. Marco, as a representative of the patriarchy, facilitates the transition.

Later that night, as Marco pushes Esther into the mud and tears into her dress with his teeth, he feels entitled to her body simply because he is a man and she is a woman. As a man in a patriarchal society, Marco sees women as vessels for sex--he treats Esther hatefully and

disrespectfully, earning the title “woman-hater” (Plath 106)--which eventually leads to an attempted rape. Unlike female desire, male desire under patriarchy knows no bounds and is subject to no restrictions. The result is a rape culture, which Renee Heberle defines as “The general environment created by the threat and the experience of sexual violence whose terms women must internalize in order to live safely in the world” (Heberle 75). In such a culture, the threat of is so normalized and commonplace that the act of rape is considered the apex of male power (Griffin 29). Marco could be attempting to rape Esther for a plethora of reasons, maybe because his biological need for sexual satisfaction has brought out his predatory animal instincts, or to prove his masculine power to himself or his peers. Either way, these explanations for his actions stem from patriarchal laws: that male sexual desire is meant to be acted upon, and that sexual domination of women, even when forceful, is a manifestation of male power. Therefore, Marco’s assault on Esther can be considered a direct result of the male dominated society in which they live.

Both Esther’s sexual repression and trauma are major contributors to the worsening of her depression. Chronistically, the sexual assault takes place right before she returns to her mother’s home for the summer, an event which marks the point when her depression symptoms become debilitating. As she rides the train to Massachusetts, she still has Marco’s dried blood on her face (Plath 113); she is physically carrying the trauma with her into this new period of her life which will be marked by depression. The assault has inflicted severe trauma upon her; Wagner-Martin, in “*The Bell Jar and The Patriarchy*,” writes of the event, “Marco’s violence—calling her names, hitting her, throwing her in the mud, attempting rape—is as damaging emotionally as it is physically. Esther’s leaving his blood streaks across her cheeks is

her visible expression of her fear, anger, and dismay” (Wagner-Martin, “Patriarchy,” 50).

Clinically speaking, there is no uniform way in which victims of rape and sexual assault act following the trauma, in both short-term and long-term periods. A 2009 review of multiple articles on the effects of sexual trauma on mental health confirms, however, that “poorer pre-assault mental health predicts multiple negative outcomes, such as depression and anxiety” (Campbell et al. 230). That is, for victims of sexual assault who are already experiencing symptoms of conditions like depression are more likely to experience worsened depression following the assault. Though most of Esther’s serious symptoms begin to present once she returns to Massachusetts (such as insomnia, loss of appetite, suicidal ideation, and lethargy), she is already experiencing depression when she is New York. Just prior to the assault, she begins uncontrollably crying during a photo shoot at the magazine; crying spells are a behavioral symptom of major depressive disorder (Beck and Alford 17). Esther, as a depressed individual who undergoes severe sexual trauma, is especially vulnerable to worsened depression. The steep decline in her mental health that occurs just after her assault, is perhaps due to the assault--the ultimate manifestation of male power results in a severe manifestation of Esther’s depression.

When Esther finally fulfills her goal of losing her virginity to Irwin, she feels almost nothing and is physically injured as a result of the sex. Prior to the act, she is desperate to shed her virginity. Plath writes, “Ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck. It had been of such enormous importance to me for so long that my habit was to defend it at all costs. I had been defending it for five years and I was sick of it” (Plath 228). Esther’s virginity is almost like a chastity belt in that it feels to her like a physical weight that impedes her ability to forget about Buddy. In her 2009 book “The

Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women,” Jessica Valenti describes virginity as “deeply entrenched in patriarchy and male ownership” (Valenti 9) in that it is an easy way for a man to judge a woman’s sexual experience and value. As virginity is a patriarchal social construct, Esther will likely feel the same as she always has once she is no longer a virgin. The physical burden that she feels is her virginity is psychological baggage that is due to a variety of other factors, like her trauma from being sexually assaulted or merely a symptom of her depression. Therefore, as she lies on Irwin’s bed waiting for “the miraculous change to make itself felt” (Plath 229) but feels only “sharp, startlingly bad pain” (Plath 229) perhaps part of that pain is her realization that her quest to lose her virginity has just been a way for her to try to shed pain that will not simply fade with sexual intercourse. As she hemorrhages uncontrollably, “the stories of blood-stained bridal sheets and capsules of red ink bestowed on already deflowered brides floated back to me” (Plath 229). Esther still at this point associates sex, including her own virginity loss, with marriage; even now that she has to a certain extent rebelled against the patriarchy by having premarital sex, she still subscribes to patriarchal ideology.

Esther’s continued repressed, or misdirected, sexuality is a result of the patriarchy and worsens her depression. There is no direct psychiatric link between sexual repression and depression, but there is a connection between positive sexual relationships and depression. A 2007 study found that positive sexual relationships decreased symptoms of depression in women who had been previously sexually abused (Feinauer et al. 103). Throughout the novel, Esther experiences only both positive sexual interactions, both in her early college years with Buddy. The first is when he first kisses her (Plath 61), and the second is after the medical school visit:

“Then we kissed and hugged a while and I felt a little better” (Plath 69). Those experiences are prior to the setting of the novel and do not occur when Esther is at the midst of her depression. Her sexual intercourse with Irwin, though it accomplishes a goal of hers, is too painful and traumatic an experience to be considered positive. Perhaps had Esther had a positive route through which to explore and express her sexuality, some aspects of her depression would have been mitigated. In the oppressive patriarchal world in which Esther lives, though, this is not possible as she is an unmarried woman.

Once Esther begins to be treated for her depression, her condition only worsens, thanks to Dr. Gordon. In an age where clinical depression is seen not just as a result of a person’s environment but as a serious medical disorder, it is difficult to discern exactly what exacerbates the condition or to determine why some treatments work for some patients and not others. Nonetheless, in *The Bell Jar* there is a clear distinction between the way the male psychiatrist and the female psychiatrist are depicted; Dr. Gordon worsens Esther’s depression, and Dr. Nolan helps effectively treat it. Esther immediately hates Dr. Gordon when she meets him, and considers him “conceited” (Plath 129). She is not comfortable sharing the extent of her symptoms with him; while she tells him about her insomnia and loss of appetite, she does not tell him that her depression has affected her handwriting (Plath 130). Dr. Gordon’s prescribed shock treatments are traumatizing for Esther, so much so that she considers running away before the treatments begin. Finally, Dr. Gordon is condescending, seeming reluctant to take Esther seriously. When she first enters his office during her first appointment, he says, “Your mother tells me you are upset” (Plath 128). He reduces her symptoms to “upset;” Esther has not eaten, slept or bathed in over a week, but Dr. Gordon sees her inability to function as little more than



just an emotional outburst. Here, Dr. Gordon represents the patriarchy in its disregard for female mental distress. Though by this point in history mental disorders were considered legitimate and women like Esther were not simply seen as “hysterical” as they might have been 50 years earlier, Dr. Gordon reduces Esther’s suffering to one negative emotion. He prescribes shock treatments and therefore legitimizes her illness to some extent, but he barely attempts to acquaint himself with Esther or figure out what is exacerbating her symptoms. The shock treatment that Esther received under Dr. Gordon’s care traumatizes her too much to actually work, and she refuses to see him again. According to Wagner-Martin, Dr. Gordon directly worsens Esther’s depression: “Dr. Gordon treats Esther in such a manner as to bring on her depressive reaction and her eventual suicide attempt” (Wagner-Martin, “Patriarchy,” 51).

Unlike Dr. Gordon, Dr. Nolan is compassionate, demonstratively knowledgeable, and an effective psychiatrist. Esther trusts her and realizes that Dr. Nolan trusts her as well, having left matches in the drawer of her room. When Dr. Nolan asks Esther what she thinks of Dr. Gordon, Esther remarks, “I didn’t like what he did to me” (Plath 189). Esther sees herself as a victim of Dr. Gordon’s treatment, which demonstrates that the relationship between them was between that of a perpetrator and a sufferer: he was the patriarchy and she was the women whom the oppression of a patriarchal system affects. In contrast to Dr. Gordon, Dr. Nolan sympathizes with and relates to Esther; in regards to her relationship with her mother, Esther says, “I hate her” (Plath 203). Plath then writes, “But Doctor Nolan only smiled at me as if something had pleased her very, very much, and said, ‘I suppose you do’” (Plath 203). Whereas Dr. Gordon hardly attempted talk therapy as a treatment for Esther, Dr. Gordon is not only using talk therapy but doing so in a way which facilitates openness and allows Esther to share what she is truly feeling.

This positive relationship further cements the trust that exists between the two, so much so that when Esther finds out she is going to have more shock therapy as per Dr. Nolan's orders, she feels betrayed. Nonetheless, Dr. Nolan is by her side the whole time and the experience is more positive than Esther's previous shock therapy. After the treatment, Esther begins to improve, forgetting why she had previously been obsessed with knives (Plath 216).

The differences between the depictions of the male and female psychiatrists are drastic. Though Plath was perhaps only retelling her own experiences with psychiatrists of different genders (especially in that it is accepted that Dr. Nolan is partly based on Plath's real, long-term psychiatrist Dr. Ruth Beuscher), the stark contrast between Drs. Nolan and Gordon exemplifies the role of the patriarchy in the novel. As mentioned earlier, Esther's depressive symptoms are exacerbated by anxieties about her potential bleak future as Buddy's wife. The thought of conforming to her role as a woman in the patriarchal society of the 1950s, which was arguably oppressive--especially for a creative individual like Esther--worsens her condition, as does the oppressive Dr. Gordon in his male conceit and condescension. Dr. Nolan, however, represents the possibilities that arise when women are given the freedom and opportunity to make their own decisions about how they will conform to stereotypes. Under Dr. Nolan's treatment, not only do Esther's symptoms improve, but she is eventually able to return to her life.

The hospital in which Esther stays after her suicide attempt is a microcosm of what society could be like were it not a patriarchal. Esther compares a room in Dr. Gordon's hospital to one in the second hospital; though neither has bars on the windows, Dr. Gordon's hospital symbolizes not only general female oppression, but the medical oppression of mentally ill women by male physicians as was the case when Esther was treated by Dr. Gordon.

Wagner-Martin writes, “And in the case of Dr. Gordon, society’s assumption is that a medical man should have full authority over troubled women’s lives” (Wagner-Martin, “Patriarchy,” 51). The oppressive nature of Dr. Gordon’s hospital is epitomized in the way that at first, the patients look like dolls. Plath writes,

Then I realized that none of the people were moving. I focused more closely, trying to pry some clue from their stiff postures. I made out men and women, and boys and girls who must be as young as I, but there was a uniformity to their faces, as if they had lain for a long time on the shelf, out of the sunlight, under siftings of pale, fine dust (Plath 141).

Like dolls or figurines which have been sitting on a shelf, the patients are still and dusty. Dr. Gordon is their owner who controls their movements and futures--that is, their medical care. As Esther and her mother leave the facility, her mother remarks, “I knew my baby wasn’t like that. ... Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital” (Plath, 145-146). Esther sees the patients as figurines, and her mother deems them like dead people; either way, the connotation is that Dr. Gordon, as their physician, has sucked the life out of them. Dr. Gordon has manipulated his patients to the point that they are dead; in that his hospital is symbolic of a patriarchal medical system, the future is bleak for anyone suffering from a mental illness in that type of system.

The next facility which Esther visits, in contrast, is microcosmic of a society in which women are given agency over both medical treatment and their personal lives. Though there are male doctors at the facility, as well as male patients, just because a system has men in positions of power does not make it inherently patriarchal. Female physicians like Dr. Nolan and Dr. Quinn provide medical care which is not oppressive--as aforementioned, the shock treatments that Dr. Nolan administers to Esther are not traumatic like Dr. Gordon’s and Dr. Nolan engages

in talk therapy with Esther. The female patients are allowed to be creative, physically active, and social. As proven by the match incident with Dr. Nolan and Esther, there is a sense of trust and camaraderie between the patients and the clinicians. Finally, the sexual relationships that occur--namely, DeeDee and Joan's--are consensual, pleasurable, and not purely to satiate male desire or produce children. Patients who show improvement are allowed to leave to shop or see films, and eventually fare well enough to move out of the facility as Esther ultimately does. In this facility, women are not oppressed or manipulated by their peers or physicians as Esther has been up to this point. As a result, her condition improves and she is presumably permanently released at the end of the novel. While she waits to meet with the staff with whom she will discuss her release, she contemplates her future. Plath writes, "My stocking seams were straight, my black shoes cracked but polished, and my red wool suit flamboyant as my plans. Something old, something new... But I wasn't getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice--patched, retreated, and approved for the road" (Plath 244). Esther is conditioned to think of marriage as the ultimate metaphor for new beginnings, as well as the ultimate accomplishment for a woman her age. At this point though, she has broken free from the patriarchal mindset which she has held throughout the novel in which she would associate or conflate marriage with everything from sex to a death sentence. Now that Esther has been treated in a facility which was free from patriarchal influence, she realizes that marriage is not everything, and that it does not to constantly be at the forefront of her mind. Her depression is not completely gone--and considering that *The Bell Jar* is semi-autobiographical, it never will be--but freedom from oppressive male dominated treatment and society has allowed Esther to heal.

According to Wagner-Martin, “Most of the damage to Esther occurs because of the laws the patriarchal system enforces” (Wagner-Martin, “Patriarchy,” 50). Until the end of the novel, it is unclear whether this damage--in Esther’s case, worsened mental illness--is perpetuated purposefully by men. Buddy visits Esther one last time in the facility and asks her bashfully, ““Do you think there’s something in me that *drives* women crazy?”” (Plath 239). As he has dated both Esther and Joan, who at this point has died by suicide, he worries that he is responsible for their unraveling--which, to some extent, he is. Esther remembers Dr. Nolan telling her after Joan’s death that the only person responsible for it is Joan, and hears Dr. Nolan in her head telling Buddy it is not his fault that two women he dated have mental illnesses. Esther responds, ““You had nothing to do with us, Buddy”” (Plath 240). A simple reading of this scene perhaps negates the entire argument made in this paper, but this scene is significant in the way that it highlights the internalized misogyny which patriarchy perpetuates.

It is of course medically inaccurate to claim that others can completely cause a person’s mental illness, but it is also irresponsible to blame a person’s mental illness on that person as Dr. Nolan almost does with Joan. In a patriarchal society, women internalize the sexism that is perpetuated against them, believing that it is warranted because of their lower status (Szymanski et al. 2009). Despite the patriarchal factors which have exacerbated Esther’s depression, she believes she is fully responsible for her own condition because of how she has internalized her own oppression. This is best represented in the scene in which Esther receives her first shock treatment from Dr. Gordon. As pain surges through Esther’s body, she thinks, “I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done” (Plath 143). Esther considers this horrific treatment punitive for a wrongdoing she has committed; rather than seeing Dr. Gordon for the sadist that he is, she

believes the painful treatment is warranted because of her own actions, blaming herself. In that Dr. Gordon is the patriarchy physically oppressing her, Esther exhibits internalized oppression when she claims that she deserves that torture.

Because *The Bell Jar* is widely accepted as semi-autobiographical in that Esther is based on Plath herself and her own experiences with depression in her early twenties, it is fair to assume that the patriarchal laws which worsen her condition are rooted in reality. Though Plath dramatizes certain events, much of the novel actually happened and therefore many of the symbols, episodes, and characters which represent the patriarchy are actual and not simply literary. Therefore, the negative influences of patriarchal law on depression extend beyond the framework of the novel and into reality. Though Plath wrote the novel and lived over 50 years ago when America was objectively more oppressive for women, patriarchal laws still influence society in 2019; women still face discrimination in the workplace and beyond, sexual objectification, sexual assault, judgment from their peers for pursuing careers, etc. In addition to the previously mentioned social factors which exacerbate depression like family history and social isolation, *The Bell Jar* is evidence that institutional and systemic factors like patriarchal law can do so as well. To scientifically establish that fact, there would need to be more research like comparative studies which examine depression in communities with differing levels of patriarchal rule, such as the Hasidic community or countries ruled by Sharia law. *The Bell Jar*, even in 2019, cements its place in the female literary canon not only in its piercing criticism of patriarchy, but its intersection with the ever-evolving field of psychiatry.

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