Buckswood School

IB Diploma Programme

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| Subject | English A Language and Literature – LITERATURE |
| HL / SL  | HL/SL |
| Exam Year | MAY 2018 |
| Lesson per week | 3 lessons |
| Teacher | Mr Bramley |
| Students | Harrison Piper, Sarah Moulvi, Jordan Farquarson, Nina Oudendal, Margarita Tadarakova |

**Christmas Term**

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| **Week** | **Literature to be Analysed** | **TOK Question** | **Connections****and prompts** | **FLIP THE CLASSROOM: Recommended Reading** |
| 1(11 Sept) | Going over practice IOCsRecording actual IOCsBASED ON THE ROAD, TO THE LIGHTHOUSE and WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? |  |  | Listen to recordings – use IOC mark scheme to grade each other’s:**ATL** - **1.2. Critical thinking**paying attention to details, selecting relevant information, analysing carefully and sceptically, making judgmentsWATCH: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNtTUvMMpyc>AndWATCH: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-s9kvzm30U>Annotation and structure |
| 2(18 Sept) | ‘The Bell Jar’ by Sylvia PlathGUIDED READING pg. 1 - 48 | How can a literary work of fiction, which is by definition non-factual, convey knowledge? |  | What is the significance of the Rosenbergs’ execution in the novel? |
| 3(25 Sep) | ‘The Bell Jar’ by Sylvia PlathGUIDED READING pg. 49 - 48 | What knowledge of literature can be gained by focusing attention solely on the work itself, in isolation from the author or the social context? | History – 1950s America, the Rosenbergs, McCarthyism  | We get the briefest remark in the first chapter that Esther did recover from depression and go on to have a child. How does that affect the way we read the novel?**ATL - 1.2.1. Constructivist perspectives of learning** Constructivism as a learning theory, simply speaking, is to make learning meaningful. The core constructivist perspectives are as follows: (a) learning is a self-directed process—knowledge is constructed rather than directly received; (b) instructor as facilitator; (c) learning as a socio-cultural process**Write a thesis statement around chapter 1. Get in group and explain and explore. Split into groups of 2 or 3: rewrite together. Back into a whole group – rewrite and present to the teacher facilitator**  |
| 4(02 Oct) | ‘The Bell Jar’ by Sylvia PlathGUIDED READING pg. 50 - 97 |  |  | <http://www.aspeers.com/sites/default/files/pdf/smith08.pdf>In addition to Deer Island Prison, what other images and conditions of physical and emotional imprisonment, enclosure, confinement, and punishment are presented? |
| 5(09 Oct) | ‘The Bell Jar’ by Sylvia PlathGUIDED READING pg. 98 - 146 |  | Psychology - Electroshock therapy | Read: **The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar***Read: <http://toto.lib.unca.edu/sr_papers/literature_sr/srliterature_2008/blair_kathleen.pdf> |
| 6(16 Oct) | **Assessment week** |
| 7(23 Oct) | **Half term** |
| 8(30 Oct) | ‘The Bell Jar’ by Sylvia PlathGUIDED READING pg. 147 - 195 |  |  | Present and explain your favourite 10 quotes! – work in pairsIn groups write 5 – 10 thesis statements |
| 9(06 Nov) | ‘Oranges are not the Only Fruit’ by Jeanette WintersonGUIDED READING pg. 1 – 42 | What is the proper function of literature—to capture a perception of reality, to teach or uplift the mind, to express emotion, to create beauty, to bind a community together, to praise a spiritual power, to provoke reflection or to promote social change? | R.E. – The Bible; Evangelism  | <https://angelmatos.net/2014/01/12/oranges-are-not-the-only-fruit/>Fruit as metaphor for gender etc.**ATL** - **1.1.5. Affective, social skills**Using quotations, prove one or more points made in the TOK question. Work in groups of 3 or 4. Present back to the class who will critique and mark – using BALLROOM dancing score cards |
| 10(20 Nov) | ‘Oranges are not the Only Fruit’ by Jeanette WintersonGUIDED READING pg. 43 – 84 | What knowledge of literature can be gained by focusing attention on the author? Can or should authors’ intentions and the creative process itself be understood through observing authors or knowing something of their lives?  | Is this novel were a different genre –horror for example – how could the writer have interpreted her life? Would it have been more effective? | <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/oct/20/jeanettewinterson>On Winterson’s use of The Bible to structure her text |
| 11(20 Nov) | ‘Oranges are not the Only Fruit’ by Jeanette WintersonGUIDED READING pg. 85 – 127 | Can literature express truths that cannot be expressed in other ways? If so, what sort of truths are these? How does this form of truth differ from truth in other areas of knowledge? | Is Winterson anti-religious? | <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/oct/27/jeanettewinterson>On the autobiography versus novel form**1.2.3. Technology enhanced learning and instruction****Computer as mind tool – PROJECT WORK – take a BIBLICAL section of the book each and interpret it using film – plot, character, context and theme** |
| 12(27 Nov) | ‘Oranges are not the Only Fruit’ by Jeanette WintersonGUIDED READING pg. 128 – 170 |  |  | <https://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-anglaises-2008-3-page-320.htm>Overview of various readings of the text, including excerpts from the authorRead: <http://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/oranges_are_not_the_only_fruit> |
| 13(04 Dec) | Essay practice – how to compare and contrast | What constitutes good evidence within the study of literature? |  | Present and explain your favourite 10 quotes! – work in pairs |
| 14(11 Dec) | **Assessment Week** |

**Spring Term**

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| **Week** | **Literature to be Analysed** | **TOK Question** | **Connections** | **Recommended Extra Reading** |
| 1(08 Jan) | ‘Oranges are not the Only Fruit’ by Jeanette Winterson | Are an author’s intentions relevant to assessing the work? Can a work of art contain or convey meaning of which the artist is oblivious? |  | In groups write 5 – 10 thesis statements |
| 2(15 Jan) | ‘Medea’ by Euripides GUIDED READING pg. 1 – 22 | Is a work of literature enlarged or diminished by interpretation? What makes something a good or bad interpretation? | Ancient History – Greek Gods | **1.2.2. Student-centred learning and instruction**Some core concepts of student-centred learning and instruction are: (a) creating multiple experiences for knowledge construction; (b) creating authentic and complex sociocultural learning environments to mediate learningIf you were to rewrite Medea for a modern audience, how would you interpret it in order to make it even more culturally relevant? Split into 2 groups and rewrite 2 or 3 consecutive scenes, write and enact it. |
| 3(22 Jan) | ‘Medea’ by Euripides GUIDED READING pg. 23 - 55 | Is the creative process as important as the final product, even though it cannot be observed directly?  | How effective is the author’s choice of form – the play – what does it add? How is it effective? | WATCH: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_xjPVQxrfo>On Medea and women’s plight |
| 4(29 Jan) | ‘Medea’ by Euripides GUIDED READING pg. 56 – 78 | How does drama construct truth? |  | Present and explain your favourite 10 quotes! – work in pairs |
| 5(05 Feb) | Assessment Week |
| 6(12 Feb) | **Half Term** |
| 7(19 Feb) | ‘Medea’ by Euripides GUIDED READING pg. 79 – END | What is lost in translation from one language to another? Why? |  | READ: <http://theconversation.com/medea-is-as-relevant-today-as-it-was-in-ancient-greece-29609>READ: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jun/16/medea-phaedra-tragedy-women-theater-bam-brooklyn>In groups write 5 – 10 thesis statements |
| 8(26 Feb) | Writing a chart of comparable points between the three exam texts |  |  | See Mr Bramley’s starter chart |
| 9(05 Mar) | Essay writing practice |  |  | See Mr Bramley’s document: How to write an analytical essay |
| 10(12 Mar) | Essay writing practiceRevision |  |  | THINK IB ESSAY WRITING TIPS: <https://www.thinkib.net/englishalanglit/page/9671/8-writing-tips> |
| 11(19 Mar) | **Assessment Week** |

**Summer Term**

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| **Week** | **Literature to be Analysed** | **TOK Question** | **Connections** | **Recommended Extra Reading** |
| 1(16 April) | Essay writing practice |  |  | REMEMBER: Thesis statement; topic sentencesP = PointE = EvidenceE = ExploreL = Link (back to topic sentence/thesis statement) |
| 2(23 Apr) | Essay writing practice |  |  |  |
| 3(30 Apr) | COURSE COMPLETED |  |  |  |
| 4(07 May) | COURSE COMPLETED |  |  |  |
| 5(14 May) | COURSE COMPLETED |  |  |  |
| 6(21 May) | **Assessment week** |
| 7(28 May) | **Half term** |
| 8(04 Jun) | COURSE COMPLETED |  |  |  |
| 9(11 Jun) | COURSE COMPLETED |  |  |  |
| 10(18 Jun) | Revision |
| 11(25 Jun) | School Exam week |

**The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar***

In the first part of Plath's novel, both the commitment to the separative self and the effects of that commitment are woven into the text through the pervasive imagery of dismemberment. This imagery suggests Esther's alienation and fragmentation as well as a thwarted longing for relatedness with others and for a reconnection of dismembered part to whole. A signal example of this imagery is the image of a cadaver head which occurs on the first page of the novel:

I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office until I couldn't get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterward, the cadaver's head--or what there was left of it--floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast. . . . I felt as though I was carrying that cadaver's head around with me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar.

This image anticipates and comprehends the disembodied faces that Esther repeatedly encounters, faces always associated with the threat of the loss of self. She repeatedly confronts her own unrecognized or distorted image in the mirror, mistaken on one occasion for "a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman," looking "like a sick Indian" on another; a third time, in the hospital after her suicide attempt, she thinks she is looking at a picture of another person, unrecognizably male or female, "with their hair . . . shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head." The faces of others hover over her or float in front of her eyes with startling frequency: the face of Buddy Willard hanging over her after her skiing accident, announcing with some satisfaction "You'll be stuck in a cast for months"; the face of Joan Gilling floating before her, bodiless and smiling, "like the face of the Cheshire cat," an image that comes to Esther immediately before she learns of Joan's suicide by hanging; on the next page her mother's face floating "to mind, a pale reproachful moon."

It is possible that the precursor of these and other apparently disembodied heads is the head of the baby born in the traumatic episode in which Buddy Willard, a medical student, takes Esther into the delivery room to witness a birth. The episode, a flashback, is permeated with images of dismemberment: the stomach of the woman in labor sticks up so high that her face cannot be seen; the baby's head is the first thing to appear in the delivery, "a dark fuzzy thing" that emerges "through the split, shaven place between [the woman's legs], lurid with disinfectant." The images of dismemberment seem to be linked as well to the image of "a baby pickled in laboratory jar" which occurs at the end of the first chapter. If, as Jung has taught us, the baby is an archetypal symbol of the self in crisis, then the image of the pickled baby, along with the images of dismembered body parts, accurately conveys the nature of Esther's crisis: each of the various paths open to her will require that she dispense with, leave undeveloped, some important part of herself. Imagistically the novel makes this point through scenes like that in the delivery room where the emergence of the infant's head is accompanied by the "decapitation" of the mother.

Thus at the beginning of the novel, as Esther walks along the New York streets "wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves," her musing is not merely a response to the electrocution of the Rosenbergs but to her own growing sense of alienation from the cultural demands and images of women with which she is daily bombarded during her guest editorship at *Ladies' Day.* These seem implicitly to reinforce the lessons of the preceding year, especially those of her relationship with Buddy Willard, suggesting that she must mutilate or deform herself through mating, marriage, and motherhood. It is not entirely surprising then that she begins to see the city as a collocation of dismembered body parts: "goggle-eyed headlines" stare up at her "on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway." Her friend Doreen, too, is presented as such a collocation: "bright white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff and blue eyes like transparent agate marbles, hard and polished and just about indestructible, and a mouth set in a sort of perpetual sneer," "long, nicotine-yellow nails" and the breasts which pop out of her dress later at Lenny's apartment. The dismembered animal parts that decorate that apartment--the white bearskins, the "antlers and buffalo horns and [the] stuffed rabbit head" with its "meek little grey muzzle and the stiff, jackrabbit ears"--are tokens of the sexual hunt in which it is assumed all the young guest editors at *Ladies' Day* will gladly play their parts, oozing enthusiasm, like Betsy, about learning the latest way "to make an all purpose neckerchief out of mink tails."

Feeling as "cut off" as these excised animal parts from the culture which expects her participation in this hunt, Esther is haunted by images suggesting the self-mutilations of marriage and motherhood. She recalls the way in which Buddy Willard's mother weaves a beautiful rug only to destroy its beauty in a matter of days by using it as a kitchen mat. The message is clear to Esther: ". . . I knew that in spite of all the roses and the kisses . . . what [a man] secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for [the wife] to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat." Her reaction against this form of mutilation is clear in her violent sensitivity upon her return home to the presence of Dodo Conway, a neighbor who had gone to Barnard and who is now pregnant with her seventh child. The vision of Dodo, "not five feet tall, with a grotesque, protruding stomach. . . . Her head tilted happily back, like a sparrow egg perched on a duck egg," elicits from Esther the following reaction: "Children made me sick. . . . I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to."

Esther sees Dodo as a grotesque collection of unrelated and incompatible parts, a vision which we may read as a projection of her own sense of self. It is crucial to emphasize at this point in the argument, however, that the imagery of dismemberment in ***The Bell Jar*** does not simply communicate Esther's psychic disturbance or a set of feelings characterizing a certain point in her history; the imagery also implies a certain model of the self. Imagery focusing our attention on part-whole relations (or dis-relations) presupposes that the self is a bounded entity, something with separate and distinct existence and of which certain kinds of things may be said: it is a whole; it may have parts or members; if some of these parts or members are removed, then the entity is not whole; neither are the severed parts, from this perspective, wholes. The model of the self implied by the imagery of dismemberment, in short, coincides with the model of a bounded self, an autonomous subject, that has dominance in our culture.

The notion of a separate, bounded self of course corresponds to our sense of being locked into our own bodies, of being separate and distinct entities. But it is important to stress that the model of an autonomous bounded self does not represent the only way in which the self may be conceived, and according to some theorists it does not represent the most accurate way of conceiving selfhood. Catherine Keller compellingly argues for the possibility of a relational model of selfhood that does not preclude a sense of differentiated identity or imply, as some feminists have argued, submersion of the self in others. Based on the assumption that the self is constituted in and through relationships with others, the relational model rejects subject-object dualism (and the system of hierarchical oppositions in which it is embedded), and it recognizes the fluid, permeable boundaries of self. Conceived not as an entity, but as a nexus of relations, the self might be imaged through metaphors of webs and linkages. Conceived not as a substance, but as a process, it might be imaged through metaphors of fluidity.

Or, conversely, a predominance of images of webs, linkages, process and fluidity, might imply an entirely different conception of the self from that informing ***The Bell Jar.*** That such metaphors are absent from Plath's novel suggests how thoroughly dominated by the separative model was the novelist's imagination. One image of linkage, of apparent significance because of its location in the last paragraph of the novel, is qualified by the paragraph which precedes it:

Pausing, for a brief breath, on the threshold I saw the silver-haired doctor . . . and the pocked, cadaverous face of Miss Huey, and eyes I thought I had recognized over white masks.

The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room.

The reminder in the image of Miss Huey of the cadaver head which obsesses Esther, the recalled image of eyes floating over masks--there is little qualitative difference between the vision represented here and that at the beginning of the novel, though the narrator's tone may have changed. The magical thread does not so much provide a link to others constitutive of the self as it does a line to those who hold the power of release from daily confrontation with the self and its agonies.

Despite the ambiguities of the closing of ***The Bell Jar,*** critics have been surprisingly willing to accept that Esther is in some positive sense "reborn" even if her future is uncertain. In the final episode, when Esther readies herself to meet the board of doctors who will certify her release from the hospital, she behaves as if she is preparing for a bridegroom or a date; she checks her stocking seams, muttering to herself "Something old, something new. . . . But," she goes on, "I wasn't getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice--patched, retreaded, and approved for the road, I was trying to think of an appropriate one. . . ." Critics who have been willing to see a reborn Esther have generally done so without ever questioning the propriety of the reference to a "retread" job. Linda Wagner, for example, ignores this passage and concentrates on subsequent paragraphs, where the image of an "open door and Esther's ability to breathe are," Wagner writes, "surely positive images." Susan Coyle writes that the tire image "seems to be accurate, since the reader does not have a sense of [Esther] as a brand-new, unblemished tire but of one that has been painstakingly reworked, remade"; Coyle claims that Esther has taken steps that "however tentative, do lead her toward an authentic self that was previously impossible for her." Not only do the comments of Coyle and Wagner ignore the implication of choosing the tire image in the first place; they also miss an affinity of the passage with one I quoted earlier in which Esther views wifehood in terms of service as a kitchen mat. The tire, like a kitchen mat, presents us with a utilitarian object, easily repaired or replaced, as a metaphor for a woman. It is worth observing that a patched, retreaded tire may be ready for the road, but somewhere down the highway the owner can expect a flat. Now "flatten out" is exactly what Esther suspects--or had suspected--women do in marriage. Yet it is precisely for marriage that Esther seems confusedly to be preparing herself in the final episode as she straightens her seams. It is true that she withdraws her reference to marriage, but despite her disclaimer, it seems to me, a retread job can only be a travesty of rebirth.

The metaphor of rebirth or a second birth is thus especially suspicious because of the way in which the tire image obliquely forces us to associate Esther's new lease on life with role expectations that contributed to her breakdown in the first place: the domestic servitude that Esther painfully recognizes "as a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's." Although Esther's breakdown may have sources lying buried in the past along with her father, the novel makes it sufficiently clear that she is torn apart by the intolerable conflict between her wish to avoid domesticity, marriage and motherhood, on the one hand, and her inability to conceive of a viable future in which she avoids that fate, on the other.

Plath's inability to resolve that conflict in her own life is well known. In an essay entitled "Sylvia Plath's 'Sivvy' Poems: A Portrait of the Poet as a Daughter," Marjorie Perloff concludes:

The first shock of recognition produced by Sylvia Plath's 'independence' from her husband and her mother was the stimulus that gave rise to the ***Ariel*** poems. But given the 'psychic osmosis' between herself and Aurelia Plath . . . given the years of iron discipline during which Sylvia had been her mother's Sivvy, the touching assertion [in "Medusa"] that 'There is nothing between us' could only mean that now there would be nothing at all.

Whatever the biographical validity of Perloff's argument, it may help us to define a pattern that has not been discerned in ***The Bell Jar.*** Esther's movement toward her breakdown entails a series of rejections of or separations from women who, though they may be associated with some stereotype of womanhood unacceptable to Esther, have nurtured some important aspect of her evolving identity; as I want to show, the supposed cure which she undergoes is actually a continuation of a pattern in which Esther severs relations precisely with those whose presence "in" her self has been constitutive. Such a series of rejections may dramatize a deluded notion that an autonomous and "authentic" self may be derived through purging the self of the influence of others, but there is good reason to suppose that the process actually means that little or nothing would remain to Esther, as means of modeling identity, except forms of womanhood offered to her by the very stereotypes she has sought to elude. The irony here is that in the attempt to avoid dismemberment, disfiguration or mutilation of the self, the heroine undergoes a process of self-dismemberment.

The novel provides another metaphor for the process I am describing in the repeated binge-and-purge episodes of the first portion of the novel. In chapter 2, Esther vicariously participates in Doreen's debauch with Lenny, then returns to the hotel and a bath of purification; the pattern is repeated when Doreen returns, to pass out in a pool of her own vomit. Chapter 4 presents another purgative cleansing; after gorging on caviar at a luncheon, Esther is leveled by food poisoning, an experience which makes her feel "purged and holy and ready for a new life." Shortly after this purgation, she announces: "I'm starving."

In somewhat a similar manner, I am arguing, Esther embraces relations with most of the women in the novel only to cast them off, as if they constituted a foreign presence within the purity of her own identity, some threat to her integrity. Doreen, for example, speaks to her with a voice "like a secret voice speaking straight out of [her] own bones," but after the evening in Lenny's apartment, Esther decides to have nothing to do with her. A similar pattern is repeated with every female character in the novel, including Dr. Nolan, the psychiatrist who brings about Esther's recovery, and Esther's mother.

Esther's aversion from her mother is obvious, ascending in stridency from the mild understatement, "My own mother wasn't much help" to the murderous fantasy inspired by sharing a room with her mother: one sleepless night, after staring at "the pin curls on her [mother's] head glittering like a row of little bayonets," Esther comes to feel that the only way she can escape the annoying sound of her mother's faint snore "would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between [her] hands." Even though Esther at one point wishes that she had a mother like Jay Cee, the editor for whom she works at *Ladies' Day,* her ambivalence toward Jay Cee and other women who have nurtured her talents is profound--and it appears to derive, quite simply, from their supposed unattractiveness to men. Of Jay Cee, Esther says ". . . I liked her a lot. . . . [She] had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter"; but sentences later, after admitting that she cannot imagine Jay Cee in bed with her husband, Esther changes her attitude abruptly: "Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all the old ladies I ever knew wanted to teach me something, but I suddenly didn't think they had anything to teach me." A similar reflection recurs near the end of the novel in a scene where the lesbian Joan Gilling lounges on Esther's bed in the asylum and Esther's revery seems to lump the unattractive, the manless, and the woman-loving together. She remembers:

. . . the famous woman poet at my college [who] lived with another woman--a stumpy old Classical scholar with a cropped Dutch cut. When I told the poet that I might well get married and have a pack of children someday, she stared at me in horror. "But what about your *career?*" she had cried.

My head ached. Why did I attract these weird old women: There was the famous poet, and Philomena Guinea, and Jay Cee, and the Christian Scientist lady, and lord knows who, and they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them.

This passage focuses our attention on the immersion of Plath/Esther in what Adrienne Rich has called the "compulsory heterosexuality," the pervasive heterosexism, of our culture. It also reinforces our awareness that despite her intelligence, imagination and professional ambition, Esther's sense of identity as a woman is predicated on finding "the right man."

That Esther categorizes Jay Cee, Philomena Guinea, and the woman poet at college (who is never named)--along with the Christian Scientist lady whom she does not know--as weird old women who want to save her is a way of rejecting these women's very real contributions and potential contributions to her own evolving identity. The claim would seem to be at least partly a projection of her own desire to be saved from becoming like these women with whom she shares certain talents, capacities, and interests. I want to suggest that there may be a kind of psychic dismemberment signified by the separation of self thus from one's nurturers; denying their influence is like peeling off layers of her own self--or cutting off important members. It is especially important to notice in this regard that the point where Esther turns her back on Jay Cee coincides with the diminishment of her sense of competence, which becomes increasingly worse as the weeks pass in New York. In rejecting the "weird old women" who want to save her, she appears to become increasingly disempowered; that is, she appears to lose touch with the talents and skills that these women nurtured.

Esther's recovery involves a reinstitution of the problems that led to her breakdown. If, as I have already suggested, the reconstructed Esther is a retreaded tire doomed to go flat (and probably on the same highway that brought her to the asylum in the first place), that is partly because her cure perpetuates the disease. The recovery process of this heroine merely extends the series of separations from or rejections of others which seems to have played an important part in bringing about her breakdown.

By the closing pages of the novel, two meaningful relations with women are open to Esther, relations with her friend, Joan Gilling, and her psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan. The first of these relations is terminated decisively by the character's suicide, which renders irreversible Esther's prior rejection of that character. In the penultimate scene of the novel, Esther attends Joan's funeral, wondering, she tells us, "what I thought I was burying" and listening to the insistent "brag of [her own] heart"--"I am, I am, I am." Since Esther springs to new life as Joan is buried, it would be difficult not to conclude that Plath is putting aside, burying, some unacceptable part of her heroine: Esther has even explicitly identified Joan as "the beaming double of my old best self." Like the metaphor of a retread, however, this comment exemplifies "the uncertainty of tone" that, according to Rosellen Brown, "manages to trivialize . . . [the novel's] heavy freight of pain." If the passage hints Esther's awareness that her "old best self" is peculiarly vulnerable to disintegration precisely because of the intolerable psychic conflict produced by trying to meet cultural expectations of women, it also--to the extent that it is sarcastic--distances Esther from Joan and from the painful feelings that she shares with Joan.

Until the revelation that Joan is involved in a lesbian relationship, that young woman is associated with a potential for intimacy that seems more positive than negative. Joan replaces, as Esther's neighbor, Miss Norris, with whom Esther shares an hour of "close, sisterly silence." Joan's intimacy with Dee Dee is associated with improving health (*pace* Vance Bourjaily, who writes that a "relapse" is indicated by Joan's "lesbian involvement"--the novel simply contradicts this). Esther even feels free to curl up on Joan's bed on first encountering her at one asylum, though she admits to having known Joan at college only "at a cool distance."

After discovering Joan with Dee Dee, however, Esther's treatment of Joan begins to be marked by a blatant cruelty, as when Esther tells Joan, "'I don't like you. You make me want to puke, if you want to know.'" A less explicit cruelty, implicating not merely the character Esther but the author Plath, pervades the scene where Joan seeks medical attention for Esther's hemorrhaging after Esther's encounter with Irwin. Esther/Plath clearly has one eye on humiliating Joan. Because Joan is allowed to surmise that the bleeding is some mysterious menstrual problem rather than connected to Esther's loss of virginity, she is made to look like a bumbler. She has difficulty explaining the problem clearly enough to get emergency aid, a problem which of course increases the danger to Esther, but a pun seems more important here than prompt medical assistance. When Joan asks about the man who has dropped Esther off, Esther says: "I realized that she honestly took my explanation at face value . . . and his appearance [was] a mere prick to her pleasure at my arrival." The oddity of her mentioning, in circumstances where every beat of her heart "pushed forth another gush of blood," Joan's pleasure at her arrival is matched by what looks like a kind of desperation to hide from Joan the cause of the hemorrhaging.

The peculiarities of this scene create ambiguities about Esther's motives and suggest confusion on Plath's part. Still Plath's imagery hints at a causal link between Esther's hemorrhaging and Joan's death. Often described before this episode in terms of horse imagery, Joan is here described as a "myopic owl" in an image that appears paradoxically to reveal what it intends to obscure: Joan's knowledge of the cause of Esther's suffering and the trauma of the rejection that Esther's suffering represents. Similarly, the structuring of the narrative implies a link between Joan's death and Esther's rebirth. Before she gets to the Emergency Room, Esther remembers "a worrisome course in the Victorian novel where woman after woman died, palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth." The birth that is brought about here, however, is not that of a strong new self but of an Esther who gives in to her fear of the love and nurturance of women--exemplified by Joan's role as nurse in this scene--an Esther who buries her capacity for identification with women and accepts the very stereotypes which have been the source of her pain.

As "the only purely imagined event in the book," the inclusion of Joan's unexpected and unprepared for suicide immediately following this episode, is, as Paula Bennett has written, "necessitated not by the novel's plot, themes, or characters but by Plath's own emotional understanding of her text. Joan, the woman who loves other women and who, therefore, can pursue a career and independent life without benefit of man or marriage, must be disposed of if the demons that haunt Plath's/Esther's mind are to be exorcised as well. . . ." The nature of those demons may partly be implied by the descriptions of the lesbians in the novel: not only the "stumpy" old Classical scholar, already mentioned, but the "matronly-breasted senior, homely as a grandmother and a pious Religion major, and a tall, gawky freshman with a history of being deserted at an early hour in all sorts of ingenious ways by her blind dates." Such images indicate the "weirdness," the unattractiveness, to Plath of any female behavior deviating from heterosexual, patriarchal norms: Esther says of Joan, "It was like observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad."

It seems a kind of narrative reaction to these images that in the episode following those in which they occur, Esther has herself fitted with a diaphragm. So compelling is the logic of her desire to avoid pregnancy that we do not feel spurred to ask why she would at this point want to have anything to do with a man in the first place. But it should be noted that her encounters with men have been nearly devastating: her father deserts her by dying when she is very young; much more recently in the novel, she is knocked down in the mud, mauled, practically raped by a man who marks her face with blood; in another, a flashback to an occasion where she ends up inspecting Buddy Willard's genitals, all she can think of is "turkey neck and turkey gizzards." The man she sets out to seduce (Constantin) falls asleep unaroused by her, and the male psychiatrist to whom she turns for help practically electrocutes her. This pattern of pain and disappointment is merely confirmed by her experience with Irwin, who creates for her, in deflowering her, a possibly life-threatening medical emergency.

It is a sad irony that precisely at the point in ***The Bell Jar*** where the action seems to call for at least a temporary turning away from men or from seeing herself in relation to male sexuality, if only to provide for some period of reflection and healing on Esther's part, the novel turns more decisively than ever away from women and toward men. Critics have not, however, generally recognized this irony; the typical reaction has been to accept at face value that the purchase of a diaphragm is an important step in the direction of independence. While contraception surely frees Esther from fears which no women should have to suffer, my argument is that we need to question the validity of the notion of independence offered through this episode.

In killing off Joan, Plath cancels for Esther the possibility of tenderness--outside the relatively impersonal therapeutic relationship--clearly symbolized by Joan's lesbianism. That possibility is named by Dr. Nolan, the only character in the novel treated with unambiguous respect. When Esther asks this psychiatrist "What does a women see in a woman that she can't see in a man," Dr. Nolan replies with one definitive, authoritative word: "Tenderness." Plath dramatizes both the yearning for tenderness in Esther and the way in which Esther is cut off from that yearning, but there seems to be little authorial awareness of the disjunction. The novel presents the possibility of tenderness between women in a story Esther recounts about two "suspected" lesbians at her college: "'Milly was sitting on the chair and Theodora was lying on the bed, and Milly was stroking Theodora's hair.'" An image of this sort of caress occurs at another point in the novel, significantly in connection with a male who is probably a homosexual. When Constantin, the simultaneous interpreter whom Esther fails to seduce in New York, reaches out at the end of the evening to touch her hair she feels "a little electric shock" and tells us: "Ever since I was small I loved feeling somebody comb my hair. It made me go all sleepy and peaceful." This touch is arguably the only tenderness Esther experiences in the novel, yet her response to the similar contact between Milly and Theodora is this: "I was disappointed. . . . I wondered if all women did with women was lie and hug."

In her aversion to Joan, Esther denies what the text nonetheless reveals: the possibility of a healing "tenderness" and "weirdness" that the relation of Joan and Dee Dee represents. As we have seen, this denial is authorially endorsed by Plath's invention of Joan's suicide. Suggesting that Joan represents Esther's "suicidal self" or--more exotically but no more helpfully--"the inverted Victorian side of Esther," critics with a Freudian orientation have linked Esther's recovery to a splitting off of an unacceptable portion of the self dramatized by Joan's suicide. While a splitting off undoubtedly occurs, the nature of what is split off is ultimately ambiguous. Furthermore, *splitting off* appears to be a major symptom of the disorder from which Esther suffers. The novel dramatizes a tragic self-dismemberment in which the heroine, because of her very strengths and aspirations, appears to split off those components of herself that represent patriarchally-defined expectations of women, projecting these aspects of herself on her mother, her grandmother, Dodo Conway, Mrs. Willard, and the young women who are guest editors with her at *Ladies' Day,* especially Doreen and Betsy. Although she consciously rejects the influence of these others, she must still unconsciously be dominated by the patriarchal images of womanhood that she rejects; otherwise she would not need also to split off those qualities and impulses in herself that do *not* meet patriarchal expectations--all that goes counter to conventional femininity and is therefore "weird." These she projects upon Jay Cee. Philomena Guinea, the unnamed famous poet at her college, and finally Joan. Her systematic rejection of these leaves her quite possibly "with nothing" in the same sense that, as Perloff argues, Plath was left with nothing after rejecting the beliefs she inherited from her mother.

Dr. Nolan appears to play a special role in Esther's "cure," but several reservations about that role ought to be made. Combining the attributes of patriarchally-defined femininity and professional accomplishment, Dr. Nolan is set forth by some readers as an ideal role model for Esther, but the last thirty years have taught us to question this sort of image which can merely compound the oppression of women by leading them to assume expectations traditionally held of men as well as those held of women: Plath herself provides a highly visible example of the tragic consequences of uncritically embracing this model which encourages the belief that women can "have it all." Furthermore, the novel leaves ambiguous the extent of Nolan's contribution to the recovery. Although the trust she engenders in Esther undoubtedly counts for a great deal, the electroshock therapy and the psychic dismemberment involved in the process appear to get equal if not more credit for Esther's improvement. Finally, whatever the depth of Esther's indebtedness to Dr. Nolan, the relationship appears to be largely terminated by Esther's release from the hospital.

Thus, at the end of the novel, far from having moved in the direction of an "authentic self," Esther has been systematically separated from the very means by which such a self might be constituted: relationships with others. Her high heels and "red wool suit flamboyant as [her] plans" clearly signal a renewed and energized willingness to enter the sexual hunt that so dispirited her during her summer in New York. Esther's seeming preparation to reenter the hunt for "the right man" is accompanied by the strong suggestion that the right man is one with whom she may avoid emotional attachment. (Esther says gleefully, after realizing that Irwin's voice on the phone means nothing to her and that he has no way of getting in touch with her again, "I was perfectly free.") In other words, Esther's identity, the boundary of her self, has been secured by her isolation.

***The Bell Jar*** makes apparent the oppressive force (at least for women) of the model of separative selfhood which dominates patriarchal culture. The novel dramatizes a double bind for women in which, on the one hand, an authentic self is one that is presumed to be autonomous and whole, entire to itself and clearly bounded, and yet in which, on the other hand, women have their identity primarily through relationship to a man. It is the increasing tension of this double bind for Esther which results in her breakdown; her release from the asylum, I have argued, is marked by a restoration of the double bind at a different and tolerable level of tension. The experiences of both Esther and Joan suggest that escape is not possible through conscious rejection of the expectation that a woman find herself in a man; in my reading, Plath's novel hints that the expectation is, in that instance, likely to be heeded at a more deeply unconscious level. (This would be a possible explanation of Joan's unexpected suicide, and the idea is supported by the imagery of the closing episode as I have analyzed it.) Yet the other alternative, to reject the model of separative selfhood and embrace a relational model, involves--in the cultural context portrayed by Plath--the restoration of the traditional plight of women: subservience to or submersion in others.

The way out of the dilemma is a relational conception of selfhood in a world of non-oppressive, non-hierarchical relations. But we do not live in such a world (yet), and our culture offers few means of imaging non-oppressive, non-hierarchical relationality. It is in signaling the paucity of such means, the unavailability of such images at least to someone like Plath but by extension to many women in our culture, that ***The Bell Jar*** has special importance. Images of lateral relationships among women, i.e. images of female friendship, provide one means, but as I have argued, Plath seems compelled in this novel eventually to reject all such images. In this context, the introduction of Joan specifically as a lesbian becomes very important. Joan's lesbianism and suicide appear to belong to a small number of "invented" features of the novel. That Plath rejects Joan by killing her off is a sign of the novelist's domination by the cultural norms that, I believe, destroyed her; that she created Joan as a lesbian in the first place, however, especially in a novel so dominated by autobiographical fact, might plausibly be viewed as a last desperate imaginative reaching toward some viable image of non-hierarchical relationality. Having rejected all the other woman-woman relationships available to her from her experience, Plath turns finally to invention, which--controlled by stereotype as it is--proves no more successful than autobiographical fact.

It is important for feminist critics to discern such emancipatory impulses or gestures wherever they occur in women's writing. We need to bring them into focus and to assess where they succeed and the conditions of their success or failure. But I would suggest that critics are less than well-equipped to undertake such work if they remain uncritical of their own discourse, for example, the way in which it is permeated with terminology implying that the self is an autonomous, bounded entity. Paula Bennett, who rightly calls the ending of ***The Bell Jar*** "unbearably factitious," provides an example of such terminology when she writes that ". . . Plath herself seems to have gained little from her experience at the psychiatric hospital. She returned to Smith . . . hollow and unintegrated at her core." Bennett's language here ("hollow," "core"), founded as it is upon the dichotomy of inner and outer, implies subject-object dualism and all the patriarchally-freighted oppositions that it brings in its wake. It is difficult to write about the self in our culture without making use of terms implying the very dualisms on which patriarchy is founded. Yet if we cannot entirely dispense with such terminology--and I do not believe that we very well can--we can be aware of its metaphoric nature and of the assumptions that it covers.

When we become aware of the limits of our metaphors for selfhood, we become more attuned to those employed by the writers we study. Only when such awareness is brought to bear upon ***The Bell Jar,*** for instance, do we become fully appreciative of the way in which the novel dramatizes the destructive effects of a commitment to the separative model of the self. When such awareness is brought to bear upon the writing of women less tragically constricted than Plath by stereotypes of women, it may enable us to discern alternative metaphors and images for the self, the very means by which the dominant model of the self in our culture may be transformed into one conducive to the validation of women.

**Source:** Diane S. Bonds, "The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,*" in *Women's Studies,* Vol. 18, No. 1, May, 1990, pp. 49-64. Reproduced by permission.

How could the text be read and interpreted differently by two different readers?

2. If the text had been written in a different time or place or language or for a different audience, how and why might it differ? **To the Lighthouse**

3. How and why is a social group represented in a particular way? **To the Lighthouse, Who’s Afraid?**

4. Which social groups are marginalized, excluded or silenced within the text? **The Road, To the Lighthouse**

5. How does the text conform to, or deviate from, the conventions of a particular genre, and for what purpose? **The Road, Who’s Afraid?**

6. How has the text borrowed from other texts, and with what effects? **To the Lighthouse**