

# The Problem Sylvia Plath Has Left Unnamed: Understanding the Complexity of Female Disenchantment in the Cold War Era

BY CAROLINE PINKE

*"Women, especially educated women such as you, have a unique opportunity to influence us, man and boy, and to play a direct part in the unfolding drama of our free society. But, I am told that nowadays the young wife or mother is short of time for such subtle arts, that things are not what they used to be; that once immersed in the very pressing and particular problems of domesticity, many women feel frustrated and far apart from the great issues and stirring debates for which their education has given them understanding and relish. Once they read Baudelaire. Now it is the Consumers' Guide. Once they wrote poetry. Now it's the laundry list. Once they discussed art and philosophy until late in the night. Now they are so tired they fall asleep as soon as the dishes are finished. There is, often, a sense of contraction, of closing horizons and lost opportunities. They had hoped to play their part in the crisis of the age. But what they do is wash the diapers."*

-Adlai Stevenson, Commencement Address to Smith College on June 6, 1955<sup>1</sup>

This excerpt was taken from an infamous commencement address, entitled "A Purpose for Modern Woman," delivered by then-governor and Democratic presidential candidate, Adlai Stevenson, to the Smith College graduating class of 1955. After articulating some women's unspoken frustration in the Cold War era, Stevenson proceeded to glorify the "depressing . . . view of [women's] future" he had painted.<sup>2</sup> He defined "Western marriage and motherhood [as] yet another instance of the emergence of individual freedom in our Western society," in contrast with the totalitarian repression of the Soviet Union, and concluded that, "in spite of the difficulties of domesticity, [women] have a way to participate actively in the crisis."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Stevenson implied that their education would not have been in vain, because "what [they had] learned and [could] learn [would] fit [them] for the primary task of making homes and whole

<sup>1</sup> Adlai Stevenson, "A Purpose for Modern Woman," 6 June 1955, Adlai E. Stevenson Papers, Box 151, Folder 7, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

human beings in whom rational values of freedom, tolerance, charity and free inquiry can take root.”<sup>4</sup> This, he claimed, was the culminating “purpose for modern woman”: to advance the core ideals that distinguish Western society from its communist enemy, within the domestic sphere.<sup>5</sup>

Nancy Hunter Steiner, a member of the Smith College class of 1955, responded to Adlai Stevenson’s Commencement Address with ambivalent reverence and gratitude:

Men, he claimed, are under tremendous pressure to adopt the narrow view; we would help them to resist it and we would raise children who were reasonable, independent, and courageous. The speech was eloquent and impressive and we loved it even if it seemed to hurl us back to the satellite role we had escaped for four years—second-class citizens in a man’s world where our only possible achievement was a vicarious one.<sup>6</sup>

Adlai Stevenson’s address may very well have quelled the anxieties felt by women who unquestioningly took in the surface message of the speech, by providing them with direction and ascribing meaning to their futures. However, it undoubtedly reinforced the ambivalence and concern felt by others (including Smith women absent from this particular ceremony), who allowed themselves to analyze, more deeply, the implications of Stevenson’s words, and were uncomfortable with the prospect of wholly sacrificing themselves for the sake of this purportedly patriotic cause. Among these latter women who were unsettled in their predestined roles as wives and mothers—particularly after completing college careers at such a prestigious institution of higher learning—were Sylvia Plath (Smith College Class of 1955) and Betty Friedan (Smith College Class of 1942).

\*\*\*

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Hunter Steiner, quoted in Pat Macpherson, *Reflecting on the Bell Jar* (London: Routledge, 1991), 45.

During the Cold War era in America, preexisting anti-communist sentiments intensified exponentially and were increasingly directed inward on the domestic front. Women were heavily impacted by this cultural trend. As Daniel Horowitz described it, “the Cold War linked anti-communism and the dampening of women’s ambitions.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, a women’s ability to pursue a career, which the previous generation of women had striven for, was no longer a priority or even a worthy aim for women in the postwar era. Consistent with Adlai Stevenson’s message in his Commencement Address, Horowitz claims that “it fell to women to restore value, integrity, and wholeness to American life” while men were engaged with “specialized bureaucratic work.”<sup>8</sup> As Deborah Nelson reemphasizes in “Plath, History and Politics,” “cultivating the private space of the home” was not merely a worthy aim for women of the time, but served as their “*greatest possible* contribution to the US’s success in the sphere of Cold War international politics.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1963, amidst this stifling environment for women, Betty Friedan and Sylvia Plath first published *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Bell Jar*, respectively. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* was so revolutionary because in it, Friedan identifies the dissatisfaction that she and many other women of her time experienced as a result of societal pressures to devote themselves to being housewives and nothing more—a phenomenon which she described as the “problem that has no name.”<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Plath’s only novel, *The Bell Jar*, follows the maturation of Esther Greenwood, a close representation of herself, as she struggles with her decline into

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the “Feminine Mystique: Culture, Politics, and the Cold War,”* ed. Christian G. Appy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 124.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Nelson, “Plath, History and Politics,” in *Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29. [emphasis added]

<sup>10</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 19. [hereafter cited within text as *Myst.*]

depression. Esther's depression is precipitated by her inability to find her place in a society with expectations of "femininity" with which she cannot identify. Both Friedan's suburban housewife and Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood face the same societal pressures.

Because of the similarities inherent in the struggles their respective works address, there is a general tendency to interpret *The Bell Jar* as a narrative reiteration of Friedan's idea of a nameless and faceless problem; however, this kind of "Friedanian" reading of *The Bell Jar* oversimplifies its message. Friedan effectively *names* the "problem that has no name" — which I will henceforth refer to as the "problem that Friedan has named" — and thus presents it as a concrete, unifying force with the potential to advance the feminist cause (Friedan, 19). Sylvia Plath, however, portrays Esther Greenwood's struggle as a more complicated problem that may be *impossible* to name; it is catalyzed not only by similar societal pressures, but also by a multifaceted paradox, deeply rooted in both her society and her mind, albeit subconsciously. The paradox lies in the subtle fact that, even as women strive for a sense of self in a male-operated society, they have internalized society's understanding of gender conventions to such an extent that their sense of self has been distorted, and as a result, the very means of attaining selfhood privilege male superiority. Therefore, *The Bell Jar* suggests that the gender problem is psychological and nearly impossible—even for Esther, whose perceptive nature allows her to at least recognize the paradox—to resolve.

Until the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, the concept of female disenchantment was a prominent aspect of public discourse, but was not generally understood as a pervasive phenomenon that could be attributed primarily to social factors. As Friedan noted, "each suburban wife struggled with it alone" — "it" being a growing discontent with the confining role

prescribed her (15). As Friedan describes it, these women had been brainwashed by “voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity” (15). Adlai Stevenson suggested, and the women represented by Friedan internalized, the same idea that Friedan articulates in her work: “truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for” (16). Friedan claims that a woman who *did* have higher ambitions for herself typically assumed that “something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself,” rather than with her society and its expectations of her—the generic “she” “was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it,” until *The Feminine Mystique* brought this issue to the forefront as a shared experience (19).

Although the fictionalized representation of Sylvia Plath, Esther Greenwood, is a teenager who is not yet expected to lead the confining life of mother and wife, her response to the inevitability of this fate does parallel, to a certain extent, the sentiments of the women Betty Friedan discusses. Friedan cites these women as saying, “I just don’t feel alive,” and “You wake up in the morning, and you feel as if there’s no point in going on another day like this. So you take a tranquilizer because it makes you not care so much that it’s pointless” (22; 31). These kinds of statements demonstrated to Friedan the problem with blaming societal pressures felt by these women on “loss of femininity: to say that education and independence and equality with men have made American women unfeminine” (27). Furthermore, Friedan argues that it would no longer suffice to invalidate women’s discontent by claiming that women are “dissatisfied with a lot that women of other lands can only dream of” (24). This kind of claim

resonates with Stevenson's patronizing speech and with the general feelings of others who were unwilling to recognize the legitimacy of the "problem that Friedan has named."

Early on in her battle with society, Esther Greenwood similarly feels that there must be something wrong with *her*, because she has been influenced by this idea. She has been presented with an abundance of opportunities and rewards for her academic achievements, and she feels as though she "was supposed to be having the time of [her] life" but somehow was not.<sup>11</sup> Esther recognizes the meaninglessness of it all early on, when she considers her ultimate fate—housewifery—prescribed her by the same people and institutions that have provided her with these amazing opportunities. Feeling the futility of her ambition weighing down on her already, Esther echoes the emptiness expressed by the suburban housewives quoted in *The Feminine Mystique*: she feels "very still and very empty" (Plath, 3); completely out of control, as though she isn't "steering anything, not even [herself]" (3); she wonders "why [she can't] go the whole way doing what [she] should any more," which makes her "sad and tired" (30); and her sadness is augmented by the realization that she "ha[s] nothing to look forward to" (117). Her language very closely parallels that of the women quoted in Friedan's work.

However, there are two necessary caveats to consider before we can discuss Sylvia Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*, and its connection with *The Feminine Mystique*. First of all, it is important to understand that, although Esther Greenwood *is*, to some extent, a representation of Sylvia Plath, the novel should not be read as an autobiography. Many of the characters and scenarios in *The Bell Jar* very closely resemble influential figures and instances in Sylvia Plath's adolescence, as she recorded in her journals. However, as Susan R. Van Dyne reminds us in

<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 2. [hereafter cited in text]

“The Problem of Biography,” wrongly assuming that *The Bell Jar* was intended to serve as an autobiography “disallows the transformative power of a woman’s art as epistemology, as an alterative, equally self-constituting form of knowing and being.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, interpreting *The Bell Jar* from Van Dyne’s perspective—recognizing Sylvia Plath’s seeming tendency to regard “her life as if it were a text she could invent and rewrite”<sup>13</sup>—allows for a deeper understanding of the novel in the context of a culture burdened by the “problem that Friedan has named.” Sylvia Plath responded to her unsettledness by recreating her struggle in a fictionalized way, which allowed her to resolve an internal conflict—one that she was evidently incapable of resolving in reality—on paper. For this reason, Van Dyne suggests that Sylvia Plath’s semi-autobiographical style “represent[s] her efforts to imagine, dismantle and reconstruct her ongoing self-narrative into a script she could live with.”<sup>14</sup>

Van Dyne’s argument brings us to the second major caveat when it comes to deriving meaning from *The Bell Jar*. Although there is a clear, and significant, resemblance between the feelings articulated by the women quoted in *The Feminine Mystique* and Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, it is important to recognize Sylvia Plath’s understanding of *herself* in relation to the larger feminist movement so as to avoid drawing a limited parallel between the two works. According to Deborah Nelson, “Plath wanted her own experiences growing up in the 1950s to provide the template for a ‘generational’ story. In her journal she wrote of the novel’s narrator, Esther Greenwood, ‘Make her a statement of the generation.’”<sup>15</sup> Nelson suggests that this

<sup>12</sup> Susan R. Van Dyne, “The Problem of Biography,” in *Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson, “Plath, History and Politics,” 24.

“shows Plath seeking wider significance for her story by positioning herself as a representative figure.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, Plath’s and Friedan’s works *can* be viewed in similar lights—both representing their gender in making a statement against the confining nature of American society on women’s futures. Nelson also puts forth the idea that Plath names her character after Ethel Rosenberg (full name: Esther Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg), a “woman whom many Americans, Plath included, believed to have suffered a terrible injustice.”<sup>17</sup> However, in the opening reflection in *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood considers the Rosenberg execution as having “nothing to do with [her]” (Plath, 1), which leads Nelson to ask the necessary follow-up question: “What does it mean to create a character representative of a generation who insists that its most significant events have ‘nothing to do with [her]’?”<sup>18</sup> In asking this question, Nelson broaches the limitation inherent in a theory that directly parallels the message of *The Feminine Mystique* with that of *The Bell Jar*. We must, therefore, take even Plath’s words with a grain of salt; she may very well have intended Esther Greenwood’s character to be representative of a generation-wide conflict, but her story ultimately portrays the subtleties and idiosyncrasies of this conflict, rather than obvious, over-arching aspects that could serve to define the generation as a whole.

The fact that literary critics often associate Sylvia Plath’s novel with *The Feminine Mystique*, which was published in the same year, misleadingly suggests that Plath can be considered a “feminist” and lumped into a category with Betty Friedan. However, unlike *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Bell Jar* puts forth the idea that women’s dissatisfaction cannot be fully

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 24.

explained in universal terms. In "Killing the Angel in the House," Elaine Connell proposes the theory that Plath cannot rightly be viewed as a feminist because of her distinct "sense of being an exception amongst women."<sup>19</sup> Connell suggests that the reason Plath should be considered as such is that she lacks "an essential attribute of feminism" —namely, "consciousness of the fact that society can change."<sup>20</sup> And although this is a legitimate reason to substantiate Connell's claim, this reason alone is insufficient in explaining how both Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood should be understood as exceptional, rather than representative of the Friedanian suburban housewife; therefore, the remainder of my argument will provide more sufficient reasoning to support this theory.

Although Esther cannot be read as a direct representation of Plath, Plath has undoubtedly projected her own sense of being an "exception" onto her protagonist. When Esther is working for the fashion magazine in New York City, she vacillates between associating herself with two girls with completely polarized personalities: Doreen, the bad girl who wholly disregards propriety and has "a mouth set in a sort of perpetual sneer" (4), and Betsy, the innocent southern belle, "imported . . . straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile" (6). Esther first tries to identify herself with Doreen, who "single[s] [her] out right away" and makes her "feel [she is] that much sharper than the others" (5). However, after her night out with Doreen, during which Doreen gets drunk and ends up passed out in Esther's arms, Esther decides, "I would watch [Doreen] and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart" (22). On her last night in New

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Connell, *Sylvia Plath: Killing the Angel in the House* (Hebden Bridge: Pennine Pens, 1993), 86.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

York City, Esther tries out Doreen's lifestyle one last time, accompanying her to a dance with a blind date. But she rejects her "Doreen" side when her blind date nearly rapes her, leaving her covered in mud and streaks of blood outside the dance. Esther goes back to her apartment, throws all of her own clothing off the roof, and symbolically dresses herself in Betsy's clothes for her departure the next morning. However, Betsy's purity, which Esther reverts to by wearing her clothes and discarding her own, is so blatantly contradicted by the remaining streaks of blood on Esther's face that her inability to identify with both Doreen *and* Betsy becomes painfully clear.

In addition to her own female contemporaries, Esther grows up with various female role models of her mother's generation, each of whom represents a distinctive direction her own life could take. She "imagine[s] what it would be like if [she] were Ee Gee" (39), an Esther-Greenwood version of the famous magazine editor, Jay Cee. She thinks to herself, "I [wish] I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do" (39); although Esther wants to, she is similarly unable to identify with Jay Cee and her lifestyle. Dodo Conway represents the model suburban housewife—"a Catholic who had gone to Barnard and then married an architect who had gone to Columbia and was also a Catholic" (116). Dodo lives in "a big, rambling house . . . surrounded by scooters, tricycles, doll carriages, toy fire trucks, baseball bats, badminton nets, croquet wickets, hamster cages and cocker spaniel puppies—the whole sprawling paraphernalia of suburban childhood" (116). Esther finds herself constantly revisiting this image of Dodo Conway. Dodo's compliance with societal expectations and seeming satisfaction with her lifestyle make Esther feel even more of an exception. She asks herself, "Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puling baby

like Dodo Conway?" (222). The fact that she cannot wholly identify with any of these women makes her feel alone—an "exception amongst women." Therefore, Connell's claim, although perhaps limited in its reasoning, helps us see that Esther's struggle is not a mere reiteration of the "problem that Friedan has named." Whereas *The Feminine Mystique* seeks to unify women in a struggle against a male-operated society, Plath's novel portrays Esther as feeling alienated from society as a whole—by men and women alike. Esther struggles, in vain, to define and achieve selfhood, within a society that has betrayed her by distorting her sense of self.

Esther feels betrayed by her gender in general, but particularly by the woman who is supposed to serve as her *quintessential* female role model: her mother. Esther's conflict with her mother is a primary catalyst to her decline into depression. She cannot relate to her mother's unquestioning submission to society. Esther's mother represents the previous generation of women; Lynda K. Bundtzen, in "Plath and Psychoanalysis: Uncertain Truths," characterizes her as "sacrificing her own life for her daughter's, [and then] exacting a debt of gratitude for her martyrdom."<sup>21</sup> In *Reflecting on The Bell Jar*, Macpherson makes a similar claim: "Mothers (underpaid service sector) pay for exceptional daughters (professional women with glamour jobs, but without children demanding mother's sacrificial services)."<sup>22</sup> Although, on the surface, selflessness seems noble, it is precisely this kind of self-sacrifice, attributed to the "mother" generation, which has bred such resentment from the "daughter" generation. In Esther's case, for example, Esther explains that her "mother had taught shorthand and typing to support [her] ever since [her] father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no

<sup>21</sup> Lynda K. Bundtzen, "Plath and Psychoanalysis: Uncertain Truths," in *Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 43.

<sup>22</sup> Pat Macpherson, *Reflecting on the Bell Jar* (London: Routledge, 1991), 27.

money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen" (39). Her mother has indeed sacrificed herself for Esther's sake; however, in doing so, she has submitted herself to the role prescribed her by society by giving up her sense of self for the sake of others.

Therefore, throughout Esther's development, Macpherson suggests there "lurks the matrophobic fear of becoming her mother," who has adopted the least desirable and least admirable lifestyle in Esther's eyes.<sup>23</sup> As Macpherson describes her, she has become "an embittered secretarial teacher doubly betrayed, first by a husband who died and left her without insurance (man as provider fails twice), and then by the market assigning her to the female drudgework sector of business and education."<sup>24</sup> Esther seems to express her "matrophobic fear" through hatred; while in the mental hospital, she thinks to herself, "My mother was the worst" and later confesses to her second, more professional psychiatrist, Doctor Nolan, "I hate her" (202; 203). Upon reflection, Esther explains this hatred by saying that her mother "never scolded [her], but kept begging [her], with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong" (202). This explanation is consistent with Bundzten's theory as to the origin of maternal hatred and matrophobia. It seems as though Esther's pronounced "hatred" is really resentment which she derives from her mother's inability, or unwillingness, to assert herself and scold Esther; instead, her mother scolds *herself*, and wonders if she might not have raised Esther properly and in accordance with her prescribed role. Esther fears that she, too, will eventually submit to society and be forced to sacrifice her sense of self.

Similarly, Esther's mother has so deeply internalized society's expectations of her that she cannot relate to Esther's recognition of, and resulting inability to cope with, societal

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

pressures. After Esther's first botched shock treatment, she informs her mother that she's "through with that Doctor Gordon" (145), and her mother responds, with a self-righteous grin: "I knew my baby wasn't like that . . . like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital . . . I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (146). It appears as though she is either in denial about Esther's condition, or is completely out of touch with her daughter. Rather than trying to understand Esther's problem, she transfers responsibility over to a man (Doctor Gordon), who poorly administers shock treatment to her daughter. She then takes Esther's *rejection* of this harmful treatment as validation that she has not failed as a mother since Esther has decided to "be all right again." Even at the very end of Esther's treatment, her mother is still incapable of understanding the reality of her daughter's situation; Esther mocks her mother and thinks: "A daughter in an asylum! I had done that to her. Still, she had obviously decided to forgive me" (237). In reality, Esther is in touch with her own internal conflict enough to know that she has not "done" anything blameworthy to her mother. Her mother naively trivializes the gravity of Esther's struggle by trying to "act as if this were a bad dream" (237), and now that Esther has been deemed mentally healthy, they can forget all about her illness. Again, she has so deeply internalized societal expectations of the "mother" generation—being a martyr for the "daughter" generation's happiness—that she can understand Esther's mental illness only as a negative reflection on her mothering, and thus, can understand her relative wellbeing only as a relieving reminder that she has *not* failed in her role. This is a crucial generation gap that separates Esther from her mother, and thus, from a significant female force in her life.

The mother-daughter conflict, by extension, gives rise to a somewhat paradoxical (in the context of a feminist movement) phenomenon: a woman's apparent longing for a dominant

male figure. This longing is paradoxical in that it seems to detract from the cause that Betty Friedan advances by suggesting a dependency of women on men. Jessica Benjamin argues that, “the father and his phallus have the power they do because of their ability to stand for difference and separation from the mother.”<sup>25</sup> In “Plath and Psychoanalysis: Uncertain Truths,” Bundtzen claims that the father “represents freedom, the outside world, will, agency, and desire.”<sup>26</sup> Using their analysis can help us better understand Esther Greenwood’s development; she loses her father figure relatively early in life, and just as her resentment for her mother grows, so does her longing for a “dominant male figure” to help her “become independent and, most important, loosen the ties to [her] mother.”<sup>27</sup>

Another complication to Esther’s character that adds a dimension to the general experience of Friedan’s suburban housewife is her feeling of a loss of control, which seems to originate from a sexual double standard that haunts Esther. The moment in which she first understands this double standard occurs when she decides to ask Buddy Willard, her ex-boyfriend and perfect “husband material” (by society’s standards), whether he has ever slept with anyone else. Esther thinks to herself, “I never thought for one minute that Buddy Willard would have an affair with anyone. I expected him to say, ‘No, I have been saving myself for when I get married to somebody pure and a virgin like you’” (69). She has these naïve expectations because, as a young woman, she faces the societal pressure to remain “pure” for her husband-to-be; therefore, she thinks, it is only rational to assume that young men face the same pressure. When Buddy defies Esther’s expectations and tells her he has had an affair, she

<sup>25</sup> Jessica Benjamin, quoted in Lynda K. Bundtzen, “Plath and Psychoanalysis: Uncertain Truths,” in *Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 42.

<sup>26</sup> Bundtzen, “Plath and Psychoanalysis,” 42.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

thinks to herself, "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" (81). However, even as she expresses her abhorrence of this "double life," she maintains the assumption that "of course, somebody had seduced Buddy, Buddy hadn't started it and it wasn't really his fault" (70). Thus, Esther places the blame primarily on the woman—the "tarty waitress"—and effectively legitimizes the double standard she so despises (70).

After this disappointing interaction with Buddy Willard, Esther is better able to articulate part of the reason she feels as though she lacks control over her own life. As Esther and Doctor Nolan discuss the idea of birth control, Esther tells Doctor Nolan that "what [she] hate[s] is the thought of being under a man's thumb" (221). She goes on to explain that "a man doesn't have a worry in the world, while [she's] got a baby hanging over [her] head like a big stick, to keep [her] in line" (221). In "*The Bell Jar and Other Prose*," Janet Badia claims that Esther "sees birth control as her path to self-determination."<sup>28</sup> Badia substantiates this claim with the argument that "as [Esther] rides back to the asylum with her purchase," she "expresses full self-possession" for the first time<sup>29</sup>—she confidently proclaims, "I was my own woman" (223). At this point, Esther seems to feel as though she has remedied much of what has been plaguing her since her conversation with Buddy. She had been trying to lose her virginity, to defy societal double standards; however, the unavoidable potential for pregnancy hangs over her until she is able to free herself of this lingering threat by using birth control.

<sup>28</sup> Janet Badia, "*The Bell Jar and Other Prose*," in *Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 135.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

However, Badia neglects the second part of Esther's thought "as she rides back to the asylum with her purchase;"<sup>30</sup> Esther actually says, "I was my own woman," and *then*: "The next step was to find the proper sort of man" (223). Although, even in the novel, the latter part of Esther's thought is easily skimmed over, it is important to analyze this statement in order to fully understand the complexity of Esther's ambivalence. As Macpherson suggests, Esther learns that "women cannot save themselves from each other. . . . It takes a man and his machine."<sup>31</sup> At this crucial point in Esther's development, when she claims to feel like her "own woman" for the first time, her follow-up statement legitimizes Macpherson's claim. In other words, when Esther feels as though she has finally obtained control over her own life, she is still subconsciously at the mercy of societal expectations, because she still feels dependent on a man, and "the *proper* sort of man" at that (223; emphasis added).

In this way, Plath's novel suggests a problem that is drastically divergent from the "problem that Friedan has named." Even if we accept Nelson's argument that Plath intended Esther to be understood as a "representative" figure—despite Connell's assessment of Plath as an "exception"—we must at least understand Esther Greenwood as representative of a more complex internal and societal conflict than the one-dimensional (in comparison) "problem that Friedan has named." Esther Greenwood's conflict is extremely complicated; therefore, characterizing her as a representation of women who struggled with the "problem that Friedan has named" would be missing the more complex aspects of Esther's struggle: her intense desire to break away from the mother figure, her longing for a dominant male figure, her outward acknowledgement of a sexual double standard in her society, and her legitimization of this

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Macpherson, *Reflecting*, 53.

double standard. Friedan's work seems to advance the idea that all women can recognize their shared disillusionment and move forward as a unit against societal constraints; however, these complicated facets of Esther's character and development seem to isolate her in a more alienating, psychological conflict. Even when Esther finds what she deems the key to having control over her own life and breaking free from society's unfair expectations—namely, birth control—she cannot fight the desire to find stability—and possibly refuge from becoming her mother—in a “proper,” dominant male figure.

Although *The Bell Jar* concludes in a seemingly hopeful tone—Esther is released from the mental hospital—and *The Feminine Mystique* was similarly accepted as a hopeful, inspiring work for furthering the feminist cause, Plath's novel actually suggests that women's struggle against societal confinement is paradoxical, and thus, difficult to escape. *The Feminine Mystique* suggests that simply by articulating women's confinement—by giving it a name—we can make significant progress toward eradicating the problem. *The Bell Jar*, however, suggests that consciousness of the problem may *not* bring us significantly closer to a resolution. Part of what seems to separate Esther from the majority of her society is her unique perceptiveness, which allows her to be conscious, for the most part, of the paradoxical nature of the gender issue. And yet even Esther falls victim to the paradox. Thus, if a woman's impulse to achieve selfhood in a previously male-operated society is inevitably conditioned by gender conventions, then maybe the problem itself is so deeply ingrained in both men's and women's psyches that it is beyond anyone's capacity to fully resolve. In the end, even as Esther prepares herself to reenter society, she is unable to wholly break free from the metaphorical bell jar society has placed over her, and she recognizes this frustrating truth:

But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again? (241)