

Masochists and “Moonbrains”: The (Macabre) Philosophy of Feminism in Plath’s *The Bell Jar*

While many critics have chronicled the ways in which Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* serves as a call to feminist awareness, few have analyzed the role of humor in the novel. This discrepancy is strange, given that Plath originally intended the text as a “comic novel” (Wagner-Martin 187). It is not as if Plath’s jokes fell on deaf ears; in fact, numerous scholars, such as Linda Wagner-Martin and Marjorie G. Perloff, noted the humor embedded in the narrative. So why have critics neglected to analyze the humor of Esther’s feminist awareness? One reason may be that Plath’s subject—oppression, hopelessness, and suicide—seems ill-suited to humor. Another reason may be that Esther’s humor often is depicted as an unfortunate consequence of her “madness”. Such a reading is detrimental, however, because it denies Esther, and by extension Plath, agency over her own narrative. Rather than ignoring the humor in *The Bell Jar*, therefore, it is essential to assess its value as a tool for challenging and critiquing gender roles in the patriarchy.

In fact, jokes in *The Bell Jar* serve four central functions—they critique human behavior, they move Esther from a place of subjugation to one of relative objectivity, they point out incongruities between language and meaning, and they encourage critical thinking. As Mordechai Gordon aptly points out, these four modes are the places where the purposes of humor and philosophy intersect. Thus, Plath’s humor functions as a rudimentary philosophy for the feminist movement in that it both provides a language for challenging and critiquing the patriarchy and subverts dominant modes of power and authority.

R. D. V. Glasgow notes that “[m]ale reluctance to grant women intellectual autonomy has thus coincided with a suppression or at least regulation of female humour” (58). As a result, conventional scholarship has made the case that women are not as funny as men, or that women prefer to receive humor rather than create it. In fact, Paul E. McGhee argues that “a clearly definable set of sex-role standards regarding humor exists for males and females in our culture [...] It is proposed that the use of humor in interpersonal interaction serves as a means of gaining or maintaining dominance or control over the social situation [...] For a female to develop into a clown or joker, then, she must violate the behavioral pattern normally reserved for women” (183-4). Esther’s use of humor is subversive: it not only provides her with a language for critiquing dominant perceptions of gender and identity, but also bestows her criticisms with the power and authority typically reserved for men. Furthermore, the four functions of humor within novel—questioning human existence, depicting Esther’s detachment, pointing out incongruities between language and meaning, and encouraging critical thinking—demonstrates that Plath is not merely joking, but that she is attempting to establish a rudimentary philosophy by which to express feminist concerns.

One way of understanding Plath’s humor is through the lens of incongruity theory, which asserts that humor occurs in the “incongruities” between a joke and its punchline. Many comedians who use humor to critique social inequalities rely upon incongruities in their performances. Comedian Aamer Rahman, for instance, uses incongruities to critique the concept of “reverse racism,” stating: “I could be a reverse racist if I wanted to. All I would need would be a time machine [...] I’d go back in time to before Europe colonized the world, right, and I’d convince the leaders of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Central and South America to invade and colonize Europe” (Fear of a Brown Planet). Rahman’s description of “reverse racism” subverts expectations, and in doing so, reveals that white privilege is not dispelled when Africans, Latino/as, and Middle Easterners are given opportunities. Thus, his humor rejects patriarchal perceptions of race. Similarly, Tina Fey uses incongruities to criticize patriarchal perceptions of rape. After Senator Todd Aiken commented that “If it’s a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down”, Fey responded by saying “Mr. Aiken, I think you are confusing the phrase ‘legitimate rape’ with ‘competitive gymnastics’” (*Wall Street Journal*). Like Rahman, Fey relies upon incongruities to question the validity of patriarchal perceptions of the female body.

Their humor, which “depends on the unexpected disclosure of some (often unflattering or morally problematic) truth”, is successful because it alters popular perceptions of social issues (Dadlez 1). Feminist humor similarly subverts popular views of gender identity. According to Merrie Bergmann, the difficulty of feminist humor is “precisely where the feminist distinguishes herself from non-feminist

women. For while she is unwilling to accept the stereotypes of women's ignorance, irrationality, irresponsibility, and so on, or to accept the fate ordained by such stereotypes, she is still a woman and hence subsumed under those stereotypes in the eyes of many beholders" (63). In order to succeed, therefore, the feminist must argue that she is an exception to the stereotypes—an act which may place her in contention with other women.

While this is problematic in its potential divisiveness, feminist humor also "provide[s] human beings with a way of making sense of themselves and the world around them, which is significantly different from rational analysis and other more conventional ways of knowing the world" (Gordon 16). Thus, humor subverts patriarchal logic by giving value to other forms of knowledge and meaning-making. Since Plath recognizes that logical discourse is often used to reinforce patriarchal structures that are harmful to women, her refusal to engage in a "rational" debate on gender is a form of protest against those very structures. At the same time, humor allows her to critique social inequalities effectively, thereby making humor an ideal form for Plath to disclose her frustrations with patriarchal culture.

Plath's use of humor is especially significant because when *The Bell Jar* was published in 1963, there was not a language for expressing feminist concerns. As a result, Plath does not discuss concepts like "women's liberation" or "sexual objectification" in her novel, but rather demonstrates the discordance between the external feminine self, which operates according to social norms regarding beauty and behavior, and the internal feminine self, which longs for life beyond the domestic sphere. Many scholars, including Kate A. Baldwin, discuss Plath's use of images to this end. Other critics have described Plath's "lack of language" in detail; for example, Caroline J. Smith asserts that Esther uses food to communicate her discontent with gender norms. Esther's interactions with food "emphasize [her] anxiety concerning her ability to fit in with the normative world around her, the normative world, that is, which abides by the more conservative images constructed by women's magazines" (13-4). Food is particularly significant in Smith's analysis because it functions as a symbol of the domestic; thus, Esther's gluttonous caviar consumption, her frequent vomiting, and her hoarding of "two dozen avocado pears" suggest her inability to conform to the social mores of domesticity. While Smith's analysis is certainly correct—Esther's discomfort with domesticity, as well as a variety of other tasks and roles relegated to women, is indisputable—suggesting that Esther demonstrates these sentiments through food. Consumption negates the verbal and lingual ways in which Esther challenges these behaviors.

Similarly Marilyn Boyer argues that Plath's novel "describes the battle that Esther Greenwood must wage in order to hear her own muse and create her own language", however, this "language" exists in the form of blood and unintelligible oral emissions (200). Boyer builds her argument upon Irigaray's perception that femininity speaks best "in the gaps, blanks, and silences of the text" because these are the places where the narrative does not have to conform to patriarchal language (Moi 218). While Boyer is correct to point out that Esther's interaction with male language, particularly in the form of "science"—whether it be chemistry or psychoanalysis—results in physical collapse, her argument reduces Esther's experiences to bodily acts: consumption, excretion, illness, and trauma. By emphasizing the role of the body in Esther's world, Boyer ultimately objectifies Esther in a manner similar to the men in the novel, which denies her agency through language. To avoid participating in Esther's objectification, therefore, it is necessary to analyze the places where Esther's speech and writing communicates her dissatisfaction with patriarchy.

In fact, Esther's interaction with so-called "masculine" language, or the rational schools of thought advocated by prevailing power structures, results in a complete communication breakdown. For example, when reading a passage on Adam and Eve in *Finnegan's Wake*, Esther notes that "the letters grew barbs and rams' horns. I watched them separate, each from the other, and jiggle up and down in a silly way. They associated themselves in fantastic, untranslatable shapes, like Arabic or Chinese" (102). In other words, Esther finds patriarchal language, particularly reason and religion, so disconnected from her experiences that it becomes unintelligible. That is not to say, however, that all language is anathema to Esther; rather, merely the logocentric modes of patriarchal discourse have become nonsensical. Nevertheless, Esther is encouraged by her mother, her teachers, and her peers to adopt patriarchal modes of discourse in her own work. Instead of doing so, however, Esther finds ways to avoid logocentric language. For example, she takes Mr. Manzi's chemistry class for a grade based solely on attendance, an act which allows her to "shut his voice out of my ears by pretending it was only a mosquito in the distance" and sit "back enjoying the bright lights and the colored fires" to write "page after page of villanelles and sonnets" (30). Esther devalues the language she finds inaccessible to her and values language that communicates non-patriarchal ideals. Moreover, the humorous way Esther depicts her rebellion against male authority establishes a set of values, for both herself and the reader, which exist outside patriarchy.

Similarly, Esther uses humor to express her dissatisfaction with prescribed gender roles. Perhaps the earliest example of this occurs when Esther is working for *Ladies' Day* magazine, a periodical promoting self-improvement through beauty tips, relationship advice, and fashion. According to Pat MacPherson, "the dark underside of [*Ladies' Day's*] self-improvement road to female identity, reassuringly sign-posted though it is, is that the more thorough the instructions and illustrations, the more thorough the surveillance and regulation of the female body" (9). Certainly, this is the case for the women in the novel. Instead of attending business meetings or writing articles advocating social change, the interns at *Ladies' Day* spend the majority of their time at lavish dinners and social events.

Hilda, in particular, embodies the feminine ideal promoted by the magazine by adhering closely to the rules of behavior and beauty it advocates. Esther recognizes Hilda's position as a model object of the feminine ideal by noting that she "never really understood Hilda. She was six feet tall, with huge, slanted green eyes and thick red lips and a vacant, Slavic expression [...] I don't know if Hilda could read, but she made startling hats" (23). Here, Esther veils a critique of patriarchal expectations for women in a joke about Hilda's intellectual abilities. Hilda's potential is not grounded in intellect, as Esther feels it should be; rather, her selection was based entirely on her "exceptional femininity" symbolized by her fashionable clothes. By highlighting the reasons why Hilda was chosen for the internship, Esther demonstrates a double standard that exists between men and women: if men were competing for a high-profile internship at a major publication, their selection would be based on intellect and writing ability. When women are offered a similar experience, however, the selection process disregards ability and favors feminine stereotypes.

Plath goes on to hint that women who adhere to the feminine roles prescribed by the patriarchy ultimately become monstrous. Since these women are encouraged to cultivate their external bodies rather than internal virtues, they run the risk of blind and mindless ignorance. In fact, when Hilda advocates the execution of the Rosenbergs, Esther compares her to a dybbuk, or a malevolent being possessed by the spirit of the dead (81). Though Esther's comment may, at first glance, appear to be a petty and injudicious insult, it ultimately demonstrates the ways in which patriarchy advocates injustice and violence, particularly towards women. Since Esther aligns herself with the Rosenbergs on the very first page of the novel, it is essential to read Hilda's stance as a condemnation of both the Rosenbergs and Esther. By advocating the execution of Rosenbergs, Hilda is also encouraging the mistreatment of "outsiders" who do not adhere to commonly accepted social roles. The comparison between Esther and Ethel is particularly significant, not only because their names are near homophones, but because both women did little to deserve electrocution. During the Rosenberg's trial, little evidence could be found connecting Ethel to acts of espionage. In fact, evidence suggests that Ethel did little more than type memos for Julius; however, her association with Russian spies resulted in her execution. Esther is similarly punished for her association with deviant social behavior. In particular, she decides that death is preferable to a life of domesticity and, as a result, is condemned for disagreeing with patriarchal views on gender.

While death may appear to be a drastic response to social oppression, Plath and other women who did not want to live in the "feminine sphere" had few alternatives. Jacqueline Rose, upon reading Plath's journals, astutely asked: "How can women assert themselves against social oppression [...] without propelling themselves beyond the bounds of identity, without abolishing identity itself?" (145). For Plath, the only option was to abolish her identity in its entirety. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther also attempts to eradicate her own identity—through both a pseudonym and a suicide attempt—in order to escape social oppression. The only other option, in Plath's view, was to have her identity subsumed by her future family. Both options left her without autonomy or agency over the course of her life. Although Plath could not radically overturn this system of female oppression, she could criticize it using the tools at her disposal—language and humor.

The first way Plath uses humor is to comment on human existence; in particular, she describes the superficiality of American popular culture. When Esther attends a film with the other girls interning at *Ladies' Day*, she notes that "[e]verybody in a Technicolor movie seems to feel obliged to wear a lurid costume in each new scene and to stand around like a clotheshorse with a lot of very green trees or very yellow wheat or very blue ocean rolling away for miles and miles in every direction" (34). Her statement underscores the frivolity of the characters in the film. In particular, she demonstrates that the characters are not significant as people but rather as models of the latest fashion trends. The characters function much like the women at *Ladies' Day*, human beings who are reduced to nothing more than objects whose sole purpose is to promote beauty and fashion.

Esther's critique continues with an evaluation of the gender roles within the film: "I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along" (34). By placing these

analyses side by side, Esther emphasizes the superficiality in both scenarios. Not only are the characters little more than their clothes, they are also little more than tropes of feminine codes of morality and immorality. As a result, the “nice girl” who is undoubtedly sweet, innocent, and virginal, lives out an “ideal” love story. The “sexy girl”, on the other hand, loses her virginity and ends up unhappy and alone. Furthermore, since the purity myth often labels sexually experienced women as “spoiled goods”, it is likely that the “sexy girl” will never be able to find a “nice boy” to marry. The film promotes virginal sexual standards for women, but does not question the behavior of the male characters, particularly Gil, who is perfectly willing to sleep with the “sexy girl” (as well as many other women) for his own gratification. In other words, the film functions as propaganda rather than entertainment. Once Esther realizes this, she begins to “feel peculiar” and is “in terrible danger of puking” (34). She also calls the other viewers of the film “moonbrains” because they have allowed the silver glow of the film’s glamour to blind them to the problematic nature of its message about female sexuality. By humorously critiquing the shallowness of both the film and the viewers, Esther points out the sexual double standards depicted in the film.

One of the reasons Plath is able to critique her peers successfully is by “adopt[ing] a detached mental perspective in [her] work” (Gordon 8). Not only does Esther’s detachment allow her to critique patriarchal norms from the position of an outsider, it also demonstrates the ways in which women are kept intentionally naïve, or “detached” from realities regarding sex and sexuality. For example, when Esther thinks about the possibility of her boss having sex, she states: “I always had a terribly hard time trying to imagine people in bed together” (5). Since sexual standards for women encourage purity—even for those who are married—Esther has a difficult time envisioning a healthy sexual relationship. Her detachment only increases as she considers when to first engage in sexual intercourse, a decision that is not rooted in deep-seated emotions of love, but rather in curiosity and desire. As a result, Esther debates whether or not to sleep with a number of men she dates in the novel. Though she refuses to have sex with Buddy, she does consider sleeping with Constantin and Irwin. While she does not sleep with Constantin, she does have sex with Irwin, who is completely open about his sexual behavior. Esther finds that his “honesty”, combined with her own sense of agency, liberating. She states, “It occurred to me that the blood was my answer. I couldn’t possibly be a virgin anymore. I smiled in the dark. I felt part of a great tradition” (187). Her reaction is surprising, given that she begins hemorrhaging profusely immediately after intercourse; however, the sheer relief of no longer having her “virginity weighed like a millstone around [her] neck” ultimately has a positive influence on Esther (186). At the same time, Esther’s first sexual experience results in great bodily trauma, suggesting that in spite of its liberating qualities, women are negatively affected by sexual behavior that occurs outside socially approved standards.

Esther’s detachment in regards to her sexuality mirrors her detachment throughout the novel. She states: “I liked looking on at people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory just for me to look at, I’d stop and look so hard I never forgot it” (11). For this reason, Esther frequently examines human behavior from an outsider’s perspective, a position that grants her a relatively objective view of patriarchal social conditions. Instead of speaking as a member of the patriarchy—like Buddy, who exploits sexual double standards for his own benefit, or speaking as a female advocate of patriarchal gender roles—like Hilda, who is complicit in her own objectification—Esther gives voice to women who both recognize and react against their marginalization at the hands of this system. As a result, she more clearly identifies and critiques the flaws inherent to conventional gender roles.

In particular, she points out the “incongruities of language and meaning” that others fail to notice (Gordon 8). In particular, Plath focuses on the three key phases of female life in the 1950s and 1960s—romance, pregnancy, and death. When describing Esther’s relationship with Constantin, for example, she goes to his apartment under the pretense of listening to “balalaika music”; both of them, however, are aware know that this is merely a strategy to move their date a more intimate setting. The term “balalaika music” is not actually referring to music, but to sex. Though tactics such as these are often used in romantic relationships, Esther’s terminology is particularly amusing because the term “balalaika” seems nearly nonsensical and is far removed from the act of sex.

These incongruities only become more pronounced in Esther’s other relationships. For example, Esther struggles with Buddy’s designation as a “good boy” even though he has had an affair with a woman named Gladys. She repeatedly notes that she is not upset about the affair itself, but “what [she] couldn’t stand was Buddy’s pretending [she] was so sexy and he was so pure” (57). Here, Esther hints at the sexual double standard for men and women. While Buddy is jealous about the many dates that Esther has had with various college men, she is expected to accept his previous sexual behavior without a second thought. Furthermore, Esther is frustrated that Buddy’s behavior seems to have no impact on other’s moral perceptions of him. She wants Buddy to have “the honest guts to admit it straight off to everybody

and face up to it as part of his character", believing that he should experience the same judgment that a sexually experienced woman would (58). While Esther's critique of sexual standards is very serious, her manner of communicating it to Billy is cloaked in humor. Her break-up note states that she "was engaged to simultaneous interpreter and never wanted to see Buddy again as [she] did not want to give [her] children a hypocrite for a father" (98). Thus, Esther uses humor to communicate incongruous sexual standards for men and women. Esther also critiques domesticity through contradictory images of pregnancy. As Betty Friedan notes:

Over and over again, stories in women's magazines insist that women can know fulfillment only at the moment of giving birth to a child. They deny the years when she can no longer look forward to giving birth, even if she repeats the act over and over again. In the feminine mystique, there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future. There is no other way she can even dream about herself, except as her children's mother, her husband's wife (50).

When Esther's medicine makes it look "just as if [she] were going to have a baby", she appears to be living out her purpose according to patriarchal definitions of femininity (157). However, the fact that she is institutionalized suggests that her pregnancy is "deviant". In fact, Esther even fears that her patroness, Philomena Guinea, will withdraw her financial support because she looks as if she has gotten pregnant out of wedlock. In actuality, Esther's faux-pregnancy hints at the underlying problem with domesticity: it encourages women to become pregnant and permanently "institutionalized" in the home, an act which eradicates all need for an autonomous feminist self. Friedan cautions, "women who 'adjust' as housewives, who grow up wanting to be 'just a housewife,' are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps [...] they are suffering a slow death of mind and spirit" (253-4).

For this reason, Plath also uses humor to examine death. Specifically, she conflates literal and figurative death. For example, after Esther is "punished" for social deviance with ECT, she holds up her image to that of a dead girl and states that they match "mouth for mouth, nose for nose. The only difference was the eyes. The eyes in the snapshot were open, and those in the newspaper photograph were closed. But I knew if the dead girl's eyes were to be thumbed wide, they would look at me with the same dead, black, vacant expression as the eyes in the snapshot" (120). By comparing herself with an actual corpse, Esther suggests that women who have no agency over their own lives are just as devoid of life as the dead. Physical life, therefore, becomes meaningless and leads women to contemplate suicide. However, even suicide is beyond their reach because the "body had all sorts of little tricks, such as making [the] hand go limp at the crucial second, which would save it, time and again" (130). As a result, Esther determines that she "would simply have to ambush it with whatever sense I had left, or it would trap me in its stupid cage for fifty years without any sense at all" (130). Her jocular tone makes light of suicide, suggesting that it does not appear inhumane when compared with a life of domesticity. In fact, Esther's descriptions of death suggest that there is comfort in dying because it results in freedom from impossible gender standards; she says, "The earth seemed friendly under my feet [...] The dark felt as thick as velvet [...] Wrapping my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow, I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water, one by one by one" (138).

Though Plath's description of suicide initially may seem disturbing, it ultimately "encourage[s] us to question the 'wisdom' of authority and reject the tendency to accept pat answers and conventional ways of looking at the world" (Gordon 9). One way Plath compels readers to question patriarchal codes is by "reframing" moral situations to point out the flawed logic within this system. According to Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland, and Richard Fisch reframing "take[s] into account all of the known facts of the situation as well or better than the original frame [...] lift the problem out of the 'symptom' frame and into another frame that does not carry the implications of unchangeability" (102). In other words, Esther "reframes" social perceptions regarding gender, sexuality, and suicide to demonstrate the flawed codes of logic that allow the continued oppression of women. The goal of "reframing" is to enact a "second-order change" that alters the system itself (102). For Esther, a "second-order change" comes in the form of birth control, which both grants her agency over her sexuality and allows her to choose whether or not she wants a life of domesticity. The legalization of birth control in 1960 granted a similar agency to women throughout the United States. Since then, women's college attendance and graduation rates have increased dramatically, which in turn has led to widespread acceptance of higher education for women as well as increased leadership opportunities outside the home ("Contraception: Freedom from Fear").

While Plath recommends a "second-order change" in *The Bell Jar*, what she may not have foreseen

is that the novel itself has also enacted a "second-order change" by becoming a seminal text for the feminist movement. Since its publication in 1963, the novel has sold more than three million copies, has provided a foundation for second-wave feminism, and has been referenced in television shows and films such as *10 Things I Hate about You*, *The Simpsons*, and *Gilmore Girls*. Given such widespread influence, Plath's use of language, and particularly humor, is an essential part her blossoming feminist views. By utilizing humor in four distinct ways—to criticize human existence, to detach herself from female subjectivity, to examine the incongruities between language and meaning, and to encourage critical thinking—Plath creates a rudimentary language for both challenging and critiquing the patriarchy that moves beyond the confines of androcentric logic. In doing so, she effects a second-order change for women in United States—she lays the groundwork for second-wave feminism and paves the way toward building a better world for women.

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