Feminine Failure and the Modern Hero: Mad Women in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*

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Charles Newman points out in his perceptive essay on Sylvia Plath that she is among the few woman writers who link the grand theme of womanhood with the destiny of modern civilization and that the new persona of the new woman emerges from *The Bell Jar*.[1] It is precisely for this reason that Sylvia Plath and her novel *The Bell Jar*[2] have become such a positive source of inspiration for woman writers in the United States since the late 1960s. That is to say, Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, is not a heroine, but a hero, a protagonist who is a woman; this *Bildungsroman* not only deals with the central theme of growing up female in modern America, but also dramatizes the American tragedy, the plight of the modern person whose search for identity leads her to encounter nothingness, evil and the absurdity of existence. In her desperate search for salvation Esther recoils into herself, where she finds the same nothingness. Through her personal, female experience, she comes to perceive the decline of the whole civilization and to bear the moral and intellectual burden not only of saving her personal life but the civilization that

is inseparable from it as well. In this sense she is a modern hero who, by throwing away the heroine's traditional pose and role as love-object, dramatizes the human condition.

The discovery of nothingness, evil, the absurdity of life and the sterility of civilization (its sexual failure) have been the central themes of modern literature. Modern British and American authors especially have extensively dramatized the sterility of life produced by a mechanical civilization and the self-delusive aspiration for money and success, and, in particular, the threat sensed in a hostile environment characterized by holocaust, concentration camps and ruthless monopoly enterprise. Yet it is rarely a woman protagonist that undergoes the shock of discovery of the void, combats its silence and attempts to go beyond the reality of nothingness, for rarely are women conceived of as capable intellectually and psychically of undergoing the central drama of modern life; at best they are treated as powerless victims of circumstance.

It is exactly these central themes of modern literature—the encounter with existential nothingness, the struggle with "ontological insecurity," the attempt to make whole a psyche rent by despair and cruel forces, and the attempt to find a new and vital life image in a civilization at once hostile and sterile—that Sylvia Plath develops through her protagonist's experience of growing up female in modern America. While the experiences which lead Esther Greenwood to discover these are typically feminine experiences, they reveal most vividly the condition of all human beings in the latter half of twentieth century America. Thus the woman hero of *The Bell Jar* emerges as the archetypal hero in modern literature. A number of works have begun to follow the radically new creative path opened by Sylvia Plath; among

these is Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays,*[3] in which the woman hero is also a universal hero.

This does not mean that woman as a hero did not exist in modern literature. As Carolyn Heilbrun observes in her essay "The Woman as Hero," the late nineteenth century and the beginning of this century produced such writers as Henry James, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster and George Bernard Shaw, writers who centered their novels on female protagonists who serve as metaphors for the modern person.[4] The modern hero who searches for himself, for a way to "remain sincere and true in relation to one's self" within the intellectual and moral wasteland of civilization, is indeed dramatized by such women as Isabelle Archer, Minny Temple, Adela Quested, Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen, Connie Chatterley and St. Joan. Heilbrun argues that the reason for which these authors chose woman heroes is the freedom of women from the social demand to display outworn military and business virtues and to pursue success in these terms. Indeed, free even from the need to have a profession, the only demand the woman heroes made on life was the "demand to live."[5] Thus their dramas can be presented by the authors, specifically as well as metaphorically, as dramas of the modern person whose search is life itself.

It is worth noting here that all of the writers noted above are men, and that this fact itself reveals their deliberate, conscious use of women as their heroes. Of course such woman writers as Virginia Woolf have created great woman heroes. Yet ironically, in many cases women writers are themselves more prone than their male counterparts to be subject to the influence of the traditional pose of the heroine, and less able to discard the values, qualities and ambiguous role which are ascribed to her. Edith Wharton's Lily Bart, for example, is an

embodiment of the American dilemma and of the burden imposed on American intellectuals by their need to reconcile morality and wealth. Although unlike Henry James's Maggie Verver, she is unable to reconcile the two, she vaguely considers herself capable of so doing and this is the source of her tragedy. Embodying the author's historical perception of what was happening to the social, moral and psychological life of America at the turn of the century, Lily Bart undertakes the universal action her circumstances permit and meets defeat. Thus she is a modern tragic hero. Her limitations, her partial understandings, her weaknesses and contradictory aspirations, and her sufferings are all universal within the context of American civilization; she emerges, accordingly, as an epic as well as culturally archetypal American hero.

Lily Bart comes to assume, however, a disturbingly traditional heroine's pose at the end of the novel, and the novel ends disappointingly with the suggestion of feminine salvation when Lawrence Selden, the man she loves, comes to her rescue in the traditional pose of gallant (although too late to save her life). Before her death, moreover, Lily Bart finds a moment of gentle relief for her tension and unhappiness in the maternal instinct evoked by holding a baby, and is awakened for the first time to the life-symbol in her own motherhood. At the end of the novel, therefore, Lily Bart converts herself from a modern hero to a heroine, finding a too-late salvation in being a wife and mother, a submissive woman who would be embraced by and rescued in Selden's masculine "republic of the spirit." In assuming the traditional heroine's role, Lily Bart risks converting the novel into a melodrama.

In terms of feminist causes, the two decades following World

War II were reactionary ones. As Betty Friedan tells us, women were told to yield the jobs and other social roles they had temporarily occupied to the returning GIs, and to return home to the traditional roles of wife and mother.[6] These were the decades in which America rediscovered the bliss of home and the warmth of motherhood after the hardship in the battlefields and the shock of violence. This conservatism is well reflected in the disappearance of the woman hero in postwar literature. Perhaps it can be said that American authors discovered other alienated modern heroes in Blacks, Jews and Southerners, yet the disappearance of the woman hero cannot be separated from McCarthyism, the raging influence of vulgarized Freudianism in every social and intellectual sphere, the glorification of American military and economic power, and the underlying fear of sterility and total destruction associated with the cold war. Women were vulnerable to these antagonistic masculine forces and were the first to keep their mouths and minds shut. It was, understandably, the time when motherhood was praised and woman raised to the position of a mother-earth goddess,[7] a sexually attractive and intellectually safe child-producing machine. As Betty Friedan points out, the traditional division of women between the virtuous wife and the evil whore was replaced by a division between the good and sexual housewife and the evil career-woman.[8]

Since the central position occupied by feminism in American reform movements is an established pattern of American history, the condition of the feminist movement is a trustworthy barometer of the condition of liberal reformism in general. The 1960s, which opened with the hopeful note of the New Frontier, witnessed the growth of the New Left, militant civil rights and Black movements. Although much

delayed in its arrival on the social scene, a radically new feminist movement also appeared in the same decade. The major contribution of the new American feminist movement exists in its analysis of sex roles and the socialization process, and in its re-examination of Western civilization, which it portrays as basically sexist in nature. The movement brought forth to analysis the myths of female fulfillment and feminine values, myths which re-enforce and perpetuate the social and legal subjugation of women, and above all, the movement laid bare the psychic experience of being a woman in a hostile and discouraging civilization. The treatment of women as inferior existences ("the second sex") and as objects is clearly the product of a male-dominated and male-created civilization, yet modern science, as in the biological theory of female inferiority, helped to perpetuate the traditional status of women even in the modern period. Women are considered not as human beings but as mysterious existences, fascinating, terrifying and difficult to comprehend; they appear as *femmes fatales*, as embodiments of moral principles and of sensual and spiritual beauty, and as the source of creation, stability and love. The ideal feminine values and feminine traits are based on this mythical view of women, and women must undertake a lifetime commitment to preserve this false image of themselves to which their husbands are wedded. The cosmetic and fashion industries are only a few among the exploiters of women's need to deceive their husbands and themselves. Women have also come to realize that the role traditionally assigned to them and the feminine values ascribed to them create psychological strain, the draining of creative energy and the loss of life-aspiration. The effort to deceive themselves by trying to be what they are not masks their own psyches from themselves. They become alien existences to them-

selves and often neurotic. Among the female writers who undertook to unveil the masks that covered their psyches, Sylvia Plath was the forerunner.

Betty Friedan's best-selling *The Feminine Mystique,* published in 1963, literally marked the dawn of the new feminist movement in the United States after the long period of silence succeeding the victory of suffrage in the 1920s. The deep frustration of housewives and the bitterness of motherhood were recognized and articulated by her as the housewives' plight. The modern American woman who has achieved the dream of American women, that is the security of marriage, the bliss of children and a comfortable suburban home, is presented as a self-alienated woman racked by deep frustration and psychological strain, and filled with bitterness over her own creative sterility and lack of a sense of self-fulfillment. Friedan calls this "a problem that has no name."

Several decades ago, Virginia Woolf told a group of female college students that in order to become a creative person it was necessary to have a room of one's own and five hundred pounds a year of one's own income.[9] Contemporary women have attained both yet remain deeply tortured by a sense of self-unfulfillment, of being creatively sterile, desperately unloved. In the 1950s, Doris Lessing had already analyzed the creative sterility, sexual frustration and lack of identity of "free women," those "liberated" women who have economic and moral independence and refuse to find fulfillment in the traditional role of the woman as wife and mother. She traces the neuroticism of free women, their failure to achieve creativity and happiness, to the general malaise of a civilization dominated by money, power and exploitative power-relations, including female-male relations. Although

both male and female are neurotic, victimized by the threatening, sterile force of civilization, the female is more vulnerable as she is subject both to the forces of diseased civilization and, because of the illusion of romantic love, to the neurosis of the male. Those of Lessing's women who try to surrender themselves to men in the pursuit of romantic love lose not only the self but also the responsibility and will for self-creation. Free and intellectually independent Anna Wulf, the protagonist of *The Golden Notebook,* turns into a "naive Anna" when she falls in love. Doris Lessing reveals with merciless accuracy that although free women do not subscribe intellectually to the security of marriage and eternal love, their psyches are not yet prepared for the reality stripped of the illusion of the romantic love by which they will be converted into beautiful love objects. Their longing for dependence on a man, their desire to find an emotionally secure relationship with one man remains with them, causing a strong sense of failure, fatigue and frustration. Their failure and unhappiness is the fate of the avant-guarde in a transitional period.

Doris Lessing's "free women" were indeed avant-guarde in 1955; their problems were too far-fetched and sophisticated to be seriously understood by women in general as their own problems. This was particularly true of American women, who were still busy beautifying their suburban homes, working hard to attract men or smiling in order to achieve acceptance in the professional world. Doris Lessing describes them in one of her novels as comfort-seeking suburban wives who push their husbands to make more money, convert love into property and frantically deceive themselves into believing that money and love will fulfill their desire for self-identity.[10)]

Both Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* and Maria Wyeth in *Play*

It As It Lays enter this world as most-promising candidates for success in it, the former with brains and the right education and the latter with beauty. Both come to find a terrible vision of the real world, of their lives in it and, above all, of their own inadequacy to cope with it, let alone transcend it. Both of them do rebel against the tyrannical forces which reduce them to a thing or event and become alienated as a result, but their nervous breakdown or "madness" takes place when they sense that they themselves are part of their vision and that the vision itself is final and complete. In their attempt to escape from the terrible real world, they try to find a harbor in their inner selves, but by recoiling into themselves they find void and silence instead of the harbor of integrity.

Neither Esther nor Maria can communicate their vision; they can only continue to vomit violently, hurting themselves further and sinking more deeply into an inner silence. Esther's breakdown becomes apparent when she returns to her suburban home to find that she was refused entry into a writing course at Harvard. She becomes unable to write, not just poetry, prose or her thesis, but literally any words at all. The fear of being locked in this inner sterility and silence becomes real and the bell jar descends, confining her in an air-tight space cut off from the external world. She can still see the terrifying real world through the glass yet she cannot speak about it or do anything about it. Indeed, like the deformed baby bottled in vinegar-solution in the dissecting room, she remains as a specimen of a mad person.

Maria's "madness" is also characterized by her inability to communicate and her inability to cope with the vision of nothingness she comes to encounter, and her consequent loss of a sense of life and

of herself. Joan Didion's short, elliptical sentences and chopped-up chapters parallel Maria's gradual loss of words and her inability to relate herself and her vision to anything. Her life does not contain any story or rhythm to unify itself and to maintain its structure. In order to keep herself from disintegration, Maria must find an artificial rhythm. She drives out on highways, trying to keep a tight balance in the rapid flow of the highway's movement. Yet this rhythm is artificial, superficial and sterile. It is at best the rhythm of the crude, masculine American energy which produced mechanical American civilization. Not only is it the highway which thousands of Americans, including her father and husband, rode in search of money and success, but also it is what took them to the ghost-towns, to failure, sterility and death. Maria's highway indeed leads her to the heart of the desert or suddenly ends in a junkyard in a slum section of Los Angeles. After the mechanical rhythm betrays her, she has no protection against her own inner sterility, the "unspeakable peril" or force of disintegration she senses in herself and in her environment. She quickly deteriorates, completely losing her psychic energy and ability to act, and thus becomes a mental case.

Both novels present case studies of the nervous breakdowns of young women in a specific social milieu of America. Esther is an all-American girl with straight A's and the right middle-class aspiration ingrained in her through education. *The Bell Jar* is a story about the initiation of this all-American girl into adult American society. The central issue of her initiation is sexual: the story is about Esther's struggle to lose her virginity, which ends with her bleeding to the point of death. Although she survives physically, she does not do so psychically; her initiation is into the world of the terrified female psyche.

The initiation is also social and cultural—she discovers sexist society and culture which deny her as a person. As a *Mademoiselle* guest editor, she is in New York during the summer of 1953, the summer of her junior year, to be initiated into the glamourous world of fashion journalism—to meet famous artists and writers. The stifling atmosphere of the city, with its peanut-smelling subway entrance revealing a dark gulf inside, itself causes her nausea. She feels a deep disgust when she sees her sexy friend Doreen fall in her own brown vomit after a nightclub orgy. Yet it is at a *Ladies' Day* luncheon where Esther suffers from foodpoisoning that causes her to vomit violently.

In fact, her initiation into sexist American life had already begun when she started dating an all-American boy, Buddy Willard, a clean-cut, straight-A pre-med student. Through him she sees the major events in the life of a woman. When Buddy becomes a medical student, learning his role of caring for others, Esther learns the feminine role of being led. Following him through the hospital, she encounters deformed babies, dead and bottled, the traumatic birth of a child and the mother's agony, a body being dissected, and even the naked body of a man, a sight to which she must soon get used, a body which she thinks resembles a turkey. All of these encounters fill her with a sense of imminent threat, and the fear and disgust of the grotesque reality of womanhood. Through him, she learns the hypocritical double moral standard of the society, and of its hostile, masculine force which denies her individuality as a woman. Her experience is the traumatic awakening of a female psyche, frustrated, humiliated and wounded. She learns to hate the values attached to marriage, birth and motherhood.

Symbolically, everyone with whom this American boy, Buddy Willard,

comes in contact becomes insane. His former girl friend, Joan, and even Mrs. Tomolillo, whose baby he delivered, end up in a mental hospital. He, with his Midas's arm causing insanity and death, is, ironically, a doctor. The mental hospital in *The Bell Jar,* like that in *Play It As It Lays*, becomes a metaphor for modern life.

Yet Esther's initiation goes beyond a personal and social level into the sterility and violence of modern civilization and ultimately leads to the void of existence itself. The general atmosphere of malaise, the threat of violence and fear of destruction, enwraps not merely American society but modern civilization itself. Esther's summer in New York was the summer when "they electrocuted the Rosenbergs." Although she was "stupid about execution" at that time, she continued to think about what it was like to be electrocuted. The fear of brutal persecution obsessed her that summer until at the end of the summer she herself is forcibly subjected to electric shocks and her fear turns into a scream. She wonders what terrible thing she had done. The mental hospital where Esther is confined (and where another inmate receives a lobotomy) becomes identical to the prison where Ethel Rosenberg was confined and electrocuted.

In Sylvia Plath's poem, "Daddy," the threatening masculine force of civilization is expressed in the persona of Daddy, the Nazi. Many of her poems evoke the atmosphere of violence and brutality characterized by wartime massacres, concentration camps and the Hiroshima holocaust.[11] Even nature is consistently hostile in her poems, bringing with certainty only death and destruction at the end.[12] Nature is filled with ominous, terror-inspiring little creatures, yet they too are controlled by its hostile, death-causing power. The ominous threat that fills the environment is cosmic in Sylvia Plath's poetry. It comes from

the universe or existence itself. I will return to this point later.

Thus despite the advice one of her bosses gives her, "don't let the wicked city get you down," the city does get her and so does the whole "wicked" civilization. If the city is a prison, so is life, as Esther comes to realize, with one's mind locked in a bell jar. The horror of the real world, visible through the glass, is transparent, but she has no words, no way to communicate her vision of the terror of the real world. She is confined in a terrifyingly silent space within the bell jar.

> The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence.[13)]

A triple level of initiation, into the female psyche, into American society and into existential nothingness, exists also in *Play It As It Lays*. Maria's breakdown is understood specifically through her feminine experiences—the fraudulent male-female relation, the failure of love and marriage, her sorrow over her deformed child and the traumatic, lonely and guilt-ridden experience of abortion. She plays the leading role of a girl who is raped in a film made by her husband. Yet these feminine experiences are dramatized as typical American experiences as well. A satire on American society, this Hollywood novel is clearly the female version of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Maria is a beautiful girl who comes to New York from a small Western town in order "to make it." She moves on to do so in the Hollywood world of stars and glitter, yet this is exactly where she breaks down, while her director-husband makes himself rich and famous. Her father was a typical American dreamer-failure, a man who invested in a town called "Silver Wells" to realize his American dream. When Maria returns there at the end of the novel, she finds his Silver Wells has become a U.S. missile site. The novel's constant references to high-

ways, gambling and the make-believe world of movie sets evoke the vivid landscape of a superficial, success-oriented society where everyone plays games only to lose.

Like *The Bell Jar, Play It As It Lays* is a psychic case study of the unsuccessful initiation of an innocent American girl into womanhood and into American society. Yet the drama is placed in the generally sterile and barren landscape of a desert where rattlesnakes lurk under the rocks. As in the case of Sylvia Plath's nature, the desert is a metaphor for the cosmic universe, for existence itself. Maria escapes from a decadent Hollywood, but her escape into highways in search of order and personal integrity ends in a real desert. There she is engulfed by the cosmic nothingness. Her breakdown comes because she had "been out there where nothing is" and was in danger of losing her sense of her own being.

Thus her real initiation is into the world of nothingness, and the threat it poses to her sense of her fundamental existence. In this novel, as in the case of *The Bell Jar,* the protagonist's personal encounter with nothingness is expressed by Sartrean nausea. The nothingness is evil because it destroys innocence and the energy that sustains life. Maria's father had warned her not to overturn the rocks, for rattlesnakes would come out. In Maria's newly discovered vision, rattlesnakes exist everywhere—a honeymooning couple, an innocent baby in its playpen, and even a man who entered the desert in search of God are killed by them.

The climactic scene of the novel takes place in Death Valley, the dwelling place of rattlesnakes, where Maria's husband is shooting his new film. (Maria is no longer the star of his film, but goes there only as an observer of the shooting.) Maria's initial encounter with

nothingness must lead her to its very core—to the point of the absolute zero of life in Death Valley. It is the world of the inferno, where the temperature rises above one hundred degrees and missile and atomic experimentation threatens total destruction. There are only two trees there, one of which is dead. After "helping" her friend BZ to commit suicide in Death Valley, Maria is removed to a mental institution—her only escape from the desert is into madness.

Both Esther Greenwood and Maria Wyeth are taken to mental hospitals after nightmarish initiations, terrified, brutally wounded and half-dead, yet neither of them is reduced to a totally powerless victim. They continue to struggle to restore the meaning of life, and to endure for the sake of personal survival. In the height of their "madness," they are curiously aware of their own sense of being. Their crisis is clear and real, yet because of it their energy for life is restored at the end and they survive.

The crucial point in their struggle for survival and renewal comes when they encounter the possibility of death and contemplate suicide. The weight of this encounter with death is incomparably heavier and more significant in Sylvia Plath than in Joan Didion, for death is the single most important theme in Plath's entire work and the dialectic interaction between life and death occupies almost the entire realm of her imagination, while Didion is far from being obsessed by or infatuated with death. Yet, both Esther and Maria experience a moment of recovery, regaining enough psychic energy to continue at least for a while, when they encounter the suicides of their close friends—both of them homosexuals. Maria's survival, her choice of life over death in her extremity of despair, is carefully prepared in the novel; it is presented as the only possible and legitimate survival.

Through descending to the zero point of life, to the core of nothingness where her realization of nothingness engulfs her almost entirely, she emerges as a newly-born existential person, successfully initiated into the world of nothingness. She is the one tree which continues to live in the sterile desert environment. Maria, like the waitress in the desert town of Barstow who sweeps away the sand only to find it brought back endlessly by the wind, joins the existential heroes of Camus, Kafka and Abe Kobo in refusing to be swept away by the terrifying force of nothingness.

Her confinement in the mental hospital, therefore, is not confinement in a bell jar or in Sing-Sing awaiting electrocution. It is an attainment of meaningful silence, a calm repose in the midst of the ever-clearer awareness of nothingness after the drama of initiation. She is preparing to start a new life in the midst of the nothingness. Maria is the still-alive tree in the desert, the person who returned alive from her search for God in the desert although bitten by snakes. Although she did not find any order in life or answer to the existential nothingness, she regained the psychic energy for survival and the will to endure. Her plan is to can fruit and to love her daughter Kate, who suffers from brain damage.

Death, for Didion, is an absolute descent into nothingness and therefore signifies defeat; it is the final loss of man's awareness of existential nothingness. Ironically, Maria now follows another of her father's maxims for successful gambling—"play it as it lays." In the asylum, Maria plays solitaire, a lonely game of life. Death, especially suicide, is presented in the novel as an attractive temptation. Maria does not stop her friend BZ from taking an overdose of pills, yet she herself refuses to be tempted by its luring promise of comfort and

escape from pain and suffering.

For Sylvia Plath too, suicide is a "truly serious philosophical problem"[14] in the world of nothingness, but it is more central to Plath's drama than to Didion's. For it is not only a question of her existential choice of not to live, but it is a choice of death as a path for rebirth.[15] Esther Greenwood does attain a sense of life, however, when her friend's suicide causes her to be struck by the terrible meaninglessness of one's existential awareness. For both Esther and Maria, it is terrifying life in contrast to the terrifying and absolute void of death that they choose. Both live off the deaths of others.

Yet Esther's decision is not to endure the meaninglessness of existence, but only to live for the time-being. The question of suicide is not resolved (she remains infatuated with death), but only postponed for a while. For as she says in the end, the bell jar might descend again at any time, anywhere. Esther has a sense of unbelievable luck if the destructive nothingness does not strike her catastrophically.[16] While Maria has decided to play the game of life as it lays, even though the chance of the player winning is negligible, Esther emerges from the hospital with a psyche still obsessed with the sense of catastrophe, of threat from the brutal masculine force, and of her own vulnerability. This sense is balanced only for a while with the desire to live her fear of death evokes.

Furthermore, Esther has once yielded to the delirious temptation of death, not through despair and fatigue, but through profound inquiry into her psychic past. Death had once appeared as a vision of rebirth that purifies life and clarified meanings for her. In Sylvia Plath's poems, her father, who deserted her by dying, appears as God, a man in black, a Nazi, a doctor and a husband; all of them are cruel and

authoritarian, persecuting her brutally or demanding sacrifice. The personae in her poems hate and fear these figures yet admire and love them at the same time. All women love Nazis, as Plath says, and they are masochistically drawn to them.[17] To be persecuted by them is thus almost a religious sacrifice or revenge made by converting the demand for submission into a willful, masochistic act. The resurrection of the personae as bitches or witches is an act of grotesque transcendence.

Suicide provides not only a psychic salvation close to what religion supplies, but also an archetypal or mythical vision which brings reconciliation with the universe. It is at the ocean where Esther, confronted by the destructive yet tempting force of the waves, contemplates her own death. The ominous power of the ocean is a theme in many of her poems and in her early prose work "Ocean 1212-W."[18] The sea is the ultimate image of nature for Sylvia Plath, ultimate in the sense that it is the cosmic universe into which nature merges; it is the primordial core of life and nature. Nature, for Plath, is mostly hostile and destructive; it is at best indifferent, presenting an absolutely alien order. Yet nature is charged with a cosmic force which maintains and destroys life, a force whose source is the sea. The sea thus is archetypal, the primordial origin of life where all life returns through death. Plath's longing for "death by water" is for a return to this original life, it is her aspiration for rebirth.[19] The sea is not benevolent, however; it is hostile in the sense that it represents original nothingness. Yet again, it is the absorption into this powerful nothingness that Plath desires and fears. Esther gains the sense of herself only when she confronts the sea, the original force of life and death.

Submission to this force is an ecstatic homecoming, a means of

participating in the cosmic drama, a purging of personal agony and guilt. At this moment of almost religious, mythic vision, the fear of death is numbed by the ecstasy of self-annihilation this vision provides. Life, on the other hand, does not present for Plath a vision alternative to that of death, but only relief from the fear and terror of dying. In her poems, poppies, tulips and other small flowers assure the temporary calmness of life, of life which is still vulnerable to the imminent threat but has luckily escaped catastrophe thus far.[20] For her, life is a balance slimly maintained in the interval before the final plunge into death.[21]

Life and death are experienced on both realistic and mythical planes,[22] as existential visions transformed into a mythical cosmic vision. While for Plath, death and poetry both destroy the integral and comfortable vision of reality and life, they evade reality itself in their attempt to reconstruct and go beyond it, blurring the sense of the self in it. All of her works explore, in the dialectic of life and death, the temptation for suicide on psychic and cosmic planes, and in *The Bell Jar*, on a social plane as well. In all of the survivals her characters experience, the sense of an imminent threat and destruction, and of terrible vulnerability remains. This sense of threat and vulnerability is experienced and dramatized as woman's psychic experience. The hostile forces of the environment (the wars, concentration camps, holocausts and natural calamities) are dramatized as masculine forces, closely related to the violence and fear of rape, birth and bleeding.[23] Plath remains one of the few and certainly one of the first women writers who "confessed" or explored the most private, emotional areas of womanhood, areas which she considered to have been taboo.[24]

In particular, Sylvia Plath places marriage and love, childbirth

and motherhood in a general atmosphere of sickness, menace and decay, as events in woman's vulnerable, terrified psyche. Dead and pickled babies, Thalidomide babies, the screams of both mothers and babies at the time of delivery and the "stink of baby crap"—the birth of the baby is set in the atmosphere of a Gothic story.[25] The child is born into a world of darkness and evil and the birth is a traumatic experience for both baby and mother. The sense of inadequacy of being a mother and the chilled discovery of the otherness of the child are expressed throughout her works.[26]

Maria Wyeth, too, suffers from the guilt of her inadequacy as a mother. Although Maria's love of Kate, her brain-damaged daughter, reflects her compassion for innocent victims of the evil of existence, she cannot but feel deep guilt for her as well. Not only does she see Kate as a victim of her loveless marriage, of her failure in love, but she also sees her senseless and unjust suffering as the result of her failure as a mother, her inability to save her or to protect her from the world of evil. After the abortion, she is haunted by a vision of the fetus in a garbage can or flushed down the toilet. As a mother, Maria is both the guilt-stricken torturer and the tortured.

Through a terrifying "feminine failure," the modern hero who embodies and combats the twentieth century crisis emerges. The cases of Esther and Maria are not only pathologies of "feminine failure," but of human failure, while their struggle to go beyond the reality of nothingness is the central drama of modern life. Both Esther and Maria, in their effort to regain the sense of the self, try to reconstruct their past, delving into the depths of their psyche down to their "original experience" in childhood; Esther meditates on her father's death and Maria on Silver Wells and her mother's death in the desert.

Only when they find that their parents were subject to the same terrifying force of nothingness, do they feel the destiny that unites them with their parents. Their personal history becomes identified with the history of modern American people; they are the younger sisters of Nick Adams, Tod Hackett and Asa Leventhal. Their return, therefore, from the terrifying descent into inner darkness and silence becomes the return of the modern hero who survived, if temporarily, initiation into the modern wasteland.

Notes

1) Charles Newman, "Candor is the Only Wile: the Art of Sylvia Plath," *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p. 27.
2) The novel was published in England in 1963 under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. It was published in America by Harper and Row under the author's real name in 1971.
3) New York: Harper and Row, 1970.
4) Carolyn Heilbrun, "The Woman as Hero," *The Texas Quarterly*, 3, No. 4 (Winter 1965), 132–141.
5) *Ibid.*, p. 140.
6) Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963), 11–27.
7) Ibsen's Nora and Faulkner's Lena Grove are prototypes of the modern mother-earth Goddess.
8) Friedan, p. 40.
9) *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1957).
10) See *Play With a Tiger* (New York: Bantam, 1962); see also *The Golden Notebook* (New York: Bantam, 1962).
11) See, for example, "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," "Lesbos," "Garden of Tortures," "Fever 103," "Mary's Song," and *The Bell Jar*.
12) For comprehensive analyses of nature in Sylvia Plath, see Ingrid Melander, *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1972); Annette Lavers, "The World of Icon: On Sylvia Plath's Themes," Newman ed., 100–135; and Edward Lucie-Smith,

"Sea-Imagery in the Work of Sylvia Plath, *Ibid.*, 91–99.

13) *The Bell Jar*, p. 15.

14) Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 3.

15) Death as a rebirth can be seen most clearly in such major poems as "Ariel" and "Lady Lazarus," and in most of her sea poems, including, in particular, "Lorelei," "Full Fathom Five" and "Suicide at Egg Rock." For analyses of the theme of death in Plath, see Melander, Lavers and Lucie-Smith. The significance of death in Plath's imagination and the relation between her poetry and her obsession with death are analyzed by A. Alvarez in *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971).

16) Lavers, p. 105.

17) See "Daddy" (*Ariel*, New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

18) In "Ocean 1212-W," Plath describes her first discovery of otherness while staying at the ocean cottage of her grandmother. For analyses of this work and the theme of the sea, see Newman, Melander, Lavers and Lucie-Smith.

19) See, for example, such sea poems as "Full Fathom Five," "Point Shirley," "Suicide off Egg Rock" and "Lorelei."

20) See "Poppies in October," "Tulips" and "Poppies in July."

21) Wendy Martin emphasizes Plath's desperate effort to "balance on the 'razor edge' of the opposing forces of life and death." "God's Lioness: Sylvia Plath, her Prose and Poetry," *Women's Studies*, 1, No. 2 (1973), 191–198. On this theme, see also Lavers, A. Alvarez, *The Savage God*, and his "Sylvia Plath," Newman ed., pp. 56–68.

22) Josephine Donovan points out that throughout Plath's short stories, central themes are developed on both realistic and mythical levels. "Sexual Politics in Sylvia Plath's Short Stories," *The Minnesota Review*, 4 (Spring 1973), 150–157. For an analysis of the cosmic and religious levels in poetry, see Lavers.

23) For an analysis of the sexual politics in Plath's works, see Josephine Donovan.

24) See Plath's interview and reading of poems for BBC; *The Poet Speaks*, ed. Peter Orr (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 167–169. Sylvia Plath indeed writes extensively on pregnancy, childbirth, child-rearing, motherhood and child-mother relations. The baby is one of the significant images in her poetry.

25) The best examples are "The Manor Garden," "Mary's Song" and "Thalidomide."

26) In Plath, the mother's feeling about birth and towards her child is quite complex; it is a feeling of exhiliration and joy mixed with fear and a chilled sense of alienation. See, for example, "The Disquieting Muses," "Morning Song," "Magi," "Nick and the Candlestick," "Mary's Song," "Child," and "Brasilia." Religious references to Christ appear often in her baby poems. For analyses of motherhood in Plath see Margaret D. Vroff, "Sylvia Plath on Motherhood," *The Midwest Quarterly*, 15 (1973), 70–90; and Marjorie G. Perloff, "On the Road to *Ariel:* The 'Transitional' Poetry of Sylvia Plath," *The Iowa Review*, 4 (1973), 94–110.