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Defending the aesthetics of *The Bell Jar*

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Introduction

Having been published for 58 years, *The Bell Jar* received numerous reviews that focused on its different aspects. The contemporary readers, praising the cult of Sylvia Plath, were more drawn to the life of the author; or else praising her as a protofeminist figure. The novel became a *New York Times* bestseller only after it was published under Plath's own name, meaning the fame of the novel was built upon the author. While focusing on listing the parallels of the plot to Plath's life experience that happened mostly in 1953, Carol LeVarn, who recognised herself as the inspiration of Doreen, said it was a "thorough betrayal" (Winder 246) to her real character. *Red Comet*, the biography by Heather Clark also regards the incidents in New York as an "inspiration" of the novel. Modification of reality, with the concealment of the author's identity under 'Victoria Lucas' in its 1963 publication, drove the novel away from the categorisation of an autobiography to a Roman à Clef, a *novel* with a key. Plath did not initially intend to make the novel, in any sense, an autobiography.

Ignoring Plath's autobiographical inclination could lead us to a more neutral point of view when we read the novel. Thus, I would like to appreciate the aesthetics by presenting several symbolic objects that materialise the themes of the novel. Three notable images: the bell jar, larkspurs and roses, and the fig tree will be the extension of five reviews from the first readers in 1963, following a summary of their inadequacies with John Crowe Ransom's definition of literary criticism in 'Criticism, Inc.'. These three metaphorical objects are significant to indicate Esther, the protagonist's thoughts on her situation throughout the plot, and thus worthwhile for our attention.

Reviewing the 1963 newspaper articles

I retrieved five reviews on printed newspapers by the first batch of readers dating from 24 January to 1 February 1963 in London (see Appendix 1). *The Bell Jar* was presented along with other novels published in the same reviews. All authors were doing a decontextualised reading, except Lerner, who knew that Plath was the author (Clark 852). I regard Lerner's review as taking the New Critical approach, as he omitted mentioning Plath's biographical details (for Ransom, it is a kind of "historical studies" that he regarded as "parallel citations" (598), not criticism) in his article; as well as the other reviewers that performed a neutral reading. Ransom regarded these non-institutionalised reviews as "amateurs" (586) as their comments are personal and focus on the plot of the novel. The nature of a newspaper column limited the depth and length of the discussion in these reviews, which are rather explicatory and concise for the public to digest.

The five reviews rated *The Bell Jar* highly. In common, they begin with a short summary of the story, then progress onto their comments on Esther: the metaphorical description of her thoughts, and the plot featuring depression. These were superficial comments that fall in the "synopsis and paraphrase" category of what Ransom (598) defined criticism is not. The focus on the plot prevented the reviewers from touching on the "real content" – some deeper connotations of the novel. Though I could make my critical claim following some of their directions: the importance of the bell jar as a visualisation of inner thoughts (mentioned in 'Under the skin', also by Lerner and Taubman); Esther's experience as "dreamlike" ('New Fiction'); and the criticism that Esther might have been magnifying her feelings, which her pain was bearable in the reviewers' eyes (in 'New Fiction' and by Duchene). These were fundamental thoughts for my following New Critical analysis.

While the recent readings gave this novel more attention, the attention was on the 'cult of Sylvia Plath' to treat mental disorder as a theme to write, and her influence on feminism: "*The Bell Jar* was a call to action because it is a diary of despair" (Winterson 2013). These essays mostly treat *The Bell Jar* as an autobiography of Plath, and treat its protagonist as a shadow of the author. Like the online reading group reported by Jordison (2013): people list parallels of Esther and Plath to prove that reading it as an autobiography is the only way, then regard Esther's resistance to the male-manipulated world as an encouragement to her female readers. Yet treating the novel as an autobiography is a fallacy. Toomey's interview with Aurelia, Sylvia's mother, proves that the autobiographical approach leads to misinterpretation: "[Aurelia] is, quite obviously, *not* Mrs Greenwood [(Esther's mother)]. [Aurelia] and her son Warren can discern the elements of five people they and Sylvia knew in this character" ('In Search of Sylvia'), meaning the novel is more fictional than autobiographical. Using the pseudonym 'Victoria Lucas' means to separate the fictional and real words, therefore it is incorrect to compare the characters with real-life people around Sylvia, or to see the life of Sylvia through *The Bell Jar*.

Esther is a character created by Plath, and thus should be reviewed separately. I would like to discover a better approach to view the novel: a decontextualised, New Critical reading of *The Bell Jar* fits more with Plath's original intention to publish the novel under the pseudonym 'Victoria Lucas'. To supplement the five articles, the following analysis will expand their comments on *The Bell Jar*. Analogically expressing the author's view with images and objects is skilful labour, thus I will focus on the metaphorical object, the ones that magnify Plath's writing skills.

The bell jar

The bell jar was a visualisation of Esther's state of mind, and the level it hung above her was like a thermometer indicating her mental condition: the lower it covered, the worse her state was. Layers of its meanings get richer following the plot.

It is worth first mentioning the paratext that influences the perception of the novel, as it affects the readers' first impression. The title "The Bell Jar" hinted at the significance of the imagery conjuring the focal point of the novel: linking the image to the theme of Esther's psyche, her thoughts. The meaning of the abstract image is only revealed by reading through the novel: the bell jar image is emphasised as the title of the novel, indicating that the readers' focal point should be Esther's inner thoughts.

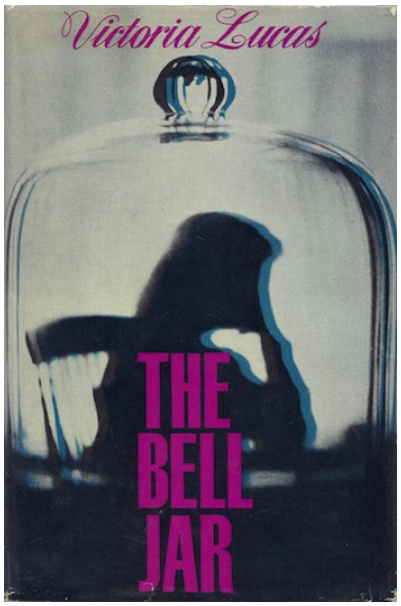

Image 1: Cover of the first The Bell Jar *publication (Heinemann 1963)*

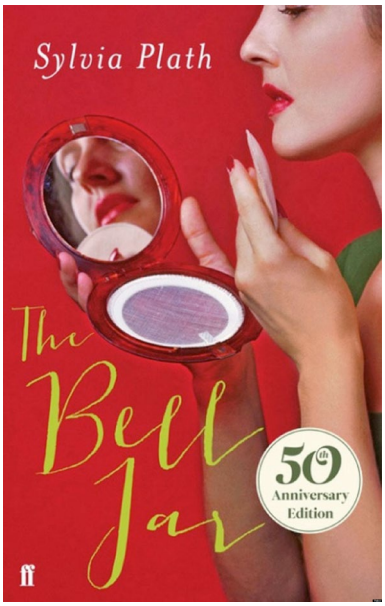

Image 2: Cover of The Bell Jar *50th anniversary edition (Faber & Faber 2013)*

However, the cover art of the 50th anniversary had derived its attention away from the iconic object – the bell jar, and problematically portrayed the novel as a

"glorified chick lit" (Topping 2013). The first edition of *The Bell Jar*, intended by Plath, was a dark story of Esther's deepest trauma, of her progress walking out from the worst state of depression. Its cover art features a shadow of a girl inside the bell jar, which in this sense the readers were consciously aware of 'the girl in the bell jar', thus paying attention to Esther's psychological journey. Whereas the 50th-anniversary edition cover art is of a beautiful woman holding a powder compact, and her red lips were reinforced by the reflection of the hand-held mirror. The 2013 edition cover had a brighter colour tone than the 1963 edition, with the red background reinforcing the femininity in the novel that seems to have ignored the dark thoughts of Esther. It was delivering a false "para-textual message" (Genette 262) to the readers that the tale was not dark, and drew their focus towards the glamorous life Esther led at the beginning instead of her illness in most of the plot. Matching the two important elements of paratext: the title and the cover art, the first edition was a better match between the title "The Bell Jar" and the photograph of a girl in the bell jar. It is incongruent to match the title "The Bell Jar", the darker psyche with the vibrant cover art of the beautiful city woman. If the title of the novel was not "The Bell Jar", drawing our attention to the protagonist's thoughts, then we may not see it so problematic for the 2013 edition cover to present the novel in such a belittling way of Esther's experience in the bell jar.

Throughout the novel, the bell jar symbolises the narratological control of older Esther. Older Esther, as the narrator, controls our perception of younger Esther's story depicted in the novel. The first paragraph of the novel featured older Esther thinking about the Rosenbergs' electrocution, which reminded her of her experience of depression in the same summer, hereafter inspiring her to write the novel. For the two 'Esthers', electro-shock treatment was a traumatic experience that was like an execution, as the "worst thing in the world" (1). The imagery of the bell jar was then

built up, and after Esther's first shock treatment at Doctor Gordon's hospital, the bell jar appeared in the main text. Comparing the Rosenbergs and Doctor Gordon's 'executions' suggests Esther's critique on her shock treatment – younger Esther's illness was not a crime, yet she was treated no differently than the Rosenbergs, executed as Soviet spies ('A Cold War Tragedy'). This is a sarcastic remark for the poorly conducted treatment that her mother had brought her to do, leading the appearance of the bell jar.

The bell jar first appeared in Chapter Fifteen, when Esther was in a sober mood sitting in Philomena Guinea's car. Escaping the mistreatment at the hospital ought to be an exciting thing for her, only she had not yet recovered from the aftermath of the poorly conducted shock treatments, leaving her numb and shut in the bell jar "stewing in [her] own sour air" (195). The scene is a wrestle among three forces, pulling Esther towards extremes: Esther was numbly trapped in between extreme sensations of enjoyment and torture, reflecting the fluctuating nature of mental disorder (bipolar disorder). After being tortured by her first electric shock at Doctor Gordon's hospital, Esther was traumatised. That was why she hoped to opt into radical acts: to engage in multiple suicide attempts by trying to hang and drown herself (in Chapter Thirteen); and "eat narcotics in her own coal-hole" (Duchene 1963), in which swallowing sleeping pills at the cellar (177-178) was Esther's closest to death. Her later thought to have the "water over her head" (194) indicated Esther's desire to seek liberation from trauma through suicide – seeking physical pain against her mental pain. For Esther, to die is an extreme enjoyment, as her mind would be liberated from her physical body after enduring the pain. Entering into the stage of the void was her biggest crave.

As a Unitarian (58) growing up in a Catholic environment, Esther is aware that her suicidal tendency is a sin, but her desire to end her sufferings had overridden her

rational knowledge of God's judgement: Esther rated going to hell as a sinner better than to be tortured alive, and "believed in hell" (213). Older Esther attempted to stabilise Esther's situation by holding her in the middle of the bell jar, though younger Esther had attempted it with sleeping pills that brought her a moment of oblivion through the coma. The shock treatment at Doctor Gordon's hospital induced the appearance of the bell jar, meaning the activation of Esther's defence mechanism, only younger Esther did not quite perceive and able to express it as the bell jar which older Esther did.

This brings forward the tension between older and younger Esther. The transparent glass bell jar separated her from the outside world – seeing through but the outside world remained detached from Esther and her senses numbed by the sour air, so she could see but not feel. Younger Esther perceived the numbness "wadded" (195) her that she could not run away from her trauma as she hoped. But indeed, her defence mechanism was helping: shutting Esther in the bell jar, and using the sour air to numb all her senses, including her pains. That was like cryotherapy – pouring liquid nitrogen on one's wound. The freezing chemical leaves the wound numb for ten to fifteen minutes, but it is a good way to treat wounds and painfulness ('Liquid Nitrogen (Freezing) Wound Care'). This comparison corresponds to Esther's later description of her feeling in the bell jar, being "blank and stopped as a dead baby" (250), numbed and petrified. Older Esther, through the sour air and the bell jar, was attempting to heal younger Esther's trauma through the numbing sour air; and used the shield-like bell jar to protect her and allow her to rest in the protected space. The bell jar was Esther's defence mechanism, understood and visualised as the bell jar by older Esther.

In Chapter Eighteen, the bell jar is mentioned for the second time, after a better-conducted shock treatment session at Belsize. Being well-cared and properly treated

and having chances to move around, Esther improved, that she was no longer stirring in her sour air, but opened to the "circulating air" (227) outside. Esther progressed from the state of "wadded" and the disability to "feel a thing" (195) in the effect of the sour air. Her 'shut' in the ball jar had stopped her extreme sensations, buying time for her to recover. She was treated more friendly at Caplan, the walk privileges there opened Esther to more stimulations from the world, allowing her interaction with the purifying "fresh, blue-skied air" (227), and with friendlier people such as Valerie who tried to befriend her (198). The environment is less depressing than the oppressing psychiatric ward that Esther stayed before taken to Caplan. Esther had resumed her normal sensations. These positive stimulations prepared Esther for her return to college, and opened her to society again, initiating a friendship with Miss Norris (200) though the effort was futile. The positive sensations pulled Esther out from the fluctuating state that she experienced in New York and at Doctor Gordon's hospital: Esther was over-excited by the city life in New York that exhausted her, thus need peace to recover. The people and the environment at Caplan were better stimulations that neutralised Esther's past desire for death and her trauma from shock treatments. Though we should be aware that the bell jar was still "hung, suspended, a few feet about [her] head" (227), implying that her defence mechanism was still in alert and would activate whenever Esther needed. Half-lifting the bell jar displayed Esther's progress, though Esther was still vulnerable, and her psyche had to be protected. The half-lifted bell jar foretold Esther's recovery, to step out of the 'funny' state of severe depression, and return to her improved 'good old self' before heading to New York – a straight A's student and a rising artist.

The third time the bell jar was referred to was drawing to an end of Esther's trivial experience over the plot. The visualised bell jar in the ending chapter of the novel

commented on Esther's "six months' lapse" (249). This reflection sparked during her chat with Doctor Nolan before her last psychiatrist interview, when the metaphor of the bell jar was added as another "inner-directed" ('Anti-heroes') layer of comparison. Other than as a visualised defence mechanism, the bell jar also brought us to witness Esther's mental development. After its materialisation through the traumatic shock treatment, working as a protection and healing shield, older Esther brought the bell jar image back to an untouchable psychological domain: she reviewed her experience as a "bad dream" (250) she might remember for the rest of her life, the deep sleep prompted by the sleeping pills she devoured. The bell jar, by the end of the novel, becomes a conceptual, historical part of Esther, and someday it may "descend again" (254), return to a materialised form. Doctor Nolan's description echoes the one in 'New Fiction' (1963), which also pointed out Esther's "worst experiences are dreamlike". The dream is another dimension remote from reality, but nightmares could motivate one to reflect, thus leading her to grow. At this stage, Esther matured and started to treat her depression as her "landscape": to accept her traumatising nightmare as a part of her, which not only brought her 'madness' but also a big lesson to learn. At this stage, Esther was not anymore "in her private world" ('Under the Skin'), instead, she was waiting for her last interview before returning to college, setting her step back to the open society.

That was also the stage when Esther regained her sympathy towards the others, marking her recovery. Esther's depression, summarised in a sentence, is caused by her reluctance and fear to grow up as a woman – the anxiety towards the future (discussed in the coming chapter). Her choice, after experiencing the over-excited life in New York and things that are out of her comprehension, is to refuse from maturing, and attempt to ditch from it through death. While her failure reminded her of the fact that

she has to face her fate, to get over and regain her life. After the healing and all the treatments she received in the bell jar, she was able to think about the universal problem of maternity and incomprehensible pains that all girls are enduring, coming to her conclusion that "[t]hose girls, too sat under bell jars of a sort" (251). Esther's conclusion that her experience is universal and that she is not the only one that suffers from depression marks her restoration of connection with the world; and she is not anymore considering herself as an alienated person from the world, but considers how the other girls may share her experience. The ending here has made the novel less dark – as a "six month's lapse" (249) is just a chapter of Esther's story, which with the other episodes her life is less tragic. Esther perceived that the other girls, such as Joan, are suffering from their own pains like her, but she is just a lucky one whom she is saved and is able to express herself through writing the novel. Comparing her case with the other girls is a way to demonstrate that Esther has connected back to society and (temporarily) need not the bell jar to protect her anymore.

The course of her six months' breakdown has led Esther to experience another mode of life as an alienated character – a reversed social character compared to her past as a straight A's student, as the centre of attention. Later, older Esther reviewed her experiences and Esther's defence mechanism that protected the young Esther in the plot. How much the bell jar, the 'protection and healing shield' activated was according to younger Esther's mental state, changing according to her circumstance. Plath was not, with such arrangements, only working out a coherent metaphor for readers to enjoy, but also placing milestones for Esther's improvements. Therefore, the bell jar is the most significant object in the novel, not only because it is put in the title as the main focus of the novel, but it is also symbolic for Esther herself to remark on such a big transition in her life.

Flowers

Easily overlooked, flowers have deep connotations that could help us to reach the "deeper content" (Ransom 598). Though the 1963 articles had not mentioned them, the note on the bell jar as a symbolic object had inspired me to look for more objects with connotations I can explore, this is why the flowers are examined in this discussion. The flowers stirred up Esther's negative emotions when her subjective perception contrasted with the flowers that are supposed to have a positive effect on her.

Flowers distributed at the maternity ward

Despite their vitality, flowers carry ominous connotations in *The Bell Jar*. Two scenes featuring larkspurs and roses have significant importance on the plot. To improve her depression, Esther was advised to go to serve the sick at a hospital and sent to the maternity ward to distribute flowers (Chapter Thirteen). This was an ominous last-straw scene, distressing Esther further to her suicide, marked by the literary presentation of the flowers. A trolley of flowers was given to her, distributed to the women in the maternity ward. It is supposed to be a lively episode where the energetic flowers echo the vitality in the ward, as the women were giving birth to new lives. However, the flowers were "droopy and brown at the edge" (170), on the verge of dying.

The contrast was foreboding. The sight of putting the dying flowers beside mothers to be has a hidden connotation that maternity and womanhood mean death to females, which links to Esther's critique on womanhood. The flowers were comparable to those women. It is the death of a girl and reborn as a woman – as a mother, as a wife, but not herself, reminding us of the woman's rebirth in Plath's poem 'Lady Lazarus':

the never-ending suffering of generations of females is contagious. For Esther, she fears her mature life will end up like these women, living a life away from her ambition to flourish as she wanted. Seeing the terrible outcome of growth stirred up her fear further, and pushed her to her suicide attempt. To die at a young age means escaping from womanhood, from maturity; and thus remaining to be herself. The fine details of the appearance of the dying flowers highlight Esther's view on maternity.

Another reading of the scene is the connotation of infanticide. There were only six women in the maternity ward, but their babies, supposed to be next to their mothers, were absent from the scene. Or it could have been Esther's hostility towards babies in general, leading to her ignorance of them. This reminds of a previous scene from Chapter Six, of Esther's encounter with bottles of dead babies at a chemistry lab at Yale:

> After that, Buddy took me out into the hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born. The baby in the first bottle had a large white head bent over a tiny curled-up body the size of a frog. The baby in the next bottle was bigger and the baby next to that one was bigger still and the baby in the last bottle was the size of a normal baby and he seemed to be looking at me and smiling a little piggy smile. (66)

We can draw an uncanny relation between these scenes: the absent babies were dead before they were born, then "pickled in a laboratory" (13). The images were linked up by the number 'six' (by coincidence, six women were in the ward, and the specimen made of babies appeared in chapter six, printed on page sixty-six), a symbol of Satan, marking an ominous flag. Then in this sense, the absent babies then became an object for examination instead of leading a joyful childhood. Esther's transferral of the babies was then shed with a Satanic undertone that Esther might be a reluctant deliverer,

offering the babies to death. The cart of dying flowers that is given to her in the trolley was like offering the dead babies to their reluctant mothers on the stretcher. Metaphorically presenting the dead babies as flowers is to deliver the scene in a less disturbing way.

However, Esther found herself a misfit in such a gloomy environment. To cope with the incomprehensible sight, Esther tried to "pick out all those that were dying" (170), from the trolley, reorganising the flowers – unwillingly arranging the funeral for the women and the babies. The description of Esther picking out the dead flowers shed "poetic flashes" ('Under the Skin') on the scene. To examine the dead flowers was like a pathologist, examining the 'dead bodies' of the women, then reorganising them was like embalming the dead bodies. Next, Esther placed the dead flowers in the basin, which "felt cold as a tomb" (170). The whole process resembles the process of placing dead bodies in the morgue then moving into tombs. This scene laid suspense to build up the suicide attempt later in the chapter because of the highly suggestive resemblance.

Esther's ominous undertone sparked the tension between the women and herself. She was repeatedly asked for a bunch of larkspurs that "the flabby lady" (171) received from her husband Larry. Larkspur, as a recurring object, represents love and affection – the fundamental elements of marriage ('The Larkspur Flower'). Whereas the larkspurs were dying, in which I read the bunch as the husband's fading love and affection towards his wife. The bunch of flowers given by Larry, the only named character Esther met at the hospital, enforcing a male dominance on the all-women maternity ward environment. Her demand for the bunch of dying flowers from Esther gave the impression that she wants to cling to this fading marriage.

Another woman, a “sharp face blond” (171) complained that Esther had “loused up [her] yellow roses” with “some lousy iris” (172). The flamboyant yellow roses are wedding gifts to newly married couples, but paradoxically symbolise infidelity during the Victorian period (Daniels 2021) – those dead yellow roses forebode her husband’s mischief. The iris flowers that were put together with the yellow roses signify a “better understanding and perception” (Mukherjee 2021). The seemingly random joint of the bouquets has a deeper meaning, in which Esther had unintendedly brought forward the mistrust to the blond woman’s consciousness, reminding her of the reality she will have to face leaving the hospital. Her complaint about Esther not giving her the whole bunch had a similar meaning with the “flabby lady”, which she was refusing to comprehend that she was less attractive for her husband after being a mother.

The two women seemed to have accepted their miserable circumstance being a woman, only Esther, who was afraid of womanhood, had unconsciously spectated and rejected the darkness of femininity. Her intervention to their lives which did not go according to the women’s expectations caused their conflict in Chapter Thirteen. Esther’s running away, with her action of dumping the uniform into the washbasin with the dead flowers she picked out, remarked her unacceptance of womanhood. Running away also hinted that Esther was scared away from the brutality facing womanhood. This action of dumping the sage-green hospital uniform marks the moment Esther stepped into ‘complete madness’, towards her multiple suicidal attempts. The “sage-green volunteer’s uniform” she wore represents “peacefulness and tranquillity” (‘Choosing Medical Scrubs Colors at Your Hospital’), which not only she was delivering them to the women who were “worse off than [Esther]” (170) as mothers, but also represented her mother’s hope that she will regain inner peace tranquillity. However, she dumped it, signifying her disposal of rationality.

On the other hand, we should be aware of the possibility for Esther's subjective perspective to perceive the lively flowers on the cart as dying flowers. In this sense, her picking out "lousing" behaviour on the flowers is then an intentional action because of her jealousy of the women who had gotten over the growth pain and successfully became mothers. For Esther, to see the women "chattering like parrots in a parrot house" (171) after giving birth is bewildering, as it is unimaginable for her to have overcome such "terrible pain" (69) giving birth herself. She cannot imagine herself enduring such pain. Esther may be spoiling the flowers – the love from the husbands for the flower to let them feel her displeasure and fear for growing even though they were merrily enjoying maternity.

Roses as Esther's birthday present

In Chapter Sixteen, Mrs Greenwood, Esther's mother visited her at Caplan on her birthday and gave her a bunch of red roses as a gift. Only Esther rejected the present and told her to "save them for [Esther's] funeral" (214). The scene happened during Esther's worst point when the bell jar covered low, and she was completely trapped under it. Under that state, Esther's perception of the outside and reading of others' actions are distorted by the obstructing glass of the bell jar. Similar to the mentioned hospital scene, Esther threw away a bunch of "blood-red buds of a dozen long-stemmed roses" (212), which she mistook as her mother's gift to celebrate Saint Valentine's Day, but was later reminded it is her birthday. Celebrating Esther's birthday was mental torture to the death-desiring protagonist, as birthday represents the growth in age, yet for Esther, mentioning her age is like drawing a temporal mark on how long she had been tortured being alive. That also explains the reason why she has a distorted concept

of time. Esther visited New York in summer, and fell sick after that, when Saint Valentine's Day has already passed in February. It is an effect of the bell jar that excluded Esther from the normal, linear conception of time – in a state of vacuum that she is drawn outside of the society.

The bunch of red roses Esther rejected represent romantic love and desires, and is usually given between couples, leading to Esther's misunderstanding of the date. Mrs Greenwood's choice of red roses in that scenario is then inappropriate since she could not comprehend Esther's real need at the time – a complete separation from the outside so as to have a resting space. However, Esther "hate[d] those visits" (213), especially Mrs Greenwood's, in which she treats as emotional blackmail. From Esther's description: "She never scolded me, but kept begging me, with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong" (213), we can see Mrs Greenwood's misconception of Esther's case and somehow refused to understand her needs to rest. Mrs Greenwood's behaviour, for Esther, is emotional blackmail. She was attempting to make Esther *improve* by invoking her guiltiness towards her "sorrow face". She believes that her daughter, being "perfectly trained" (214) in her early ages, is a perfect person according to the psychoanalytic diagnosis, and there is no reason for her to cause any "trouble" (214). Mrs Greenwood's ignorance of the cause of Esther's severe depression, including her inability to perceive that her decision to take Esther to Doctor Gordon's hospital is a mistake hindered her attitude when she was facing Esther. Instead, she treats Esther's unhappiness as a crime and brought her to Doctor Gordon to "execute" (1) away from the part that she thinks went wrong. Through her mistreatment and attitude towards Esther, we can see the result-oriented characteristic of Mrs Greenwood, in which she focuses on the medical progress, but not on how her daughter is progressing towards rehabilitation. The difference in opinions towards the

treatment of Esther's depression has worsened the mother-daughter relationship because of how they approach the disorder – Esther wants to heal slowly in the bell jar, and Mrs Greenwood expects the recovery to happen shortly after her first shock treatment at Doctor Gordon's hospital, overlooking Esther's needs. The misplacement of the red roses in this scene, then, not only indicates Esther's desire for death, but also portrays the ignorance of her mother that further depressed her.

There is also the possibility that the red rose recalls Esther's traumatic thoughts. The colour red represents blood, the blood that Esther has once wanted to shed to escape from her mental pains. Brought into the Caplan, she is having spaces for herself to let the sour air stir and unwind her traumatised and over-excited mind, yet seeing the "blood-red buds" (212) of the roses that her mother brings in reminds of the red (and blue) lights that she saw when she was at the cellar. We should also be aware that red is a colour that excites people, like how the bulls are charged when they see the red flag. Red is the colour that goes against Esther's need to be tranquilised, and realising her need, she turned to hate her mother who brought in the wrong colour of flower, and cut off the traumatic memories by throwing them away.

Expressing her hatred towards the visits and her mother is a good sign that brought Esther to Belsize. The worst of Esther's depression is provoked by the trauma from her mother's mistreatment – taking her to Doctor Gordon's hospital for badly-executed shock treatments, which induced the appearance of the bell jar. In the stage of being in the bell jar, Esther's terror, hopelessness, and anger are all frozen. Her feelings were inexpressible. While her mother's visit on her birthday is a transition – Esther's little improvement is that she can let out a little part of her emotions, a sign of her first step towards recovery. Esther's expression of her hatred towards her mother, though a negative emotion, indicates that her emotions are gradually soothing. The

protagonist may not realise herself, but she is moving away from the overwhelming thoughts of self-harming. This explains Doctor Nolan's "smile to [Esther] as if something had pleased her very, very much" (214) as she sees that their treatments of insulin and treating her not like a prisoner is working well on Esther, thus giving a satisfied smile.

The two aforementioned scenes are placed near the important plot twists – the pre and post of Esther's suicide attempt at the cellar. The pre-suicide hospital scene of the dying flowers tempts Esther towards her to "eat narcotics in her own coal-hole" ('In Short') with the dying flowers by inducing her refusal to grow and be reborn as a woman. While the latter scene, featuring the lively red rose, is plotted right before she is transferred to Belsize for her second shock treatment. Placing Esther's suicide in between the conflicting flowers sheds an artistic atmosphere – using a front curtain to decorate her dramatic act of committing suicide, so for her readers, it would be less uncanny. Both scenes are about death, which reminds of Plath's poem 'Lady Lazarus': "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well", implying how she liked to metaphorically express her ideas of death. Instead of the disappointing "plastic flowers" (175) at her father's graveyard, she plans to decorate her own grave with eerily beautiful flowers that she 'collected' in the hospital for her own funeral. Expressing death with the allusion of the flower imagery perhaps could link to Esther's growing desire for death through her treatment of the flowers, a brilliant way to pave the road of dead flower petals (in *The Bell Jar*, written in between April and August 1961) towards the white "sarcophagus" she wanted ('Last Words', written on 5 February 1963) as if at a funeral. It is the way for Esther to neutralise the tempting force of death by putting them into beautiful metaphors; and as a funeral director, carefully planning out her own funeral with the dead flower petals.

Fig tree

Originated from a short story Esther received as a token of repent for the Lady's Day food poisoning, the fig tree is an easily overlooked imagery. Throughout the two mentionings, the fig tree represents Esther's view on maternity, and her reflections on her relationships with the man she meets. This section will discuss the significance of the story and thus find out why Esther mentioned it.

The fig tree short story

Esther presents the story in Chapter Five, which she described as a "lovely" (58) one and craved to enter the world of the story to reach the fig tree. The story is about the romantic relationship of a Jewish man and a dark nun. They picked figs together, building their relationship to a point that they sat under the fig tree to watch birds hatching together, touching the back of their hands. Eventually they were not seeing each other again. There are multiple interrelated elements that can be discussed in detail:

1) **The symbol of the fig**: Being the only tree that is specified in the garden of Eden in the Bible, the fig is a "symbol of prosperity, wellbeing, and security" ('The Symbolism of Figs in the Bible') as a sign of abundance, mentally or materially. Thus, being under a fig tree means one is safe and peaceful because he is protected by the abundance of the tree. Esther's desire to "sleep under that beautiful big green fig-tree" (58) is a sign that she is not much comfortable with the wild New York life, and craves for inner peace – the wellbeing of her mind. Plus, figs resemble a woman's womb ("Fig – Nurture"), which echoes the theme of maternity that is mentioned throughout the novel and the other images. Mentioning the implication of the fig is important for us to understand its importance for the story and in the plot.

2) **The implication of the actions**: The actions performed by the Jewish man and the dark nun have a subtle sexual connotation. The beginning act in Esther's summary is of the Jewish man and the dark nun collecting figs together in their shared lawn under the fig tree, safely engaged in a relationship, and their action of picking figs implies that they were to fulfil their desires. To pick the figs is to make choices. While the nature of their relationship changes on the day they saw "egg hatching in a bird's nest" (58) and touched the back of their hands. The egg-hatching, obviously, is about pregnancy – an outcome of engaging in a romantic relationship. It might be that the nun is pregnant, violating the rules for being a nun which she should not engage in any romantic relationships because the day they become a nun is married to God. To touch the back of the hands means another invitation of the Jewish man to be engaged in the relationship again, given his knowledge that she cannot. But the nun, as a servant of God, refused the invitation and left the relationship, passing the role of fig-picking to the next person, the Catholic kitchen maid. The kitchen maid's behaviour of counting the quantity of the figs is also not likely to the dark nun, whom she as a servant, has no bargaining power over how many figs she is taking into the convent. The Jewish man was then furious because his relationship with the dark nun, expected to stand for a long time that they are both prosper in love, breaks with the arrival of the kitchen maid, by which he could not see her anymore and gratifying his lustful desires that are expressed through the physical contact of touching the back of their hands.

3) **The social and religious implications of the characters**: The Jewish man is the most important character of the short story who represents a superior force as the race that is chosen by God, and is the one who controls the progress of the story. His superiority is opposite to the "beautiful dark nun" (58) that he likes, as her race and her role as a nun – the servant of God make her way more inferior compared with the Jewish man. Such a difference in social class forebodes the failure of the relationship. It is possible that the Jewish man initiates to touch the hand of the nun, which is an act of sexual harassment. As a figure of power in the short story, the Jewish man (representing God) expects that he has the force to control over the lawn and get everything that he needs, and to possess the nun (represents the servant of God) is easy because they are both born into the hierarchal power relations. Moreover, the nun has to comply with the rule of her religion to be pure by which to be in a relationship with the Jewish man has already violated the conservative rules as a nun. So, it is understandable why the nun had to stop seeing the Jewish man even though she may be in love with him, because she realised, after crossing the border, that she had made a mistake in her religion which has to be redeemed. After the touching-hand incident, the Jewish man's fig-picking 'buddy' changed into a "mean-faced Catholic kitchen maid", in which as a Catholic, the kitchen maid may be more conservative to engage in the relationship with the Jewish man, leading to his anger for not gratifying his desires. The meanness of the kitchen maid conflicts with the submissive attitude of the dark nun, and with her conservative nature, the Jewish man's desire, is then could not be gratified.

Other than the theme of sexuality, the story brings out the message of one to be responsible for his actions. The nun, violating the religious rules for seeing the Jewish

man, bore her responsibility to hatch the eggs, to give birth to the Jewish man's child; and also she refused to meet the Jewish man anymore to avoid making the same mistake again. She is fulfilling the Catholic teaching which is to always confess their sin and redeem them.

Plotting the fig tree

The fig tree story is mentioned like a random remark, but if we take a look into a bigger setting that it is placed in, some interesting outcomes point towards Buddy and Constantin. The way Esther speaks of the fig tree is thought-provoking, in which the short story is mentioned and linked to her romantic partners. In Chapter Five, there is a direct, parallel comparison between the characters in the short story and the novel right after Esther's summary of the short story:

> It seemed to me Buddy Willard and I were like that Jewish man and that nun, although of course we weren't Jewish or Catholic but Unitarian. We had met together under our own imaginary fig tree, and what we had seen wasn't a bird coming out of an egg but a baby coming out of a woman, and then something awful happened and we went our separate ways. (58)

The ex-couple are compared to the Jewish man and the nun. Fitting the two into the short story, the Jewish man (Buddy) is a powerful man whose force rules over the nun (Esther). The two had once dated, picking up the figs in the lawn. But when the new life (and the suffering as a woman) arrives, the woman escapes from the man that caused such pain and who deceived her with wrongdoings; and finally, they are separated even though they may have a close physical distance, walking their ways because they are made to be a misfit. Esther chose to break up because Buddy is far from being the perfect man that she expected to marry, which she found out that he is not pure at all, having a sexual partner but claimed to know nothing about sex.

The story is recalled amid Esther's only date with Constantin, as her recognition that the man Mrs Willard introduced is not an American reminds her of some of her hard days first time being in such a big city of New York. The transition of these memories into the story of the fig tree is like a stream of consciousness that brings the reader over some illogically related imageries, but reaches the destination of the short story.

Later, in Chapter Seven, the analogy of the fig tree appeared again during Esther's date with Constantin. Esther imagined herself under the fig tree that the fruits bloomed for her, looking at the numerous figs – her ambitions and desires of the future in marriage and life achievements. Seven good fortunes are waiting ahead for Esther (81), yet she has not the ability to pick only one as she cannot prioritise her desires, and she wants them all. As time went by, Esther could not make up her mind, witnessing those good fortunes rotting and falling on the ground, wasted. There is much disillusionment happening in the Chapter that causes her imposter syndrome, to focus on her disabilities more than her abilities. As a straight A's student, Esther is expected to be good at everything like the others, such as cooking and skiing, equipped with various living skills. But seeing the people around her, she realised that she had only got the studying and writing skills which makes her less advantaged to get a job, even as a star college graduate. She compares herself who has only the capacity for one fig and the others who can take more figs than her without realising how great the figs that she had, and even the seven fortunes (lucky seven) could not gratify her desire for having all the figs for herself. Esther's expectation of her great future then collapsed, represented with the fallen figs from the once-green fig tree.

The fig tree, besides her desires of life achievements, is an emblem for the men she once "collected" (54) to fulfil her bodily desires. Buddy, whom she once admired,

is the first one who fits her desire to “a husband and a happy home and children” (81) that they had once dated and thought of marrying. Finding out later that he is not an “awful hypocrite” (55), Esther then thinks of giving up her chastity as revenge, then tries to seduce Eric and sleep with him. She failed also to make him sleep with her, then further projected her desire onto Constantin. Constantin, with perfect appearance and manner, invited Esther to his flat that Esther thought it is an invitation for sex, which at the end much disappointed Esther because they had fallen asleep in the same bed, but they did not have sex, not pleasing Esther’s desire have her first man perfect. In her final reflection there is a long run-on sentence/ paragraph (250), that our heroine recounted what she “remembered” from New York, counting her experience during the summer, the fig tree is an abstract representation of those men she dated, an abundance in the number of men she dated (collected) echoes to the symbol of the fig tree.

Conclusion

Esther's emotional force was reduced and expressed throughout the different objects of the novel. Like the first line of Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence': "To see the world in a grain of sand", we had gone through an essay which dissected Plath's *The Bell Jar* from the minimal objects that contribute to the plot, and attempted to reach to the core of the novel by delving into the very details that appeared. There were harsh criticisms from 'New Fiction' that rated "her condition never seems painfully serious"; and Duchene's review which described the novel as a "sprightly little tale", belittled the emotional force gathered all together. But they had overlooked a deeper connotation that could be supplemented with a New Critical reading, of which though are the known findings in the reading, but the discovery of these imageries made our adventure in Esther's world stereoscopic with the "little" details that are indeed big. New Criticism is not a popular approach in the area of Plath studies because people usually consider her works with regards to the world of politics or social implications. The most popular is to build their critical viewpoint upon the life of the author and then turn their essay into identical bibliographies, or quote books of Plath herself. The three images that I picked are the most obvious ones, which could be a starting point for linking the recurring imageries throughout Plath's works, creating a map of imageries. In this way, we are returning to the artistic representation of Plath's world that opens to a new path to studying the various works that Plath created in her lifetime.

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Clark, Heather. "My Mind Will Split Open." *Red Comet: The short life and blazing art of Sylvia Plath*, Knopf, 2020, pp. 238-258.

This chapter of the Pulitzer-Prize-finalist biography introduces Plath's month in New York for her *Mademoiselle* guest editorial programme, where it was the inspiration of *The Bell Jar*. Her life there, as Clark depicted, was totally a different story compared to the novel – which derived the novel from autobiography to semi-autobiography.

Duchene, Anne. "In Short." *The Guardian* (London), 1 February 1963, p.7. https://theguardian.newspapers.com/image/259688604/?terms=the%20bell%20jar&match=1.

The shortest paragraph in the batch that commented on the individual-oriented style, the least positive reception. To Duchene, Esther was an untrusted narrator: her suicide might have been caused by magnification of her depression, yet blaming her New York experience as the cause. She had failed to examine the "reason" in details, making her opinion personal. But is it really no reason for Esther to "eat narcotics in her own coal-hole"? Her opinion could be reviewed by looking in the very details around her suicide.

Hayman, Ronald. "Posthumous Life." *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, William Heinemann, 2003, pp. 197-212.

As the title suggests, the chapter concludes incidents happening after Plath's death. It cites the affair of Ted Hughes and Assia Wevill, also the people around Plath, which Hayman concludes "many people felt her absence as if it were a presence". The posthumous publications are also mentioned, and summarised some of the reviews of the original *The Bell Jar*. However I was looking for the reviews on *The Bell Jar* before the secret of her pseudonym was revealed by A. Alvarez, and I was sad to see that what I was seeking only takes up a few lines in the chapter. It somehow created the impression that Hayman, or readers of Sylvia Plath, focus on the life stories of the writer, more than what she had written in her 30-years of life.

Lerner, Laurence. "New Novels." *The Listener*, 31 January 1963, p.215.

Lerner praised ‘Miss Lucas’s’ implication of multiple elements, while keeping the novel “readable”. His commentary moved from the abstract plot of Esther’s experience in New York, linking the American society as a cause of her neurosis. He especially spent a paragraph on the “triumph” of the language – her success in visualising her neurosis into a concrete bell jar image. Knowing Plath was the writer, Lerner had performed a neutral reading on *The Bell Jar* as the omission of the author fits in the nature of focusing on “the real content” (Ransom 598), yet the column only provided the topics for readers to think of, we cannot see his precise arguments.

“New Fiction.” *The Times* (London), 24 January 1963, p.13. https://link-gale-com.easyaccess2.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/apps/doc/CS218588216/TTDA?u=cuhk&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=83e4bf6e.

This commentary implied the author’s views in the seemingly natural description of the story. It challenged Esther’s experience and described it “dreamlike”, and her pain did not seem serious. For a literary criticism the paragraph is personal and focused too much on the plot of the novel.

Ransom, John Crowe. "Criticism, Inc." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1937, pp. 586-602, JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26434018.

Ransom is a significant person in the institutionalisation of literary criticism, and one of the initials of New Criticism. This influential essay indirectly provided his definition of what “criticism” is not, and his main argument is to bring back readers to the aesthetics of literary arts. The essay focuses on exclusion, while the definition seems to be clear, I am still confused on how exactly to execute it – as I was looking for guidelines (and perhaps a mechanism). Now I know what not to do but what to do.

Steinberg, Peter K. *A celebration, this is.* https://www.sylviaplath.info/

Continuously updated, this is an archival website (including a blog) made by Plath scholar and an editor of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, containing a collection of Plath archives and databases. For this project the most useful part is an organised list of reviews on *The Bell Jar* that I can search from the list in the University Library/ online archives directly.

Taubman, Robert. "Anti-heroes." *The New Statesman*, 25 January 1963, pp.127-128.

Five novels depicting different kinds of anti-heroes were put together in this article. Taubman praised *The Bell Jar* for its "Salinger mood", like *Catcher in the Rye* constructing the world by her inner thoughts. He especially picked up Esther's description of Frankie's outfit to highlight the subjectiveness of the narrative, which he pointed out that would affect the point of view we perceive to the broader themes such as her 'madness'.

Toomey, Philippa. "In search of Sylvia." *The Times* (London, England), 8 April 1978, p.11. https://link-gale-com.easyaccess2.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/apps/doc/CS185303688/TTDA?u=cuhk&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=e6d6d243.

This article provided information on the pseudonym and challenges the popular notion of *The Bell Jar* as a semi-autobiographical novel. Aurelia Plath, Sylvia's mother, described the penetration of the pseudonym a "great shock" to her, and I perceive that as one of the causes leading to her fatal suicide on 11 February 1963. Most importantly, Toomey's interview with Aurelia highlighted that her family members do not acknowledge Esther as Sylvia herself, as they see other five people's characteristics in Esther. This viewpoint from them could make a strong argument against the popular procedures which build reviews and criticisms on *The Bell Jar* around Sylvia, and thus I can use this to justify my approach to 'neglect' reading the novel as an autobiography, focusing then on the words on the page.

"Under the Skin." ***The Times Literary Supplement*** **(London), 25 January 1963, p.53. https://link-gale-com.easyaccess2.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/apps/doc/EX1200326813/TLSH?u=cuhk&sid=bookmark-TLSH&xid=d7161e20.**

The reviewer had a high opinion of the language of the novel by creating 'reality' with imagination. He praised her narration that the "dry wit" of it shaped the world for readers to experience – the aesthetic sensation that we enjoy reading. His approach was near to our New Critical approach, yet there is a lot to expand from the abstract into becoming a nuanced literary criticism.

Appendix 1: Transcription of the 1963 reviews

In Short
The Guardian (London), 1 February 1963, p.7
By Anne Duchene

THE LEVANTINES, by Fausta Cialente (Faber, 25s)
THE MISSION, by Ferreira de Castro (Hamish Hamilton, 12s 6d)
THE BANDERILLAS, by Irene Monesi (Peter Owen, 18s)
THE HOUSE AT AKIYA, by William Butler (Peter Owen, 16s)
THE BELL JAR, by Victoria Lucas (Heinemann, 18s)

FAUSTA CIALENTE'S long book **The Levantines** is about a girl of rather muddled antecedents and mettlesome spirit, growing up in and adjusting herself to the cankered society of the Italian bourgeoisie in Cairo before and during the Second World War. It bears a teeming, tender, and very intelligent witness to its society, and has been put into faultlessly spirited and felicitous English by Isabel Quigly. Ann Steven's translation of **The Mission**, by the Portuguese writer Ferreira de Castro, breathes more heavily, and this sober little parable – about whether some monks in South-east France in 1940 should or should not protect themselves by painting "Mission" on their roof – does not quite justify the hopes raised in a fulsome preface by a leading Portuguese literary critic. By contrast, Elfreda Powell's translation **The Banderillas** from Irene Monesi's French seems downright unhappy: but was this worth translating at all? It is yet another of those brittle tales in which the characters are broken like butterflies upon the wheel of the author's superior intelligence; in this instance, a pair of ageing French lovers take a lissom boy of 15 on holiday with them to Spain, and they all have as frustrating a time as one might expect.

Two American novels deal more robustly with individual breakdown. **The House at Akiya**, by William Butler, is about an American business man who rents a costal house outside Tokio where the pervious occupants have just made a successful suicide pact. His two children die in rapid succession; his wife insists upon wasting away; he himself holds death at bay for a time with a charming Japanese girl, but when they demonstrate, more or less mathematically, that life is nowhere possible for them, they kill themselves too. It is as carefully numb as a nightmare and, as a little ghost story with human overtones, very acceptable. **The Bell Jar**, by Victoria Lucas is one of those novels which domesticate the horror of the mental breakdown by relating it,

and the world which caused it, in terms of pert if disabused innocence. There seems no reason why the girl-narrator should want to eat narcotics in her own coal-hole, unless that she was perceptive as well as pretty and that she tried to live in New York. This objection apart, it is a sprightly little tale.

New Novels

The Listener, 31 January 1963, Laurence Lerner, p.215

By Laurence Lerner

The Thin Red Line. By James Jones. Collins. 25s.
One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich. By Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Translated by Ralph Parker. Gollancz. 18s.
The Bell Jar. By Victoria Lucas. Heinemann. 18s.
The Gift. By Emyr Humphreys. Eyre and Spottiswoode. 21s.

'THE THIN RED LINE' tells the story of the invasion of Guadalcanal by the Americans in 1942, and in particular of the exploits of one infantry company who arrive as raw reinforcements, and after two savage battles leave the book depleted, blooded, and (until an order from the Division Commander forbids it) symbolically bearded. The title refers not only to Kipling's thin red line of heroes, but also the precarious line that separates man from beast, the sane from the mad. It would be quite wrong, however, to conclude from this that the book is symbolic and universalized, a study of the human condition. Mr Jones is a naturalist, detailed, meticulous, and (I am sure) accurate in his reading of army speech and battle tactics; and his book is universalized only in the way that any good realistic novel must necessarily be.

I am baffled, then, when I find that the American critics have hailed this as a great anti-war novel. Certainly it shows us the callousness, the brutality, and the cynicism of soldiers in cation, for it describes war as it is; but the reader who accepts with his eyes open that the second world war was worth fighting will not have his views shaken by this book. Its soldier show the same mixture of cowardice and heroism, selfishness and sympathy, as the honest naturalist shows us in peacetime settings too. I think this is clear if we compare *The Thin Red Line* with its close cousin, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. They tell similar stories, they are much the same length, they may reach the same sales.

Mr Jones is aware of the quirks of human behaviour, especially under stress, but he is not as convinced of man's irrationality as Mailer. He has not read Freud so deeply, nor been so bewildered by human motivation: the general aims of the war have no place in the consciousness of his soldiers, even his officers, but all the same he has not given them a consciousness that denies the existence, even the possibility, of such aims. He tells the story of the battles in a way to engage our excitement about whether the Americans will break through – this is, among other things, a good adventure story.

But what did Mailer care who won the war? He explored in a direction where such questions hardly seemed to exist. *The Thin Red Line* is not nearly so disquieting to read: compared with the radicalism of Mailer, Jones seems almost conventional, despite of his frankness. And even frankness is not really unconventional these days.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn is another naturalist. If his view of man seems lower than Jones's, it is probably because conditions in a Siberian labour camp are even worse than in the army. The common enemy, corresponding to the Japanese, is the cold, and the struggle is for survival. But within the ranks there is hatred and hostility, a wish to inflict suffering: guards are not like officers, they are enemies too. Even fellow prisoners, even friends, cannot always be trusted. Solzhenitsyn chronicles an ordinary day in the life of an ordinary prisoner, without sensationalism -– and without ideology. The most appalling work site in the camp is the 'Socialist Way of Life' settlement: this fact is mentioned without apology or hesitation, without even drawing our attention to the irony.

How hard it is to make 'pure' literary judgements. There are dozens of books like this, in a century all too rich in labour camps, prisoner-of-war camps, concentration camps; *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, honest, sober, powerful, is no better than a host of others, but reading it is a special experience because it is by a Russian, and has been published in Russia. Its success there is a hopeful sign: but ought we not to try and forget this as we read, so as not to taint our reaction to the book itself with political irrelevancies? Or ought we, perhaps, to remember it in order to remind ourselves that all these things are true, that men do behave like that" This is so easy to forget, as we cover these dozens of books in a film of familiarity and indifference; anything that strips away indifference seems as relevant to literature as to politics.

I recommend *The Bell Jar* strongly. It is the story of Esther Greenwood, who wins a fashion magazine contest and gets, with eleven other girls, a free trip to New York, with free clothes, free meals, free entry to fashion shows, previews, and perhaps a career. Esther feels uncomfortable about it all. New York must have secrets it hasn't yielded to her -– in the next taxi, perhaps, in the night club she wasn't asked to. Esther is a nice girl, she appreciates what people are doing for her, but somehow the deputy editor has to ask her if she is really interested in her work. She is gloriously and convincingly young: she sees through everyone, is influenced by everyone.

Slowly, then more quickly, we realize that Esther's ruthless and innocent wit is not just the result of youth and intelligence. It is the sign of a detachment, a lack of

involvement, so complete that it leads to neurosis. From satirist she becomes a patient, yet so imperceptible that after realizing she is sick we don't feel at all tempted to discount her previous shrewdness, or even cease to find her funny, in a rather frightening way. There are criticisms of American society that the neurotic can make as well as everyone, perhaps better, and Miss Lucas makes them triumphantly.

The book has another triumph: its language. The bell jar is Esther's image for her neurosis: 'wherever I sat, on the deck of a ship or at a secret café in Paris or Bangkok – I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air'. Sharp, pungent, brittle, her images catch at most indescribable states of mind for an instant, then shift restlessly to catch others. The novelist who deals with these elusive states of being usually has to choose between apt and elaborate imagery, or a simplifying and readable clarity. But Miss Lucas is tremendously readable, and at the same time has an almost poetic delicacy of perception. This is a brilliant and moving book.

The Gift is a story about the sophisticated world of television, cinema, boorish artists, nuclear disarmers, and pretty girls: entertaining, occasionally funny, and no doubt joyous reading for the Cindrellas whose drab lives never touch this polished world. Mr Humphreys seems to have shot this gay but trivial theme through with a darker purpose, but it is hard to say just what it is. Characters keep misunderstanding one another, then learning the truth; they speculate on the human condition, making fools of themselves yet leaving us wondering about what they say. In theme and tone it reminded me of Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*, but it is neither so funny nor so boldly willing to indulge in metaphysical speculation. Mr Humphreys is a polished writer and a skilful novelist, but his confrontations and discoveries constantly seems to me mechanical or evasive, and the book never worthy of the talent that is lurking on it.

LAURENCE LERNER

Note: Heather Clark, in Red Comet *(p.852) has such a note on Lerner: "(who knew Plath was the author)", but I still keep the article because he did not reveal Plath's identity. And it is a piece of close reading I can focus on as it also focuses on the language that can bring into my arguments.*

New Fiction

The Times (London), 24 January 1963, p.13

By anonymous

JAMES JONES: *The Thin Red Line*. 445pp. Collins. 25s.

FERREIRA DE CASTRO: *The Mission*. Translated by Ann Stevens. 126pp. Hamish Hamilton. 12s. 6d.

MICHAEL SHELDON: *The Gilded Rule*. 192pp. Hutchinson. 16s.

ELIZABETH WALTER: *The Nearest and Dearest*. 191pp. Harvill Press. 16s.

VICTORIA LUCAS: *The Bell Jar*. 258pp. Heinemann. 18s.

War stories nowadays seem to be all war and no story; a mistake which Homer never made. *The Thin Red Line* is a big book with a very simple structure. It follows in great detail the experiences of one American infantry company from the day they land Guadalcanal, through their baptism of fire and the horrible weeks which follow, until at last the survivors fie down to the beaches again. Mr. James Jones, who wrote that celebrated book *From Here to Eternity*, was himself a regular soldier and fought at Guadalcanal. His reporting is tough and vivid, constantly stamped with the hallmarks of personal experience, neither exaggerating nor minimizing what happened and what it felt like to the people involved. He sketches the men of C-for-Charlie company just sharply enough to differentiate them, but hardly enough to involve us deeply in their individual deaths or desperate survival. What interests him is the marvel of unpretentious human courage. The mood, though grim, is never depressing, because there is no bitterness, no resentment at all. Here is a modern war story done about us well as it can be done. The trouble is that, since *All Quite on the Western Front*, this whole genre has had so little new to say.

A long introduction by the Portuguese literary critic, Senhor Alvaro Salema, announces Senhor Ferreira de Castro's *The Mission* as the master-work of a profoundly significant author. In fact, it is a dry little anecdote in the sceptical European tradition, with an ironic twist at the end. The missionary fathers at a monastery in southern France are presented inn 1940 with an ingenious moral problem. As a precaution against German bombers, they propose to paint the conventional word "Mission" in big letters across the roof: but one of the fathers, Mournier, points out that the local factory is an identical building, so that by saving themselves they may be condemning the factory workers. Mournier belongs to the awkward squad. There seems little spiritual grace about the debate and none in its eventual solution. The exaggerations of Senhor

Salema's introduction should not distract attention from a very workmanlike *conte*, intelligently planned and neatly shaped.

A Canadian first novel, *The Gilded Rule*, seems by comparison unsophisticated, but it too is a workmanlike job. The hero Peter Ferris (like his creator, Mr. Michael Sheldon), is a British immigrant in Montreal; he finds a job in the public relations department, Ferris soon discovers, is dominated by Warren Sproule, who believes with mystic fervour in the bank, in public relations and cherishing lame ducks. Circumstances driver Ferris to intrigue against him, partly from professional disagreement but, more subtly, to save the victims of Sproule's benevolence from being wholly devoured. The characters never quite ring true, but the oppressive atmosphere of a great honeycomb office seems only too real: and both background and plot are sufficiently usual to engage attention.

Miss Elizabeth Walter's *The Nearest and Dearest* is a plain English novel about a middle-aged woman, who, while visiting her husband's office, sees marks on his scribbling-pad which lead her to suspect that he is being unfaithful. She is right. She says nothing but gets into a fearful tizzy. Her husband's senior partner, a wise old drunkard, tries to show them both the error of their ways. In the event, however, the husband is frustrated in his attempt at a sinful night away from home, the wife is shocked by a lapse on her own part, and they are happily reunited without a word of suspicion having been uttered. Miss Walter's style and narrative patterns are professional to the point of seeming contrived.

The subject of *The Bell Jar* by Miss Victoria Lucas has been treated in a not dissimilar way, though more sternly, in several novels. It is a story about mental sickness, the stealthy onset, the intolerable burden (like a glass bell jar over your head, says the heroine), the gradual cure. The narrator is a small- town college girl who goes to New York for a month with 11 other winners of a fashion contest. Her experiences are not agreeable, and the real nastiness merges imperceptibly with something wrong in her mind. After trying to kill herself, she progresses through various departments of an asylum, suffers electric shock treatment, and is finally allowed to go back to college. There are no snake-pits here; her worst experiences are dreamlike and her condition never seems painfully serious. Friends and family, incidents in her past life and her hopes for the future, are described pleasantly and ingenuously.

Anti-heroes

The New Statesman, 25 January 1963, pp. 127-128

By Robert Taubman

The Gift. By EMYR HUMPHREYS. *Eyre & Spottiswoode.* 21*s*.
The Bell Jar. By VICTORIA LUCAS. *Heinemann*. 18*s*.
The Carpetbaggers. By HAROLD ROBBINS. *Blond*. 30*s*.
The House at Akiya. By WILLIAM BUTLER. *Owen*. 16*s*.
The Banderillas. By IRENE MONESI. Translated by Elfreda Powell. *Owen*. 18*s*.

The anti-hero of a modern English novel needs a whole baggage of pet attitudes, intense vitality and an off-hand integrity; he is a clown who comes off worst in almost all circumstances yet managed to dominate them morally; he is never a stooge like nearly everyone else. In *The Gift* this role goes to a professional actor, Sam Halkin, who has a name on TV and is sweating on his first film part. He has few personal characteristics, but lots of generic ones as a not-quite-successful actor and an anti-hero. 'Guaranteed unshockable, washable and hardwearing', he is nevertheless vain about a resemblance to Napoleon and touchy about betrayal by his friends or letting his girl Polly pose in nude. He has right impulses, and respects a few individuals like Polly's cranky Uncle Alfred (who speaks for a generation grown old in protest long before most CND marchers were born); but this still leaves a wide margin for contempt of most of the human race, especially stooges. When his laundryman supposes that Sam only plays villain parts, Sam's reaction goes:

> He had actually said it. Aloud. He was standing there smiling vacantly with his silly peaked cap askew, knowing and happy, moulting quietly through life like somebody's favourite budgie, not realizing at all that I was more than capable of playing a loose, euphoric, shambling, decaying 55-year-old child exactly like himself.

But at moments like this I can't tell whether what we're getting is a bracing critique or just a look at Sam's artistic temperament. I have this trouble with Sam throughout the novel and the doubts seem to undermine him as an anti-hero. *The Gift* is worth comparing with *Take a Girl Like You*, for they both do a professional job of consolidating the sort of thing that is being done in a slighter way all around. It is as subtly flattering to the reader's ego as Mr Amis usually is, by allowing us to identify with an anti-hero and feel one up on stooges (of which there are several well-observed specimens here); it is nearly as enjoyable, in spite of a bad sag in the story line, and sometimes nearly as funny. But it isn't as serious or effective in the same way as a

criticism of life; and this seems to be because Sam is too much of an actor and too little a representative case. Anti-heroes, after all, are always acting up to the part they frantically design for the situation; and with a professional actor the point seems to evaporate. But this is to forget Polly, who is nothing if not a representative case and just such another girl like you except that she had been to bed with nearly everybody. Golden-haired, seductive, scheming, stupid, Polly comes over straight and leaves no room for ambiguous interpretation: 'In my flat she filled a very real need. She made breakfast with complete sincerity while I lay in bed and watched through the open door.' Perfect type of the sweet and detestable English girl, she deserved to be given more of the centre of the stage.

The Bell Jar had an anti-heroine. It is a clever first novel, and the first feminine novel I've read in the Salinger mood. Esther Greenwood, who narrates as well as supplying most of the action, is an American college girl undergoing sexual and other stresses and then a mental breakdown. She is very sharp indeed with the world – certainly one can't see the New York and Boston she describes offering her any support and satisfying any possible human need. But her sharpness is expressed in such an inner-directed way that on the rare occasions her thoughts get out and touch the world at all that they do so only at a tangent: 'If there's anything I look down on, it's a man in a blue outfit. Black or grey, or brown even. Blue just makes me laugh.' This, I suspect, is meant as a point in her favour, and so is her whole breakdown. Despite the asylums and the shock treatment, she goes mad in a rather undisturbing way, partly because she writes about it with such bright assurance, partly because it's seen much less as a failure in herself than as a judgement on the world. But this is about as tangential a way of making a judgement as the remark about blue outfits, and rather more unfair. It recalls how Esther jumps to conclusions on inadequate evidence even when she's quite sane:

> He could almost have been an American, he was so tan and had such good teeth, but I could tell straight away that he wasn't. He had what no American man I ever met has had, and that's intuition.

The dozens of characters in *The Carpetbaggers* are inner-directed too, in the old primitive sense of being driven by urges quite unadapted to any sort of society. They are big, gross characters, and the story covers a lot of ground from Indian camps in the 1880s to the aircraft industry in the last war, but mainly centres on Hollywood. Although it's strong on corporation finance and on sex considered as a form of

aggression on much the same plane, what charm it has comes from the American mythopoeic faculty: a gift for reviving, at least fugitively, old stock situations – the break from prison camp, the great film star dying of encephalitis, the cool beautiful women in early Lauren Bacall postures. While it sticks to native ground a lot of it is fetching, if absurd; it was a mistake to bring in lesbians in Paris and Reichmarschall Goering to illustrate the European mythology too.

The House at Akiya is a curious little ghost story, very carefully written in a tight-lipped way, and apparently meant as an exemplary tragedy of Americans in Japan. The American family living in the house at Akiya begin to acquire Japanese characteristics – Mrs Rome gives mysterious smiles, Mr Rome starts bowing to his business associates; very soon they and the children are all dead, as well as, oddly, Mr Rome's Japanese mistress. Up to a point this is interesting: we see Oriental fatalism beginning to sap Western convictions and confidence; but the idea isn't developed, no motives are suggested, and the Rome family turns quite early on into zombies. It looks as if Mr Butler just fixed it all to come out badly.

Rachel in *The Banderillas* is a Unesco documentalist on holiday in Spain with Vincent, worrying most of the time about what's going on between Vincent and a 15-year-old boy they've brought along. Her own relations with the boy are a complex mixture of identification and aggression. States of mind are constantly but obscurely described – 'she felt like an isolated nutshell on a grey, fishy ocean' – and the elliptical, nervy style generates a sort of intensity with no substance at all. The only solid things in the novel are props like 'a small green-and-black Bentley' they used to travel in.

ROBERT TAUBMAN

Under the Skin

The Times Literary Supplement, 25 January 1963, p. 53

By anonymous

VICTORIA LUCAS: *The Bell Jar*. 258pp. Heinemann. 18s.
ELIZABETH WALTER: *The Nearest and Dearest.* 191pp. Harvill. 16s.

Few writers are able to create a different world for you to live in; yet Miss Lucas in *The Bell Jar* has done just this. She writes in the first person the story of a girl who has a breakdown and is sent to a mental hospital. The story begins in a heat-wave in New York and she is already in her private world, the Bell Jar, with a wall of glass between herself and the other winners of a magazine contest. When she goes home to Boston it becomes more and more difficult to find a reason even for washing her hair: sleep becomes impossible; her nerves twang, and at last she tries to commit suicide and is taken to a private home from which she is finally discharged.

Miss Lucas can certainly write and the book is convincing. It reads so much like the truth that it is hard to disassociate ger from Esther Greenwood, the "I" of the story, but she has the gift of being able to feel the desolation and yet relate it to the landscape of everyday life. There is a dry wit behind the poetic flashes and the zany fiascos of her relationships, and when the last part of the book begins to trail a little and details seem both ugly and irrelevant one finds oneself thinking "but this is how it happened". Miss Lucas is exploring as she writes and if she can learn to shape as well as she imagines, she may write an extremely good book. *The Bell Jar* is already a considerable achievement.

The Nearest and Dearest, on the other hand, has more shape than reality. It is a nicely made book in which, as in a Pinero play, each character is necessary and plays its necessary part. But the characters need to be acted to come alive: Helen, the gracious-living blonde; her husband Humphrey, a society architect; Christina, the dark girl with whom he falls in love; and a splendid Lionel Barrymore character, the wise old drunk. The story is tremendously readable and it is a tribute to Miss Walter that one should be so teased by not knowing the contents of the letter that Christina wrote to Humphrey, and that he, having lost his glasses, was unable to read. Now *why* did she fail to turn up?

Appendix 2: Transcription of Toomey's interview with Aurelia Plath

Toomey, Philippa. "In search of Sylvia." *The Times* (London, England), 8 April 1978, p.11. *Gale Primary Sources.* https://link-gale-com.easyaccess2.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/apps/doc/CS185303688/TTDA?u=cuhk&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=e6d6d243.

In Search of Sylvia

Sylvia Plath: Letters Home 1950-63
Edited by Aurelia Schober Plath (Faber, £2.95)

"I have only to look at people to know if they've read *The Bell Jar*", said Aurelia Plath, mother of the poet, Sylvia Plath. "They are saying to themselves, oh, yes, she's Mrs Greenwood." The burdens laid on the family and friends of Sylvia Plath are many. Fifteen years ago she committed suicide, leaving a small body of work, including some poems of great power written shortly before her death, and it is curious to discover in her file that her fame has been entirely posthumous. It has also led to an extraordinary amount of literary criticism, biography, amateur psychoanalysis, speculation and PhD theses, much of it demonstrating more the contemporary preoccupations of the writers themselves than a genuine appreciation of the poet's work.

I met Mrs Plat shortly after the book she selected and edited of her daughter's letters appeared in 1976. In her long introduction to the *Letters* Aurelia Plath tells something of the story of Sylvia's parents and grandparents, first and second generation immigrants from Germany and Austria, and of her marriage to Sylvia's father, a man much older than herself, whom she much admired, but who was also capable of willing himself from undiagnosed and untreated diabetes because he had a terror that it might be cancer.

Aurelia Plath is in the tradition of strong American women left to bring up young families, to put them through college, to see them grow, and to do her credit. Hers was the dramatic life of struggle, hardship and triumph; by comparison Sylvia was the golden girl to whom all success came. It is in these *Letters* from Sylvia which cover the period when she left home to take up the scholarship she had won at Smith and continue until a week before her death which show both family life in all its ordinariness and the growth and development of the poet. "Between Sylvia and me there existed", wrote Mrs Plath, "as between my own mother and me – a short psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an

unwelcome invasion of privacy." No doubt it worked both ways.

The early 1950s were transitional years for young Americans. Life was peaceful, President Eisenhower was in the White House, all was *almost* well with the world. Girls wore pretty dresses, matching sweaters and skirts – there is a toughing photograph of Sylvia setting off for Smith in a neat suit and hat. A pair of white gloves cannot have been far away.

Yet at the same time the security hid the fierce competitiveness that pressures the young in America. Sylvia had straight "A"s, but concealed her brains behind her considerable blonde prettiness, because to have boy friends was equally important in her society. The hideous social cruelty and snobbery of the sorority system in the Ivy League Colleges made many a life miserable, but she succeeded. She won a %500 short story competition in *Mademoiselle*. The letters home are happy and enthusiastic until failure – any failure – brings depression. It was after her summer in New York (recounted in the semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, published under a pseudonym) as Guest Editor for *Mademoiselle*, a much converted position, that she made a serious attempt to kill herself. There is a long, despairing letter in 1952 on which Mrs Plath comments that it was the first sign of her magnifying situation out of all proportion.

She made a good recovery, went back to Smith with considerable success, a pretty, still ingenuous American girl who could say of W.H. Auden, invited to address the college, "a wonderfully textured British accent"– and in May, 1955, she recodes triumphantly to her mother that in a year she has had 11 awards and prizes for her work, and sets out detailed plans for a schedule of study and a way of life.

This included a Fulbright Scholarship to Cambridge, where, relieved from the pressures of the American campus, she was happy, though frozen stiff, with a perpetual cold, suffering from a gas fire which ate shillings but gave no warmth. The letters from Cambridge are joyous – and there is one very casual mention which, to the experienced instincts of a mother, would have said a lot:

Met, by the way, a brilliant ex-Cambridge poet at the wild St Botolph's Review party last week; will probably never see him again (he works for J. Arthur Rank in London) but wrote my best poem about him afterwards – the only man I've met yet here who'd be strong enough to be equal with – such is life.

He was Ted Hughes, whom she married some few months later – a marriage which started out with much happiness but, to use an old phrase in its truest sense,

came to grief. This, too, is chartered in the *Letters* though Sylvia was understandably unwilling to tell anyone her most private and personal troubles. All through the *Letters* are the poems she copied for her mother – astonishing in that they appear to have been written by someone far more mature, quite other than the girl who writes about clothes and boys and happiness and friends.

The last letters are quite agonizing. Separated from her husband, she was living in a flat with her two small children. When she was unable to work, she always become depressed. The letters swing from depression to euphoria. On October 16, 1962 she writes saying she is ill and exhausted and could her sister in law possibly come over and help? Two days later she was more cheerful. Mrs Plath said that this time was an absolute agony for her. Sylvia did not wish her to come from America, so she sent money for the three of them to visit her for Christmas. They did not come. At this time Sylvia was writing though the night the poems collected in the volume *Ariel*, her finest work, written feverishly fast, almost as though it were the final blooming and fruition of some strange nocturnal plant under the shadow of her own death. Those who die by their own hand leave a life time of questions for those who loved them. Why? "She was always plunged by sinusitis which never left her", said Mrs Plath. Sylvia was continually ill during the frightful winter of 1962-63 "She wasn't a person to talk about it, and people never realized. She felt she couldn't cope any more, and the discovery that her pseudonym (for *The Bell Jar*) had been penetrated was a great shock to her – the last thing she wanted." With two very young children to look after, she never managed to sleep particularly well. "It was a vicious circle, fatigue upon fatigue."

Thirteen years later Aurelia Plath published the *Letters*. She wishes she had done so before. It might have stemmed the flood of speculation and interest which at times has almost overwhelmed her. She is, quite obviously, *not* Mrs Greenwood. She and her son Warren can discern the elements of five people they and Sylvia knew in this character. "Art is truth rearranged", she says. "I have always liked people and made friends easily. I have been appalled at the way people have written about me – they have never met me, never spoken to me, have never known me."

Letters Home relates a story that is not, except in its ending, tragic. For, as Mrs Plath says of Sylvia, "She was such *fun* -- I never enjoyed any human being as much as I enjoyed her."

It is more than a year now since I met Aurelia Plath. Sometimes when I talk to people with a view to writing about them they fill my mind for days. So it was with

Mrs Plath, whom I had both liked and admired. Thoughts of mother and daughter (so nearly my contemporary) pre-occupied me and as in some dream, I saw Ted Hughes walking towards me down the street. It was, most curiously, a shock which, hard though I tried, has prevented me from writing about the Plath family until now.