American Millennial Girlhood and the Cult of Sylvia Plath

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Discovering Sylvia Plath seems to be an intrinsic step of white, middle-class female adolescence, a phase that remains confined to that transitory age before one moves onto more ‘adult’ literature. In the years since her sensationalized suicide, Plath has evolved into the patron saint of disillusioned white girls, with worn copies of *The Bell Jar* appearing in countless films and television shows as a symbol of the treacherous transition from contemporary American girlhood to womanhood and an introduction to feminist thinking. As a result, Plath manages to straddle the boundary separating high and low culture as she has evolved into a fictional trope alongside her artistic legacy, resulting in a multifaceted and often contradictory cultural image. I will focus my analysis on the single facet of Plath’s status as the patron saint of female adolescence. In this paper I intend to define the nuanced relationship between the cult of Sylvia Plath and the American girlhood experience by analyzing their dynamic relationship and the influence they exert upon each other. This analysis will connect the cultural and academic discourse surrounding female adolescent readers, *The Bell Jar*’s status as a female bildungsroman, her status as the original “sad, pretty girl poet” (Quintana), and how Plath’s status as a cult figure among adolescents has impacted her academic reception.

While this paper will deal largely with secondary sources detailing critical analyses of Plath, cult fiction, and the politics of girlhood, the foundation of my argument will rest upon *The Bell Jar*. This primary text has evolved into an identifiable symbol within popular culture that instantly evokes the sad, pretty girl poet trope. Thus, this paper will analyze how *The Bell Jar* has become intrinsically linked to this trope as well as what elements are responsible for Plath’s cult following. The crucial critics for my argument include Arielle Greenberg, Becca Klaver,
Christina Quintana, Linda Wagner, and Janet Badia, as well as several others. These analyses explore the ways in which Sylvia Plath appeals to female adolescent readers and how this appeal reflects back on the writer’s mythic legacy. Greenberg and Klaver’s roundtable discussion about Plath’s reputation as a poet for teenage girls, titled “Mad Girls’ Love Songs: Two Women Poets – a Professor and Graduate Student – Discuss Sylvia Plath, Angst, and the Poetics of Female Adolescence”, proposed several potential reasons for this resilient connotation. In Greenberg’s words, “The Bell Jar’s Esther, and perhaps Plath’s Confessional persona, are types of female Holden Caulfields. But white boys have many such books and texts to choose from; how many do young white women have?”(186) In addition to these analyses, I will employ broader secondary sources to provide theoretical and historical context about neoliberal definitions of girlhood, the evolving definition of a bildungsroman, cult fiction as a genre, and societal notions about female readers as a whole.

In my first section, I contextualize the concept of American girlhood by detailing scholars’ various attempts to define and analyze this transitory period. I additionally consider what makes millennial American girlhood different from girlhood in other time periods and geographic realms. This discussion will focus on two opposing discourses concerning girlhood, namely ‘Girl Power’ and ‘Reviving Ophelia’, and discover how they interact to form the neoliberal girl subject.

For the next section, I consider whether Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar should be considered a modern bildungsroman. Despite many scholars’ contention that we cannot consider any coming-of-age narratives with female protagonists a bildungsroman due to the form’s reliance on masculine norms, I conclude that Plath’s novel is a modern derivation of the traditional form.
This assertion leads to an analysis about why the novel is particularly appealing to adolescent readers.

The third section focuses on how literary critics, contemporary films, and pop culture at large portray Plath’s cult-like following. By analyzing critical responses to *The Bell Jar*, I find that the novel’s large female adolescent following leads many critics to dismiss it as juvenile. These dismissals often stem from the characterization of female adolescent readers as uncritical and obsessive, thus leading to the creation of the ‘Pretty, Sad Girl Poet’ trope.

In the final section, I identify the defining characteristics of the millennial *Bell Jar* reader in the wake of the novel’s fiftieth anniversary. I focus specifically on what differentiates this generation of readers from the group Janet Badia focuses on in her book *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Writers*, including their increased focus on Esther’s New York narrative and erasure of her institutionalization. This leads me to conclude how these millennial readers affect both Plath and her novel’s ever-growing cultural legacy.
Sylvia Plath and American Girlhood

Girlhood is a concept that entered the mainstream lexicon only within the last few centuries, carving out a previously undefined space in between childhood and womanhood. Once girlhood came to be known as a discrete transition period, academic inquiries began to delve into girls’ culture, girl studies, and the variety of permutations that girlhood can take. Assigning a specific definition to girlhood is particularly difficult when one considers the sheer breadth of these permutations, as the girlhood experience changes with the time period, location, and social structure. Scholarly analyses into girlhood attempt to reveal how these external forces shape the transition from childhood to womanhood, based on Catherine Driscoll’s assertion that “The girl is an assemblage of social and cultural issues and questions rather than a field of physical facts”(14). This section will focus on how girlhood became a discrete period of female growth as well as a reflection of broader cultural values and anxieties by analyzing the discourse surrounding girls, girlhood, and girls’ culture. Additionally, it is important to note that though girlhood is acted upon by countless outside forces, it arises largely through the stories and actions of the girls themselves as they interact with their environment.

In this paper, the terms “girlhood” and “adolescence” are used interchangeably, as both refer to a period typically beginning with elementary literacy and ending with the entrance into legal adulthood, classified in the United States as reaching the age of eighteen, however even this definition falls short in several instances. This is the chief obstacle within the field of girl studies, as many academic analyses fail to determine whether a universal girlhood experience exists due to the sheer diversity of experiences. As a result, many academic analyses focus solely on white,
middle class, Western girlhood and incorrectly assume any findings are universally applicable. However, girls’ culture is a bit easier to pin down, with Sherrie Inness stating that it can refer to the culture that girls themselves make, such as the girl-created zines and other items manufactured by girls and targeted at an audience of girls. Girls’ culture can also refer to the countless mass-marketed commodities (books, television shows, magazines, dolls, toys, and other items) that are manufactured by adults and sold to an audience of girl consumers, both for profit and to culturally indoctrinate them into the behavior that society expects. (Inness 3)

The category thus reflects both the external forces acting upon girlhood as well as the cultural capital girls create for themselves. Though this culture was once obscured from the public eye, American society is now saturated with girls’ culture through the twentieth century technologies that lead to its popularity and profitability. Magazines such as Seventeen, Teen Vogue, and J-14 are just one example of a commodity that perpetuates and circulates cultural notions about girlhood while simultaneously profiting off of them. The growing awareness of girls’ culture is a recent phenomenon, and this paper will focus specifically on its growth from the early 1990’s to present time in order to link it to the modern reception of Sylvia Plath and The Bell Jar.

The rise of girls’ culture in the 1990’s resulted from over a century of sociopolitical movements pushing for age of consent laws, women’s suffrage, and women in the public sphere. While each movement had its specific goals, such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s call for better education for women of all ages in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), they all circulated around a desire for the increased visibility of women. These movements led to a growing acceptance of women as individuals, the rise of feminism, and the eventual creation of girls’ studies. Before these movements, society did not consider girlhood to be a type of
adolescence, as this transition was confined largely to the domestic sphere and thus hidden from the public eye. However, the rise of second-wave feminism and teenage culture in the mid-twentieth century eventually gave way to the radical shift in attention towards girlhood that defined the early 1990’s. This increased attention took form through the ‘girlification’ of consumer culture, rising popularity of texts like Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia*, and increase in girl-centered research. Once girl studies established itself as a legitimate field of research, it began to shift its focus towards topics including the role of tween culture in the 21st century, interdisciplinary studies, and girls’ digital communication. Gonick points out that perhaps the most noteworthy implication of girl studies’ entrance into the academic mainstream is that girls were finally “recognized as subjects within discourses of modernity”(3), an advancement that mirrors womanhood’s conceptual transition in the 1950’s. Both women and girls experienced a shift in their cultural perception, as they were gradually accepted as self-determining individuals instead of passive victims and objects.

Once girlhood made this transition, the range of research surrounding it focused largely on girlhood as a prism of social anxieties, often in response to shifting power structures. So while girls’ culture is created by girls for girls, it is additionally molded by external sociocultural forces such as capitalism, pop culture, and a changing world. As with *The Bell Jar’s* historical setting in the 1950’s, the 1990’s brought about cultural anxieties in response to racial progress, changing gender relations, and the overall character of the nation. As a result, these cultural shifts were projected onto girlhood, and Catherine Driscoll goes on to claim that “Associated with mass and commodity culture rather than the individual, and with self-reflexive changeability rather than singular progress, the girl embodied the difference of technologized, urbanized, commodified, transnationalized late modernity.”(17) In other words, this notion reinforces the liminal model of
female adolescence that characterizes girls as a compilation of texts without any stable identity. The representation of girlhood as a period of chaos has resulted in a variety of problematic assumptions about girls, including that there is nothing substantive to study about girlhood, thus making it unworthy of academic exploration. However, the recent rise of girls’ studies has led to a reinterpretation of this notion, contending that girlhood is not chaotic but a reflection of cultural values and tensions. Gonick introduces her own exploration of girlhood by stating that her inquiry conceptualizes girlhood “not as a universal, biological grounded condition of female experience but rather as produced within shifting sociohistorical, material, and discursive contexts.” (3) Thus, she contends that girlhood is not a universal experience, but a reflection of its environment.

Directly opposing this model of ‘girlhood as an assemblage of texts’ are the more essentialist views of ‘Girl Power’ and ‘Reviving Ophelia’. Both interpretations of girlhood came about in the 90’s, focused largely on white, middle class girls, and contributed to the characterization of a neoliberal girl subject who defies structural inequality through individualization. In this paper, the term ‘neoliberal’ refers to recent economic and political imperatives that have caused “a reshaping of modernity by the spreading of processes of individualization to ever-expanding areas of social, work, and personal life” (Gonick 16). As a result of neoliberal policy, identity becomes an active choice and citizens evade structural inequality through self-determination. Though the ‘Girl Power’ and ‘Reviving Ophelia’ discourses may seem to directly contradict each other, they both affect “how girls engage with the contradictory identificatory possibilities of the two discourses in negotiating their gendered, raced, classed, and sexed identities.” (Gonick 2) Girl Power originated in the early 90’s through a feminist movement comprised largely of young, queer, white, middle class women that called
themselves ‘Riot Grrrls’ and looked to reclaim and redefine the word ‘girl’. The members of the movement included women in the emerging punk rock scene and others who engaged in political expression through DIY culture. Girl Power depicted teenage girls as an empowered political force that subverted consumer culture through self-expression and actively dissented against the patriarchy. Popular culture then quickly absorbed this originally niche movement through all-girl bands like Britain’s Spice Girls employing Girl Power slogans and mainstream media rushing to cover the movement’s rise to popularity. However, Girl Power’s translation into pop culture resulted in a dilution of the movement’s message, with it ultimately being stripped of its political tone and used as a tool for consumerism. This mass production of youth feminism led to widespread disagreement about whether such a movement could be disseminated on such a large scale while still maintaining its revolutionary impact. Despite its shortcomings, the Girl Power movement brought the image of the empowered and politically active teenage girl into the mainstream.

At the same time, the widespread circulation of the ‘Reviving Ophelia’ discourse in the 90’s led to an entirely different depiction of female adolescence. Rooted in Mary Pipher’s best-selling 1994 book *Reviving Ophelia*, this discourse maintained that adolescent girls are delicate and impressionable, and American culture’s expectations of young women are to blame for their crumbling self-esteem. Gonick summarizes Pipher’s argument, stating that “due to pressure from U.S. culture, adolescent girls are coerced into putting aside their ‘authentic selves’ splitting what was, in their younger days, a healthy and united individual, into true and false selves.”(12) Pipher continues her argument, claiming that after this splitting of selves adolescent girls become female-impersonators who look only to please others and meet societal expectations. This model of adolescence is a drastic departure from the more fluid postmodern model discussed earlier, as
the Reviving Ophelia discourse assumes the existence of an unchanging authentic self. As a result, adolescent girls are positioned as the unwitting victims of their own hormones, powerless to avoid the fragmentation of their identities this transition brings. This fragmentation remains a pervasive cultural notion, as the ‘divided self’ is a major theme in second wave feminist readings of women’s narratives, including *The Bell Jar*. Mary Pipher successfully created a career out of the anxieties surrounding girls’ failing self-esteem with several follow-up books to *Reviving Ophelia*, and thus brought her argument into the literary mainstream. In this way, the popularity of the Reviving Ophelia model made female adolescence much more visible, elicited several changes in the education system’s treatment of girls, and created a space for girls to examine the discourses affecting their identities.

Though Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia appear to be contradictory upon a cursory reading, a deeper analysis reveals that both models redefine girlhood through the neoliberal process of individualization. The Girl Power discourse presents teenage girls as an empowered political force while Reviving Ophelia casts them as hapless victims, yet both depictions focus on an unchanging self, not structural inequality, as the determinant of one’s place in society. Gonick concludes, “both Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia participate in the production of the neoliberal girl subject with the former representing the idealized form of the self-determining individual and the latter personifying an anxiety about those who are unsuccessful in producing themselves in this way.”(2) This model, in which adolescence is a reflection of one’s internal ability, directly contrasts with Driscoll’s ‘girlhood as assemblage’ model that it is instead a reflection of external cultural anxieties about shifting power structures. Somewhere in between these two models lies Sylvia Plath’s depiction of adolescence in *The Bell Jar*, thus complicating both the neoliberal girlhood and girlhood as assemblage models.
The Bell Jar quickly became one of the principal literary frames for modern girlhood, yet the elements that led to its cultural ubiquity remain ambiguous. Viewed in relation to the two opposing models of girlhood, Esther Greenwood’s journey through adolescence feels authentic largely because it exists outside the bounds of any discrete, predetermined track. Esther oscillates between victim and heroine, child and adult, success and psychosis throughout the novel. Yet, her most consistent feature is that she embodies both contradictory models of girlhood. Plath’s protagonist is aware of her status as an assemblage of societal expectations, pop culture, and political movements, yet she moves through the narrative in search of a static identity. For example, while Esther addresses her lack of agency in the opening of the novel, stating “I wasn’t steering anything, not even myself” (2), she also characterizes her identity as an active choice that she is ultimately incapable of making. This paralysis manifests itself in the fig tree vision where Esther sees each fig as a coherent identity yet quickly realizes that “choosing one meant losing all the rest” (77). Esther’s transition from girlhood to womanhood is frozen as she is torn between compulsion and choice. Neither of these prescribed definitions of girlhood can adequately explain what is causing Esther’s paralysis, and the reader is left similarly perplexed. This confusion is at the heart of The Bell Jar’s status as a frame for modern girlhood. Girlhood is an inherently contradictory process, and Esther’s response to a society inundating her with images of who and what she should become is undeniably relatable for female adolescent readers.

When adolescence is translated into a narrative form, the differences between boyhood and girlhood become even more pronounced. The bildungsroman is the traditional coming-of-age narrative form, which I will explore in depth in the next chapter. The bildungsroman is a linear, step-by-step narrative in which the protagonist goes through particular experiences in order to transition into adulthood and achieve self-understanding. This coming of age journey’s
logical nature reflects assumed male adolescence in that the protagonist is empowered to make the progressive steps towards adulthood. While the protagonist may encounter some external obstacles he must overcome before reaching adulthood, they have the power to move through the narrative and towards their ultimate goal. Esther Greenwood alludes to this traditional linear progression in *The Bell Jar*, declaring, “I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three…nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn’t see a single pole beyond the nineteenth.”(123) Despite her attempt, Esther cannot continue her journey into womanhood along the same direct trajectory as her past, illustrating the incompatibility of girlhood with the bildungsroman model. Esther often refers to her past as a logical progression from motivated child to honors student to publishing intern, yet once she reaches the precipice of adulthood she cannot discern what is next. She becomes an assemblage of the cultural images of womanhood that pull her in different directions and ultimately leave her powerless.

Girlhood is traditionally depicted as a transition phase, during which a girl should yearn for the ultimate goal of womanhood. However, Esther disrupts this notion by simultaneously dreading her entrance into womanhood and extending her search for identity. She thus illustrates the nuanced nature of modern girlhood and the inability of any one definition to sufficiently encapsulate it. Institutional forces undeniably affect modern girls, yet they also often actively rebel against those forces, and both the ‘neoliberal girlhood’ and ‘girlhood as assemblage’ models ignore this dichotomy. *The Bell Jar*’s representation of an inherently contradictory adolescence is partially responsible for the novel’s reputation as a frame for modern American girlhood. Though this frame may appear limited to white, middle class girlhood, the novel’s
overarching themes of disillusionment, clashing societal expectations, and desire for a coherent identity are much more universal.
Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*, initially published in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, follows the education of Esther Greenwood as she journeys through Smith College, New York City, her childhood home, and a mental institution, an autobiographical interpretation of Plath’s early life. While this novel transcends several different genres, many scholars analyze it within a traditional bildungsroman framework. Esther’s coming of age narrative in the first half of the novel directly engages with the principal elements of a bildungsroman, including its narrative structure and themes, yet differentiates itself from ‘classic’ coming-of-age tales through Esther’s status as a young woman navigating the societal expectations thrust upon her and the narrative depicting her mental deterioration in the second half. The protagonist’s disillusionment with the constrictions of mid-century womanhood requiring her to remain modest, virginal, and passive motivate her to forge an identity through this journey into adulthood, and it is this divergence which separates it from the traditional tales of male education and maturation.

According to Jerome Buckley in *Season of Youth, The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, the integral characteristics of a bildungsroman are “a growing up and gradual self-discovery,” “alienation,” “provinciality, the larger society,” “the conflict of generations,” “ordeal by love” and “the search for a vocation and a working philosophy.”(18) *The Bell Jar* engages with each of these elements within Esther’s journey to self-discovery through a retrospective first-person narrator and episodic structure, and thus focuses intently on the protagonist’s maturation with little interest in the secondary characters. These characters, such as Doreen, Jay Cee, and Buddy Willard only serve to guide or hinder Esther’s development, thus contributing to
the protagonist-centered narrative. *The Bell Jar* is additionally split into two halves, which Linda Wagner describes in “Plath’s *The Bell Jar* as Female *Bildungsroman*”

The first half of *The Bell Jar* gives the classic female orientation and education, with obvious indications of the failure of that education appearing near the end of the New York experience. The second half gives an equally classic picture of mental deterioration and its treatment, a picture relatively new to fiction in the late 1950’s, important both culturally and personally to Plath (62).

In other words, Esther unsuccessfully attempts to discover a coherent adult identity through the traditionally male coming-of-age linear narrative, and then must navigate her subsequent mental decline. Through this structure, Plath separates the novel into two distinct attempts to forge an identity and consequently comments on the limitations of the “classic female orientation and education”. Esther’s internship with *Mademoiselle* in New York City positions her to follow this traditional arc, as the city promises self-discovery and an escape from provinciality in the bildungsroman narrative. However, the protagonist’s disillusionment with New York and those around her inevitably fuels her transition into the second half of the narrative and subsequent mental deterioration.

The debate surrounding the ‘female bildungsroman’ mainly stems from two opposing views: one that purports the traditional bildungsroman is completely incompatible with women’s narratives, and another that identifies the bildungsroman’s patriarchal roots yet nonetheless heralds it as a vital form for these narratives. Ljiljana Ina Gjurgjan’s essay elaborates upon the former view in “The (Im)possibility of Women’s Bildungsroman,” in which she contends that the bildungsroman is completely inaccessible to women’s writing, and any novels that attempt to work within its framework are fated to fail. Gjurgjan claims that the bildungsroman’s core goal is
to depict the process of becoming a man, and this ideological foundation causes its irreconcilability with women’s narratives, as the process of becoming a woman within the context of a bildungsroman demands compliance with patriarchal definitions of womanhood. Additionally, she highlights the absence of a compatible form that accurately depicts these narratives, stating “what the narratives of women’s lives have failed to do is construct the alternative master narrative that would challenge and reformulate the standards set by the narrative of patriarchy.”(Gjurgjan 109) In her essay, Gjurgjan identifies female coming-of-age narratives that attempt to inscribe meaning upon the “patriarchal narrative” and outlines how they are bound to fail, including To the Lighthouse and The Bell Jar. Her argument rests on the claim that the novel follows the path of the traditional coming-of-age novel, yet ultimately proves this process of character formation to be a failure through her mental deterioration. Yet, despite the novel’s somewhat hopeful ending in which Esther appears likely to leave the mental institution, Gjurgjan claims “Esther’s story does not end with the cognition of her new place in society. On her horizon there is no possibility of a lifestyle other than the one of middle-class hypocrisy and pettiness.”(114) This interpretation of The Bell Jar’s ending as evidence of an unsuccessful education leads the argument to its conclusion that this novel, along with many other texts by women writers, cannot be classified as a bildungsroman.

While this analysis reveals several astute insights into the difficulty with which women writers must navigate textual forms steeped in patriarchal ideologies, the conclusion that female coming-of-age narratives are incompatible with the bildungsroman structure is unfounded. The 1983 essay collection The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development, edited by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, identifies the same patriarchal ideologies as Gjurgjan, yet reaches the divergent conclusion that the bildungsroman remains a vital form for
women’s fiction. The book’s introduction opens with a brief history of the bildungsroman and analysis of how it “offers the complexity of form necessary to represent the interrelationships shaping individual growth.”(4) Yet, while this traditional form considers a multiplicity of variables that influence individual growth, gender is not acknowledged, thus assuming a masculine default. This absence results in a variety of problematic assumptions, which is most vividly illustrated through one of the principle conflicts within a bildungsroman: the clash between individual possibility and societal restraints. By ignoring the effects of gender, the traditional bildungsroman makes the problematic assumption that men and women experience the same societal constraints. In fact, because women were historically confined to the domestic sphere and their coming-of-age tales typically replaced outward rebellion with introspection, the bildungsroman’s reliance on an exterior journey to self-realization portrays human development in strictly male terms.

Abel, Hirsch, and Langland identify Jerome Buckley’s Season of Youth as one of the texts that illustrates this limitation, pointing out its focus on external and linear steps necessary to achieve a successful education, including romantic affairs and a vocational search. However, because a women’s coming-of-age narrative frequently reflects the tension between the female protagonists and a textual form reliant on male norms, they are less linear and more disorderly. In these narratives the internal and external realms inevitably clash, and “the female protagonist or Bildungsheld must chart a treacherous course between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it, between the costs of inner concentration and of direct confrontation with society, between the price of succumbing to madness and of grasping a repressive normality.”(12) In other words, the female protagonists must struggle to form an identity within the context of a masculine textual form. Yet, while this clash between narrative and textual form
may seem problematic, *The Voyage In* concludes that the bildungsroman remains a vital form for women writers. The authors additionally observe that women have attained many of the freedoms possessed by the bildungsroman’s traditionally male protagonists in contemporary society, and thus can employ the form to explore themes of personal growth. The following argument proceeds from this conclusion, and thus identifies *The Bell Jar* as a female bildungsroman that clashes with the form’s reliance on male norms yet nonetheless effectively employs it to reveal the intricacies of self-discovery. The novel contains many of the traditional bildungsroman themes but diverges from its linear structure, revealing the struggle between individual realization and societal oppression.

*The Bell Jar* opens in the midst of Esther’s New York City summer, and the reader is immediately immersed in the protagonist’s growing cynicism towards the city as its “hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, cindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat”(1). The first half of the novel is told through flashbacks, focusing largely on Esther’s search for a stable female role model during her internship at *Mademoiselle*. The first chapter reveals the first two of these role models, the *Mademoiselle* editor Jay Cee and Southern debutante Doreen. These women embody two opposing poles on the spectrum of womanhood that Esther believes she must conform to: one, an intelligent yet desexualized career woman, the other, a hyper-sexualized femme-fatale ultimately used for male pleasure. Both Jay Cee and Doreen are fragmentary characters, offering only conformity to a singular female role. As a result, they quickly disappoint her and are abandoned for other role models, such as when Esther immediately desires to become “pure” after witnessing Doreen employ her sexuality with the disc jockey Lenny Shepherd.
I said to myself: “Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don’t know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure (20).

This makeshift baptism cleanses Esther of her relationship with Doreen and the philosophy that she embodies. Afterwards, Doreen appears only two more times in the narrative: during Esther’s first hospital visit in the novel after being poisoned at the Ladies Day banquet, and when she introduces Esther to Marco, the woman hater.

Additionally, Esther is distanced from Jay Cee through the editor’s obvious dissatisfaction with her supposed indecisiveness. After Jay Cee inquires about what Esther wants to do with her life after graduating from college, Esther replies, “I’m very interested in everything” and “The words fell with a hollow flatness on to Jay Cee’s desk, like so many wooden nickels”(32). This is the foundation of Esther’s identity crisis, as she is unable to restrict herself to one narrowly defined type of womanhood. This is cemented in a later scene, as Esther endures a photo-shoot for the Mademoiselle summer interns: “When they asked me what I wanted to be I said I didn’t know. ‘Oh, sure you know,’ the photographer said. ‘She wants,’ said Jay Cee wittily, ‘to be everything.’”(101) Jay Cee immediately characterizes Esther’s desire as absurd, and thus can no longer serve as her role model. This rejection haunts Esther for the rest of the novel as the Mademoiselle editor transforms into another disappointed maternal figure. Though Esther encounters several other potential role models throughout The Bell Jar, including Betsy (“Pollyanna Cowgirl”), Joan, and Dr. Norton, the overwhelming majority either disappoints Esther or is disappointed by her and is subsequently removed from the narrative.
While these female role models majorly influence Esther’s journey to self-discovery, the male characters serve as additional symbols of the restrictions placed on this journey. Buddy Willard, Irwin, and Marco illustrate how Esther will be defined in relation to men, as either a virginal wife or sexual object. Esther quickly becomes convinced that womanhood is wrought with exclusions, as choosing one path also means relinquishing all others. Esther’s struggle with these exclusionary identities culminates in the metaphor of the fig tree, which Esther considers while imagining her life with Constantin, the United Nations interpreter.

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor […] I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest (77).

Unlike the male protagonists in traditional bildungsroman narratives, Esther is plagued by the belief that ‘having it all’ is merely a fantasy, and she will inevitably be constricted to a single type of womanhood. Thus, the characteristically arduous journey from adolescence to adulthood is underscored by this additional knowledge and a pervasively cynical tone. Esther’s interactions with men throughout the novel are characterized by violence and a struggle for power, starting with the introduction of Buddy Willard in Chapter 8.

Buddy Willard enters the novel as a handsome Yale medical student that invites Esther to the Yale Junior Prom and inevitably asks her to marry him. Yet, quickly after this introduction Buddy is intrinsically linked to the childbirth scene in which Esther is first exposed to “that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain”(66). This scene simultaneously disquiets Esther
and connects Buddy to the warped manifestation of womanhood that Esther strives to avoid. This type of womanhood is domestic, submissive, and employed solely for the desire of men, and Esther come to associate this to Buddy Willard and the entire notion of marriage. Spouting lines like “What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from”(73), Buddy is a manifestation of mid-century gender politics that laughs at Esther’s desire to be a poet and insists she will abandon the pursuit once she has children. Thus, Esther’s struggle with Buddy Willard is also a battle against these submissive gender roles that appear to follow her throughout the novel. The protagonist’s struggle to forge an identity distinct from that of any man often results in images of death and violence, such as Buddy’s connection to medical corpses, illness, and his gleefully sadistic response to Esther’s skiing injury. In turn, these images refer back to Esther’s feelings of powerlessness, culminating in the realization that “in spite of all those roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard’s kitchen mat.”(85) The protagonist’s perceived absence of power continues to follow her as she moves from New York to the mental institution, and this theme further connects The Bell Jar to the traditional bildungsroman narrative.

The violence associated with Buddy Willard foreshadows the even more overt sadism that Esther encounters with Marco, the “woman-hater” encountered later on during her time in New York. While Marco only appears in the narrative for a single scene, he is immediately characterized as dangerous and merciless, with Esther quickly observing that his “small, flickering smile reminded me of a snake I’d teased in the Bronx Zoo”(106). In the course of this scene Marco attempts to rape Esther, calls her a slut, and wipes his blood on her face in a vivid act of domination. This violence cements Esther’s feelings of powerlessness as she realizes “It’s
happening,” and that “If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen”(109). Though she does fight back against Marco, her anger is largely displaced towards the city itself, thus cementing her assertion in the opening chapter that she “wasn’t steering anything, not even [her]self”(11). In *The Bell Jar’s* final New York scene, immediately after Esther’s encounter with Marco, the protagonist’s disillusionment reaches its climax as she throws her city girl wardrobe off the roof of her hotel and into “the dark heart of New York”(111). By shedding her old self and the fashionable femininity symbolized by the expensive clothing she chooses to leave in New York, Esther attempts to distance herself from the depravity of the city and her own powerlessness.

Though we see Esther take steps to achieve this in the second half of the novel by seeking out birth control, seeking sexual experience, and rejecting Buddy Willard, the powerlessness follows her throughout the narrative. In discussing the role Esther’s sexuality plays in *The Bell Jar*, Linda Wagner claims

> In the conventional bildungsroman, sexual experience is but another step toward maturity. It suggests the eventual leaving one household to establish another. For a man, such a move may mean only that he hangs his hat in a different closet. For a woman, however, the move means a complete change of status, from mistress to servant (66)

In this way, Esther’s “ordeal by love” and “gradual self discovery” as described by Buckley diverge from the traditional narrative path due to her status as a female adolescent. Esther’s encounter with the last major male character, Irwin, also exemplifies this departure as she attempts to lose her virginity and separate herself from the virginal womanhood that Buddy and society at large promote. After being fitted with a diaphragm, Esther successfully seduces a mathematics professor named Irwin but begins to hemorrhage shortly after losing her virginity. Much different than the “great tradition” of “blood-stained bridal sheets and capsules of red ink
bestowed on already deflowered brides”(229), Esther’s fragile health is threatened by her profuse bleeding as she inevitably ends up back in a hospital for treatment. The doctor’s observation that Esther is “one in a million”(233) to hemorrhage after intercourse highlights not only the irony of the situation but also the danger that accompanies the protagonist’s quest for identity in the face of oppressive gender roles. While sexual experiences and ordeals by love may be a peripheral concern to a male protagonist, for a female protagonist these scenes have a much more serious impact on her reputation, health, and future.

Esther’s perceived powerlessness is a consequence of these gender roles and additionally leads her to distance herself from the women that embody them. The most obvious example of this is Dodo Conway, Esther’s Catholic neighbor with seven children who quickly morphs into a grotesque symbol of motherhood. Soon after returning home and receiving her rejection from a graduate writing program, Esther is woken by the sounds of a squeaking carriage and describes “A woman not five feet tall, with a grotesque, protruding stomach [and] two or three small children of various sizes, all pale, with smudgy faces and bare smudgy knees.”(116) The narrator employs overtly disturbing language to illustrate Esther’s alienation from traditional maternal roles and casts Dodo Conway as the ultimate symbol of this role. Esther’s attitude towards Dodo is a mixture of disgust and fascination that results from the maternal images that have followed her throughout the novel: the pickled fetuses, sterile delivery room, and “windowless corridor of pain”(66). Yet, despite Esther’s alienation from this role, the sights, sounds, and smells of domesticity bombard her immediately upon returning to the suburban realm, which in turn further exacerbate her deteriorating mental state. This mental instability leads Esther into the novel’s final setting, the mental institution, after her oppression, powerlessness, and lack of a coherent identity push her to attempt suicide.
In this last section, Esther grapples with the contradictions and exclusions she has discovered throughout her education and maturation, leading the reader to question whether this education was at all successful. As Wagner points out, “Inherent in the notion of *bildungsroman* is the sense that such a novel will provide a blueprint for a successful education, however the word successful is defined.”(64) While Esther continually returns to the metaphor of being trapped beneath a bell jar in these final chapters, an undeniably negative image, she inevitably finds some coherence at the end of the novel. The image of rebirth appears again in the novel’s final scene, as Esther prepares herself to meet with the institution’s doctors before being discharged.

    Pausing, for a brief breath, on the threshold, I saw the silver-haired doctor who had told me about the rivers and the Pilgrims on my first day, and the pocked, cadaverous face of Miss Huey, and eyes I thought I had recognized over white masks.

    The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room. (244)

Unlike the images previously associated with birth, this scene has a positive tone despite its overwhelming ambiguity. In this case, a “successful education” for Esther Greenwood does not result in a revelatory understanding of her identity, but merely some semblance of coherence in her life.

    Even in this vaguely hopeful closing scene, Esther’s future remains extremely ambivalent and the reader is left questioning whether she has truly come of age in the course of this novel. The narrative’s cyclical structure contributes to this response, and thus diverges from the *bildungsroman*’s traditional linear path. Yet, both the uncertainty and cyclical narrative are products of Esther’s journey of becoming a woman, as the tension between her journey and
societal restraints manifests itself. As mentioned in *The Voyage In*, the journey to self-discovery for women is more chaotic and rarely follows the step-by-step nature of the bildungsroman. Wagner aptly summarizes the conflict that underscores the narrative, claiming that “*The Bell Jar* must certainly be read as the story of that inevitable clash, a dull and dulling repetition of lives all too familiar to contemporary readers, and a testimony to the repressive cultural mold that trapped many mid-century women, forcing them outside what should have been their rightful, productive lives.”(67) As a result, the juxtaposition of a female protagonist struggling to free herself from this cultural mold within a traditionally masculine textual form highlights and enlarges this conflict. *The Bell Jar*’s legacy as a transgressive text stems from this clash and contributes to its often labeled ‘cult-like’ following.

By identifying the ways in which *The Bell Jar* works within and struggles against the bildungsroman framework, the novel’s appeal to adolescent female readers begins to reveal itself. Plath’s novel vividly depicts the “dulling repetition of lives”(Wagner 67) that contemporary female readers know intimately, and this struggle against gender norms within a legitimized form makes the narrative incredibly accessible. Additionally, scholars constantly characterize Esther Greenwood as the archetypal middle class, disillusioned white girl. Her mutability rests largely on her status as an archetype, thus allowing readers to project their own anxieties onto her and find some reconciliation through her narrative journey. In this analysis of *The Bell Jar*’s legacy among adolescent female readers, it is important to address the subjective experiences that these readers have with the novel and its mythic legacy.

In “Mad Girls’ Love Songs: Two Women Poets – a Professor and Graduate Student – Discuss Sylvia Plath, Angst, and the Poetics of Female Adolescence”, Arielle Greenberg and Becca Klaver focus on their first experiences with Plath and how the relationship morphed with
time. This discussion begins with Plath’s status as a ‘guilty pleasure’ author, in that any fascination with her work is expected to begin and end with adolescence. In fact, many readers do first encounter Plath as they approach young-adulthood, and Greenberg and Klaver consider the source of this trend. They quickly point out that

Part of why Plath has had the impact she has had on young women is because of the way we feel mirrored by her, by the way she writes about her life as a disillusioned young middle-class woman. *The Bell Jar*’s Esther, and perhaps Plath’s Confessional persona, are types of female Holden Caulfields. But white boys have many such books and texts to choose from; how many do young white women have? (186)

It is undeniable that male protagonists dominate the bildungsroman form, and though Esther Greenwood is by no means the only female protagonist in the genre, *The Bell Jar* is exceptional in its ability to replicate the “dulling repetition of lives”(Wagner 67) unique to white, middle-class American girlhood, such as expectations of social mobility and niceness. Esther’s struggle with a conflicting attraction towards both glamour and self-destruction while remaining ambitious and highly functioning is particularly relatable to adolescent girls. Sandra Gilbert identifies this paradox as she chronicles her own Plath fan status in “A Fine, White Flying Myth: Confessions of a Plath Addict”, stating that “it is the paradox of Plath's life (perhaps of any woman's life) and of the Plath Myth, that even as she longs for the freedom of flight, she fears the risks of freedom -- the simultaneous reactivation and disintegration of the past it implies.”(601) This results in a tendency for readers to hold Esther up as a reflection of themselves, despite the potentially problematic assumptions this entails.

Just as Plath’s work is haunted by the legacy of her premature death, Esther is immortalized as a young woman on the brink of adulthood, thus keeping both women “in the
thick of [their] troubles, in suspended adolescence” (Greenberg 187). They are frozen in this transitory state and thus eternally associated with the tumults of adolescence. Not only does this endear both the protagonist and author to a female adolescent reader, but also ultimately leads to literary academics dismissing *The Bell Jar* as juvenile and unfit to be classified as canonical literature because of this association with girl readers. The following section will focus specifically on this phenomenon, as well as how the ‘cult’ of Sylvia Plath is portrayed in critical analyses, contemporary films, and pop culture at large.
The Female Plath Reader in Pop Culture

The cultural trope of the Plath reader remains a ubiquitous and well-understood symbol in contemporary pop culture. The Plath reader is almost always a white, middle class, teenage girl whose penchant for second-wave feminist theory and melancholia casts her as a social outcast. She is often depicted as a man-hater, potentially resulting from a terrible high school ex-boyfriend like in the case of Kat Stratford in *10 Things I Hate About You*, or a sexually abusive father for Mallory Knox in *Natural Born Killers*. In *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers*, Janet Badia employs these characters in addition to others to illustrate that the Plath reader has become such a cliché that the mere sight of *The Bell Jar* or *Ariel* instantly tells the viewer everything they need to know about her and where the plot is likely heading. This chapter intends to explore how this trope came into existence and what it reveals about cultural perceptions of female adolescent readers. As a result, we must additionally analyze Plath’s early critical reception, the rise of the so-called ‘Cult of Plath’ (Badia), representations of the Plath Reader in popular culture, and its evolution into the ‘Sad Pretty Girl Poet’ trope (Quintana) in the social media age. Following this progression will reveal the shifting cultural anxieties projected onto female readers as well as the unceasing attempts to pathologize them.

Soon after Sylvia Plath’s death in 1963, literary critics began to observe its effect on the popularity of her work, including the first editions of *The Bell Jar*, *Winter Trees*, and *Crossing the Water*. Many critics spoke of the need to separate Plath’s work from its autobiographical inspiration, which quickly gave way to the characterization of Plath readers as morbid voyeurs obsessing over the author’s meteoric demise. Janet Badia addresses this characterization and its discursive implications in *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers*, claiming that it is
often “motivated less by the question of the aesthetic quality of Plath’s work than by a patronizing and even misogynistic attitude towards women readers. Often this attitude reveals itself in explicit ways through direct attacks that cast women readers as uncritical consumers prone to poor judgment and psychological problems.”(188) The depiction of women readers as indiscriminating, obsessed consumers unites the majority of these critical reviews, leads to the pervasive misogynistic tone, and reveals the problematic cultural attitudes thrust upon Plath readers. Plath’s body of work is unique in that its remains intrinsically linked to its readers, and the cultural perceptions of this group directly affect its perceived academic merit. While the mass characterization of Plath readers stems largely from societal attitudes towards women in general, it also reflects the cultural anxieties about the rise of second wave feminism and consumer culture.

Sylvia Plath’s connection to the American Women’s Liberation Movement and second-wave feminism at large was often a focal point of early literary reviews, as critics would employ this connection to categorize and thus dismiss Plath’s popularity. With the rise of feminism directly affecting the publishing and literary landscape, critics’ tendency to pigeonhole Plath readers as fanatical feminists likely manifested as a reaction against this cultural shift. This depiction forms the foundation of the Plath reader trope as an indiscriminate follower who seeks out feminist fodder without any concern for literary quality. Badia additionally outlines this derogatory stereotype, stating, “The women of the movement are young, impressionable, uncritical consumers of ideas they fail to understand; they are followers caught up in emotions they cannot control and brainwashed by cult leaders who inspire membership through mystical forms of persuasion.”(190) This perception reflects and reinforces the problematic ‘Reviving Ophelia’ image of adolescent girls as weak-willed victims while also invoking the cult imagery
explored later in this analysis. It comes as no surprise that Plath’s rise in popularity and accessibility lead to increased criticism, as this criticism additionally served as a rebuke of feminism’s entrance into the mainstream. Works like *The Bell Jar*, *Ariel*, and *Winter Trees* quickly became symbols of second-wave feminism and Plath was hailed as a feminist icon.

Consequently, Plath’s growing fan base came to be known as the ‘Cult of Plath’, with its members often referred to as “worshipers, admirers, voyeurs, pursuers, band-wagon camp followers, and even baying packs of autograph hounds” (Badia 196). These disparaging labels seek mainly to discredit Plath readers by associating them with consumerism, pop culture, and religion. By doing so, the critics strip them of any literary legitimacy and mask them in mythic language. The cultural perception of Plath readers as indiscriminate fans who find themselves unable to resist Plath’s dark allure denies them any sort of agency, and relies on problematic ideologies about women readers and writers in general. Most notably, these ideologies maintain that women are simply “bad readers”, unable to discern between high and low art, and in need of protection from dangerous ideas. Badia additionally inquires, “Are they bad readers because they have fallen under Plath’s spells? Or are they victims of Plath’s spells because they were always-already bad readers? For most critics, it likely doesn’t matter, just as long as we all recognize Plath’s readers as uncritical consumers who fail to interpret or judge Plath’s work correctly.” (200) The fear surrounding ‘uncritical consumers’ likely stems in part from the rise of consumer culture at the turn of the twentieth century, and highlights the cultural tendency to project social anxieties onto girls and women. As such, the discourse surrounding Plath readers naturally tends towards certain ideological constructions, and continues to even as the trope evolves into a ubiquitous symbol through media representations.
Beginning in the late 1980’s and early 90’s, the Plath reader trope began to coalesce into a fully formed fictional character that appeared in a wide variety of media formats, largely consisting of film and television. From the romantic-comedy Shakespeare adaptation *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) to the satirical animated series *Family Guy*, the image of a girl holding a copy of *The Bell Jar* instantly conveys everything needed to know about the character’s disposition and mental stability. Badia uses Kat Stratford, the protagonist of *10 Things I Hate About You*, to introduce the Plath reader trope’s pop culture evolution and identify its use in pathologizing female adolescent readers. Spewing sarcastic lines like “I guess in this society, being male and an asshole makes you worthy of our time.” (*10 Things*), Kat immediately characterizes herself as the sort of bitter, intellectual, man-hating teenage girl that would easily fit in with the cult of Plath. This is quickly cemented through an early scene that shows Kat seated in her living room, quietly reading a copy of *The Bell Jar*. This scene, though brief, plays an integral role in the plot by illustrating who Kat is and what the viewer should expect from her. She certainly lives up to those expectations for the majority of the film, as she becomes increasingly disillusioned with the perceived patriarchal nature of high school.

Kat soon begins to fall for Patrick Verona, a mysterious bad-boy being paid to date her by the arrogant Joey Donner so that Joey can take out Kat’s little sister Bianca. When Joey asks Bianca to the prom, Kat reveals that she had lost her virginity to Joey, immediately regretted it, and swore never to succumb to peer pressure again. Thus, the film trivializes Kat’s brand of feminism by revealing it was merely a response to an unpleasant sexual experience. According to Badia,

Kat Stratford serves as a particularly revealing example of a pathologized woman reader: a woman whose reading practices are defined symptomatically, which is to say, either as a sign
of illness or as a potential cause of it. Such pathologization reflects broad cultural anxieties concerning what women read, how they read, and what effects their reading habits might have, either on themselves or on the culture at large. (64)

The mere sight of *The Bell Jar* in Kat Stratford’s hands leads to immediate questions about her emotional and mental stability, as the novel has become intrinsically connected to Plath’s untimely demise and her readers’ perceived morbid fascination. *The Bell Jar*’s evolution into a symbol of mental instability is also depicted in popular film and television, as the Plath reader becomes not only an indiscriminate consumer, but also a potential danger to herself. In the cult-classic film *Heathers* (1988), the murderous teenage protagonists Veronica and J.D. agree to forge a suicide note after killing Veronica’s best friend Heather Chandler. As Heather’s dead body lies on the floor, the camera pans over to reveal a Sparknotes version of *The Bell Jar* and then cuts to J.D., who smiles to himself and suggests they frame her death as a suicide. The implication is obvious, as *The Bell Jar* becomes a symbol of Heather Chandler’s mental instability and thus makes her framed suicide all the more believable.

What’s often left undistinguished is whether the Plath reader’s psychological state inevitably draws them to Plath, or this psychosis is a direct result of engaging with Plath’s work. Yet, the specific nature of the relationship between female adolescent readers and Sylvia Plath is largely unimportant to the viewer, since the mere combination of the two elements results in an instantaneous image of the end result. Another example of *The Bell Jar*’s power as a symbol of the damaged female mind arises in a 1999 episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* titled “A Single Life”. The episode follows the investigation of a young woman’s death after her body is found on a sidewalk after plummeting from her apartment building’s window. In an attempt to discover whether this death was a murder or suicide, the case’s detectives begin to search her
belongings and inevitably find a long-overdue copy of *The Bell Jar* from the victim’s high school library. Soon, the detectives begin to find more parallels between the victim, named Susan Sodarsky, and Sylvia Plath, including the use of a pseudonym, writings with feminist overtones, and a history of romantic affairs. Unsurprisingly, the detectives soon discover that Susan’s death was indeed a suicide. As Badia states, “Of course Susan Sodarsky possesses a Plath book. It’s what women like her read. Of course Susan Sodarsky killed herself. It’s what happens to young women who read books like that and in that way.”(78) This fundamental correlation between Plath’s work and the unstable young women that consume it feed the belief that women need protection from certain ideas for their own safety.

In the late 90’s and early 2000’s, this belief continued to propagate through media representations of what Christina Quintana calls the “sad, pretty girl poet”(14). According to Quintana, “Plath embodies all of the characteristics—beauty, whiteness, creativity, youthfulness, and mental illness—that make her the progenitor of this trope, the original Sad, Pretty Girl-Poet”(6). This trope is exemplified by a variety of popular texts and films from the turn of the twenty first century, including *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), *Prozac Nation* (2001), and *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), as well as the rise of “pale blogs” on the social media blogging website Tumblr. All of these visual manifestations focus on the same romantic image of mental illness as white, youthful, creative, and above all, feminine. Plath’s status as the original sad, pretty girl poet result in part from the sheer breadth of images of her that exists in popular culture: the motivated scholarship girl, the youthful bathing beauty, the brilliant creative mind, and the doomed artist. These conflicting characters reflect the conflicting nature of contemporary girlhood, and Quintana points out that “Much of [Plath’s] appeal appears to rest in this very mutability and the seemingly boundless space it creates for readers to project their own suffering.”(14) This
mutability also stems largely from Plath’s whiteness and upper middle class background, which
cast her as an unmarked canvas. Sylvia Plath (and Esther Greenwood) are simultaneously
powerful and helpless, and this persistent contradiction is at least partially responsible for their
continued relevance as fictional tropes.

The sad, pretty girl poet perpetuates many of the same qualities as the Plath reader trope
from the second half of the twentieth century, but with an increased emphasis on
heteronormative desirability and romanticizing mental illness. Narratives following ambitious,
white, attractive young women on the cusp of adulthood who are inevitably affected by their
mental illness began to flood mainstream culture in the 1990’s and continued to proliferate
throughout the early 2000’s. As previously stated, the 1990’s were “a time when cultural anxiety
surrounding femininity was high and young girls were seen as both empowered and fragile,
ambitious and tenuous—a contradictory description that could also be applied to adolescent Plath
herself.”(Quintana 20) With the rise of both the Reviving Ophelia and Girl Power discourses,
this period was dominated by contradictory images of girlhood that contributed in part to the
increasing appeal of Sylvia Plath and rise of mental illness narratives. Prozac Nation’s Lizzie
Wurtzel best exemplifies the sad, pretty girl poet protagonists of these narratives: she is a
depressed yet high functioning Harvard student who wins countless awards and revels in her own
sexual desirability.

This heteronormative desirability is a key characteristic of the “sad, pretty girl poet”, as
Quintana makes the point that she “is not sexy in spite of her craziness but because of it”(41).
Similar to the smiling, lithe, constantly reprinted image of a perpetually young Plath at the beach,
Lizzie’s sinister fate simultaneously enhances her attractiveness and romanticizes her mental
illness. The paradox that underlies this trope is a direct reflection of the conflicting images of
girlhood circulating at the time, as the pretty girl poet embodies both the empowered sexiness of Girl Power as well as the doomed frailty of Reviving Ophelia. The girlhood paradox remained unresolved with the beginning of the twenty first century and the rise of social media, leading to the rise in popularity of pale grunge blogs on the popular blogging website Tumblr. These blogs continue to circulate images that perpetuate the depiction of mental illness as feminine, romantic, and creative.

The Plath reader trope has experienced many evolutions, from the feminist fangirl of the 1960’s to the dark, precocious Lolita of the 2000’s. Yet, these shifting interpretations are all similarly influenced by the cultural anxieties about female adolescent readers at that specific period and the inherent paradox surrounding Plath’s life and legacy. The contradictions of girlhood have only multiplied with the passage of time, and Plath’s Esther Greenwood remains a mutable symbol of “wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time”(Plath 94) We must additionally acknowledge that our understanding of the Plath reader is predisposed to particular ideologies, mainly those that position them as mentally unstable, indiscriminate cult members. However, the subsequent and final chapter will discuss how contemporary Plath readers affect the author’s legacy and engage with the novel in new and unprecedented ways.
The Plath reader, that contested character in all her youthful darkness, was molded by nearly every sociopolitical movement she passed through. While many scholars have documented the ideological implications bound up in representations of Plath readers prior to the twenty first century, there is a noticeable lack of research regarding more contemporary iterations of the Plath reader. While the cultural tumults of the nineties may seem close at hand, the readers engaging with Plath and *The Bell Jar* in the twenty-first century are doing so in innovative ways, and thus require us to view them as a separate demographic of Plath readers. Social media, the growing acceptance of mental illness, and contemporary iterations of the feminist movement are only a few modern social developments that affect how adolescent readers interpret and interact with Plath’s formative text. Consequently, this chapter will focus on how the new class of Plath readers engages with *The Bell Jar* differently than their predecessors, and the ways in which this affects Plath’s cultural legacy.

The year 2013 marked the fiftieth anniversary of *The Bell Jar*, and thus brought increased attention to both Plath’s mythic legacy and the novel’s effect on several different generations of readers, including the millennial generation. Though a precise definition of the millennial generation has yet to be decisively agreed upon, this paper applies the term to those born after 1980 and before 2000 (Ng). This chapter’s scope will be limited to *The Bell Jar’s* cultural relevance among millennial readers in the years immediately surrounding and following its fiftieth anniversary. Additionally, much of the contemporary discourse surrounding the novel occurs largely on social media platforms such as Tumblr and Twitter, and these discussions often indicate how *The Bell Jar*’s narrative appeals to adolescent readers. This discourse can take the
form of isolated quotes, fan fiction, book reviews, narrative inspired art, or merely photographs of Sylvia Plath or the novel itself. By analyzing the specific elements that these readers focus on, we can observe the narrative themes that remain timely and engaging fifty years after the novel was first published.

While many contemporary readers dismiss the novel’s darker themes, the “sad, pretty girl poet” trope remains prevalent on social media platforms, specifically the blogging website Tumblr. Users frequently shape their blog around a specific aesthetic, theme, or color palette, resulting in different categories such as “tropical”, “pastel”, and “pale” blogs. In her analysis, Quintana argues that these “pale blogs” result in a problematic depiction of mental illness as feminine, creative, and desirable through the images they ‘reblog’. She goes on to state, “Self-described pale bloggers (a demographic made up primarily of young [12-19], white, middle-class girls) will often post images of self harm (scars, bruises, burn marks, etc.), guns, pills, and graveyards, but also snapshots of their face, hair, nails, and make up”(44). The girls behind these blogs employ this visually striking juxtaposition of traditional femininity with the macabre in order to create and reinforce their own identities. In addition to these images, pale bloggers will also often post photographs of Sylvia Plath, passages from her work, and film stills from movies like *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation* that frame their female protagonists as depressed and beautiful. For example, Quintana refers to a pale blog featuring a film still from *Prozac Nation* of Christina Ricci as Elizabeth Wertzel saying, “All I see is the dark side of anything.”(47) The quotes and images featured from these films overwhelmingly focus on their protagonists’ depression and disillusionment with their environment.

Pale bloggers occasionally post original artwork or fan fiction, but are more likely to “reblog” images from another pale blog in order to cultivate their online identity. Thus, these
blogs can be seen as more of a performative act of self-construction than an act of artistic self-expression. Quintana expounds on this point when she claims “pale bloggers are not imagining new stories and interpretations of The Bell Jar, Prozac Nation, or Girl, Interrupted, but rather imagining themselves as a continuation of the sad, pretty girl poet lineage, a twenty-first century incarnation of Plath (or Esther Greenwood)”(50). This shift in focus from Plath herself to her effect on the reader’s identity is characteristic of many contemporary Plath readers, as they use her legacy and texts to analyze and reaffirm particular elements of their self-concept. These readers differs from the previous Plath readers described by Badia, in that they are actively engaging with the cultural image of the Plath reader and applying it to themselves through an act of performative identity. The pale bloggers and other Plath fans seek out specific narratives threads that they feel apply to their lives instead of wholly identifying with Plath or Esther. Often, this narrative has to do with Esther’s status as a “paradoxical figure of ambition and frailty”(Quintana 50), but the images in which the readers identify themselves shift with time.

Despite the problematic implications that accompany the sad, pretty girl poet, her allure has not waned for many adolescent girls and American culture at large. Musicians such as Lana del Rey play off the contradictory images of emotional fragility and sexual empowerment while presenting themselves as a continuation of the sad, pretty girl poet tradition. Lana del Rey’s engagement with this trope can be easily observed through a quick glance at her discography, which is littered with song titles like “Sad Girl”, “Pretty When You Cry”, and “Summertime Sadness”. Her use of death, sex, and wealth as foundational themes in her songs is extremely consistent, such as in her 2012 breakout hit “Born to Die”, when she sings “You like your girls insane/ So choose your last words, this is the last time/ Cause you and I, we were born to die”(Del Rey). She also often employs imagery from the 1950’s and 60’s in her music videos,
including the video for “National Anthem”, in which she appears as both Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. The parallels between the pop musician and Sylvia Plath have not gone unnoticed, as she appeared in a Sylvia Plath-inspired photo shoot for *Vogue Australia*’s October 2012 issue in which she posed clutching paperbacks, sitting next to a typewriter, and looking generally despondent (“Lana”). While this is only one example of the sad, pretty girl poet’s continuation into the twenty-first century, it indicates that the allure of this paradoxical character will likely continue as long as girlhood remains inherently contradictory.

As previously mentioned, the socio-historical context directly affects how each generation of Plath readers engages with *The Bell Jar*. While the rise of social media is the most obvious recent cultural change, there are countless other developments that draw new readers’ attention towards particular narrative threads. Most notably, Esther’s New York narrative appears to garner the most attention from contemporary Plath readers in real life and fictional storylines alike. In a New York Times cultural studies piece titled “Seeing Sylvia Plath With New Eyes” published in honor of *The Bell Jar*’s fiftieth anniversary, poet Sandra Beasley claims that her younger sister belongs to this new wave of readers who focus increasingly on Plath and Esther’s promising talent. She goes on to say “For her, the draw of Plath is this Mademoiselle era; that’s the Plath she’s into […] I’m glad that what she relates to is Plath’s struggle to make her way in the professional world, not the fear that, no matter what she accomplishes, she might lose it the moment she enters a domestic role.”(Schillinger) Elizabeth Winder’s *Pain, Parties, Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953* is another example of the increased focus on Plath’s time in the city, as Winder outlines and explores Plath’s twenty-six days working for *Mademoiselle*. There are countless potential reasons for this shift in focus, including the big-city dream’s growing unattainability for millennials, the social pressure for women to ‘have it all’, or
the prevalence of mainstream pharmacology. But while the exact reason for the shift is difficult
to determine, we can analyze what it implies for Plath readers and the novel’s cultural legacy.

Esther’s female bildungsroman narrative in the first half of *The Bell Jar* has become
increasingly relatable for millennial readers, as the societal pressure on high-achieving
adolescents continues to grow. Esther’s fear of inadequacy, failure, and commitment despite her
otherwise accomplished life is incredibly relevant for a generation of readers who grew up in a
culture that encourages them to dream big while also demanding they play it safe. In many recent
discussions of *The Bell Jar*, readers find themselves coming back to the fig tree passage as a
relevant representation of the struggle they face in a world full of opportunity. One noteworthy
example of this can be found in the season finale of *Master of None* (2015), where the main
character Dev vents to his father about his indecision regarding whether he should end his
current relationship. His father responds, “You have to learn to make decisions man. You are like
woman sitting in front of the fig tree, staring at all the branches ‘til the tree dies.” (Wareheim)
and then tells him to read *The Bell Jar*. This recommendation initially falls on deaf ears, but later
on in the episode Dev reads the fig tree passage from a copy of the novel as images of his
girlfriend, foreign countries, his job, and unidentified women flood the screen, thus representing
the ‘figs’ in his life.

This scene is noteworthy for several reasons, with the most obvious one being that Dev
and his father are male Plath readers, thus unhinging the stereotype from its typical feminine
implications. The image of the man hating, mentally unstable, white, middle class girl is replaced
by that of a twenty-something Indian-American millennial man, and the result is equally jarring
and poignant. It is worth noting that Dev’s relationship with *The Bell Jar* is notably different
than the typical Plath reader, as he seeks it out for one specific passage and then leaves the
bookstore without purchasing it. Plath’s mythic legacy does not loom in the background, nor does it bring Dev’s mental stability into question. In fact, the fig tree passage is completely decontextualized and thus stripped of its connections to Esther’s concern about her entrance into womanhood. Instead, Dev chooses to focus on Esther’s universal struggle as a young adult paralyzed by the fear of commitment.

Dev’s interaction with *The Bell Jar* marks a new type of Plath reader, one that identifies with Esther’s coming-of-age narrative yet largely ignores its darker undertones. A potential reason for this new interpretation may be the normalization of antidepressants, antipsychotics, and mood stabilizers. With mental illness becoming less of a taboo in recent years, Esther’s time in the psychiatric institution may seem to be more of an antiquated narrative to young readers. In an article titled “Sylvia Plath: Reflections On Her Legacy” published in *The Guardian* for *The Bell Jar*’s fiftieth anniversary, Lena Dunham questions this further, saying “I wonder if Plath would have been saved had she been born in a different time: in a time when psycho-pharmacologists are no more shameful to visit than hairdressers and women write celebrated personal essays about being bad mothers and cutters and are reclaiming the word slut.”(Winterson) While this question will never truly be answered, it does lead to a revealing inquiry about how modern pharmaceuticals may shift readers’ interpretations.

The anniversary edition of *The Bell Jar*, released in 2013 by the novel’s publisher Faber and Faber, additionally exemplifies this renewed focus on Esther’s female bildungsroman. The cover of the anniversary edition depicts a young woman looking into a compact mirror and applying makeup in front of a red background. The combination of the bright colors, script font, and attractive model strikingly contrast with the novel’s much darker past covers and portrays the image of Esther that has grown increasingly popular: the New York golden girl struggling to
extend her success into the professional realm. Her disillusionment compels the reader, not her madness. The cover received immediate criticism, with many Plath fans complaining that it repackaged the tragic novel as ‘chick-lit’ and thus delegitimized it. In a statement, the paperbacks publisher at Faber responded to the criticism, stating “The image on the cover picks up on the beginning of the story, where the narrator is […] encountering the conflict between new freedom and old assumptions about women’s aspirations.” (Usborne) In order to repackage and revitalize Plath’s novel, the publisher chose to ignore the possibly outdated mental institution narrative and focus instead on the image of Plath most likely to attract an unacquainted adolescent reader. Though this approach modernizes the novel’s legacy, it does so at the cost of erasing the devastating power of Esther’s descent into madness.

*The Bell Jar’s* continued relevance over the past fifty years speaks to not only Plath’s skill as a fiction writer, but also the unchanging paradoxical nature of growing up. By evaluating the discussions surrounding Plath’s novel within television, news, and social media, we see that the new generation of readers employs particular narrative threads to reinforce their own identity. Overwhelmingly, the readers are drawn to the first half of the novel, in which Esther attempts to follow the traditional bildungsroman narrative and struggles to forge a coherent identity. While the reasons for this shift remain undetermined, the rise of mental health pharmacology and deinstitutionalization of long-stay mental health facilities may be responsible. Modern Plath readers thus continue to modify *The Bell Jar’s* cultural relevance and employ its themes in innovative ways.
**Conclusion**

The concept of girlhood as a coherent transitional phase from girl to woman is a relatively modern one. The rise of girl studies in the second half of the twentieth century marked the beginning of scholarly research concerning the universal and nuanced elements found within the girlhood experience. This increased scrutiny led to the development of the ‘Reviving Ophelia’ and ‘Girl Power’ discourses in the early 1990’s, which both approached girlhood through an essentialist perspective and focused on the unchanging self as the driving force of girlhood, instead of societal influences. These discourses form the foundation of the ‘neoliberal girlhood’ model, which directly contrasts with the ‘girlhood as assemblage’ model. However, neither model of girlhood can entirely explain or resolve Esther’s paralysis within *The Bell Jar*, as she transitions from an empowered proto-feminist to helpless victim with each turn of a page, thus imbuing her journey with a sense of authenticity.

Esther’s inability to be defined additionally manifests in *The Bell Jar*’s form, which can be seen as a female interpretation of the traditionally male bildungsroman. The first half of the novel engages with several traditional bildungsroman elements, while the second half illustrates the failure of the bildungsroman to adequately capture the girlhood experience. The bildungsroman form has undeniable shortcomings that make it difficult to apply to girlhood, most notably that it ignores the role of societal restraints in the protagonist’s journey to self-discovery. Though some literary critics maintain that this literary form is completely incompatible with women’s narratives, this paper’s argument concludes that *The Bell Jar* can be classified as a successful female bildungsroman. The novel depicts a female protagonist...
struggling to free herself from societal expectations within the confines of a masculine textual form, thus magnifying the conflict and redrawing the bounds of a bildungsroman narrative.

Just as Esther is forever suspended in adolescence within the confines of the novel, the Plath reader is always portrayed as a hapless teenage girl. Though this cultural trope has evolved throughout the years, the Plath reader largely remains a white, angry, creative, middle class female outcast. This trope initially emerged from literary critics’ misogynistic descriptions of Plath readers as helpless, indiscriminate consumers, which in turn reflected broader cultural anxieties about the growing women’s liberation movement. The Plath reader trope began to coalesce in the 1980’s and 90’s, with the character beginning to frequently appear in popular film, television, and literature. In time, a single image of a female character clutching a copy of *The Bell Jar* became an instantly recognizable symbol of mental instability. The turn of the century and rise of social media led to another iteration of the Plath reader that depicts mental illness as white, feminine, creative, and attractive. By analyzing the evolution of this trope, we realize that our interpretations of Plath readers are predisposed to problematic ideological frames.

In the wake of *The Bell Jar*’s fiftieth anniversary, we see that new Plath readers engage with the text principally through discussions on social media platforms and performative identity practices. A large portion of the social media discussions occurs on “pale blogs”, which ‘reblog’ images of Plath and passages from her journals, poems, and novel. The “pale bloggers” see themselves as a continuation of the sad, pretty girl poet tradition and will often juxtapose morbid images with traditionally feminine ones. New Plath readers also increasingly focus on *The Bell Jar*’s Mademoiselle narrative and Esther’s coming of age journey instead of Esther’s time in the mental institution. One potential reason for this is the popularity of mental health pharmacology
in favor of long-term mental institution. Though this shift in emphasis strips the novel of an integral narrative thread, focusing on Esther’s universalized struggle to grow up allows *The Bell Jar* to appeal to a wider array of millennial girl readers.

Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* continues to attract and engage young readers more than fifty years after it was first published in spite of the rapid societal and cultural changes that have occurred since 1963. Esther is a complex, contradictory protagonist whose struggle against the crippling effects of predetermined cultural molds casts her as the champion and the victim, traditional and transgressive. These contradictions are at the heart of *The Bell Jar*’s cult status and continued popularity, as millennial American girlhood remains an inherently paradoxical state. The relationship between *The Bell Jar* and its readers has been mocked, replicated, and analyzed many times over, particularly because of the unique way in which both the text and readers shape each other. Ultimately, the novel’s legacy rests upon the perceptions of its readers, and only time will tell how the next generation will continue to build upon it.
Works Cited


