

**THE FACE IN THE MIRROR: MULTIPLE IDENTITIES AS A CAUSE OF MADNESS IN THE WORKS OF GWENDOLYN BROOKS AND SYLVIA PLATH**

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**Abstract**

*This paper focuses on notions of madness as found in the works of American authors Gwendolyn Brooks and Sylvia Plath. The author considers Brooks' Maud Martha and Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar for instances of madness as it is expressed by both anger and rage and by mental psychosis. The paper argues that the female protagonists, though separated by race, region, and age, both experience forms of madness that result from the social climates in which they live. Ultimately, each of these novels serve as cautionary tales for the effects of repressed madness in women.*

In her 1963 manifesto, "The Feminine Mystique," Betty Friedan describes an epidemic spreading throughout American households. This epidemic, Friedan explains, is characterized by an overall mental malaise that compounds a sense of emptiness, anxiety, and despair. Though the "problem...has no name" Friedan claims it is has infiltrated the psyches of countless American mothers and wives (Friedan 20). While "The Feminine Mystique" primarily focuses on the growing dissatisfaction of white suburban housewives, it fails to recognize that in the 1950's, women of all classes, races, ages, and professions wrestled with stifling social climates that dictated their lives. Questions of personal identity and the role of women in society loomed large in the minds of women from many different backgrounds and generations. These anxieties, naturally, manifested themselves in the writing of female authors during this time. Novels as diverse as Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* unite to form a chorus of voices proclaiming that female dissatisfaction and unease transcends the boundaries of race, age, marital status, and profession.

The works of Brooks and Plath show how two women, Maud Martha, and African American living in Chicago in the 1950's and Esther Greenwood, a student from the suburbs in Boston, experience mental turmoil as they fight against the social scripts of 1950's America. Though the battles each female protagonist faces are unique and individualized, both women experience fractured identities as a result of the repressive, often patriarchal society in which they live. The split each woman undergoes ultimately leads to a form of madness that takes shape in rage and psychosis. As Maud Martha experiences the racism that pervades her everyday life, she comes to see the world in a kind of double consciousness where she acknowledges both her own perception of life as well as her counterpart's perception; this condition eventually leads to a constrained and repressed rage that infiltrates Maud's spirit. Esther Greenwood, meanwhile, is so overcome by her sometimes stifling, sometimes expansive life options that she feels herself split into two personas which causes her mental downfall. In both of these characters, split identity has devastating, and prophetic, results. Both Brooks and Plath's novels end elliptically and with lingering questions about the fates of each protagonist. The lack of closure and finality in the fates of each of the protagonists, even as the work themselves terminate, allows for consideration of the sociological problems that contribute to the conflicts in the works. Ultimately, both novels act as cautionary tales that highlight the results of placing limitations and unattainable expectations on women.

While a variety of scholars have noted notions of madness in both the works of Gwendolyn Brooks and Sylvia Plath, little, if any, work had been done on the similarities between each author's depiction of female madness. Authors like Mary Helen Washington and Patricia and Vernon Lattin have explored the topic of rage in Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*, and they all come to similar conclusions about how Maud triumphs over her madness or anger. In their article "Dual Vision in Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*," the Lattins assert that Maud "possesses a dual vision that allows her to see simultaneously beauty in ugliness, life in death, and a positive way of living by which one can maintain one's self-respect and creativity in the face of overwhelmingly negative forces" (Lattin 137). Washington presents a franker, more pragmatic understanding of Maud noting in her article "Taming All that Anger Down: Rage and Silence in Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*." She notes that *Maud Martha* is essentially about "bitterness, rage, self-hatred, and the silence that results from repressed anger" (Washington 453). Though Washington's article goes further to address the complexity of Maud's internal rage, she overlooks the serious consequences of unchecked anger. Washington sees motherhood as an out for Maud, a way to embrace herself and her femininity; however, motherhood and the expectations of motherhood, as Betty Friedan duly notes in her 1963 "The Feminine Mystique," often do more to provoke female anxiety than relieve it. The complexity of Maud's anger runs deeper than most critics allow, and her stifled madness serves as a warning for the consequences of latent rage.

Critics of Sylvia Plath concentrate on rage in both her poetry and prose, but unlike Brooks scholars, fail to recognize fractured identity as the cause such angst. Elaine Martin and Jooyoung Park highlight the social impact on Plath's protagonists' psyches. In her article "Mothers, Madness, and the Middle Class in *The Bell Jar* and *Les Mots pour le dire*," Martin cites patriarchy as a cause of Esther's insanity. While Martin's analysis is astute, she fails to recognize that it is the split identity caused by the gulf between a patriarchal society's expectations of Esther and her own vision of herself that leads to her insanity. Park, likewise, focuses on Plath's narrators' anger towards both men and women in her elegies. Though many have taken up issues of madness in the works of Brooks and Plath, there is a significant absence of scholarly material dealing with the similarities between these two women writers. Examining both women's work in tandem will offer a new perspective on how the "female problem" in 1950's America crossed boundaries of race, class, age, and geography, and prove that it was a much more potent and pervasive problem than many critics allow.

Brooks' *Maud Martha* chronicles life of an African American woman living in Chicago in the 1950's. Written as a compilation of vignettes, the novella provides a glimpse into Maud's mundane experiences, joys, and heartbreaks. In its brief but poignant impressionistic sketches, *Maud Martha* makes no attempts to evade the pervasive issues of racism in America during the 1950's, and in several vignettes, Maud herself is obliged to contend with the prejudices of others. In these moments, a peculiar and important change takes place in Maud's psyche: she steps outside herself and takes on the consciousness of another person. This shift in consciousness allows Maud to negotiate her position as an African American woman, but it also creates a sense of unease and apprehension about her identity. The double consciousness that Maud, and many other African Americans experience, was first articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In the book, Du Bois describes double consciousness as "a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 1). The effect of continually envisioning one's self through the eyes of another, Du Bois argues, is to create a sense of perpetual divideness. He explains that "One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois 1). The results of a divided identity become apparent in several of the vignettes in *Maud Martha*. Throughout the novella, Maud enters the consciousness of a variety of people, both black and white. Regardless of whose psyche she inhabits, the effect of Maud's double consciousness is almost always

the same: she becomes angry as her own sense of morality stands in direct opposition to those who tell her how, as a black woman, she should behave.

The vignette “the self-solace” depicts a critical moment when Maud’s consciousness becomes fractured as she is forced to try to understand the incomprehensible behavior of a racist. The scene, which takes place in a beauty salon, begins ordinarily enough. Maud is lounging in the beautician’s chair when a white saleswoman, Miss Ingram enters. Miss Ingram is selling makeup specifically targeted to black consumers, and, with a little persuading, she convinces the beautician, Miss Sonia Johnson, to buy ten of her lipsticks. After her negotiations, however, Miss Ingram makes a shocking proclamation that triggers some of Maud’s deepest anxieties. Miss Ingram exclaims that she “work[s] like a nigger to make a few pennies” (Brooks 281). Appalled by Miss Ingram’s lack of sensitivity, Maud is forced into a double conscious perspective wherein she considers the perspective of the “other.”

As Maud closes the *Vogue* magazine she has been reading, her perspective shifts. Before the shift in consciousness, Maud’s interior dialogue is made up of long, descriptive sentences. The sudden terseness of the sentence “Maud closed *Vogue*” marks an important change. This striking, three word phrase is injected precisely in the middle of Maud’s detailed explications, and it, along with the physical act of closing the magazine, signals the change taking place in Maud. She no longer perceives the situation from her psyche alone; she now inhabits the world of another. Interestingly, Maud does not place herself in Miss Ingram’s position; rather, she explores the psyche of a fellow black woman, Sonia Johnson. Though Miss Johnson is black like Maud Martha, she represents a white perspective instead of a black perspective. In her passivity, Miss Johnson acquiesces to dominate white standards which would have her accept her role as a submissive black victim. In embodying Miss Johnson’s consciousness, Maud, in effect, situates herself in the consciousness of the white majority.

The narrator describes Maud’s de-centering noting Maud “began to consider what she herself might have said had she been Sonia Johnson, and had the woman really said ‘nigger’” (Brooks 281). In this alternative consciousness, Maud muses that as Sonia Johnson she “wouldn’t holler...[and] wouldn’t curse” (Brooks 281). Maud tells herself that she would behave according to social priorities, and like Sonia Johnson, would succumb to the behaviors dictated by white culture. By not “fighting” with Miss Ingram, Maud is merely a passive victim who accepts that, as a black woman, she will have to contend with derogatory remarks from others.

Ironically, Maud’s double conscious perspective does not allow her to sympathize with Sonia Johnson’s tepid reactions. Her shift in perspective only fuels her rage by underscoring the difference in her outward behavior and her inner beliefs. While imagining Sonia Johnson’s point of view, Maud claims that she too would act in a calm, composed manner. However, she eventually snaps out of her reverie, and, positioned as herself once more, and, sensing injustice, she becomes angry. By occupying Miss Sonia Johnson’s psyche, she comes to understand that Miss Johnson’s composure is only an attempt to pacify and appease Miss Ingram and society’s sensibilities. The clash between Maud’s own sense of justice and her behavioral obligations as a black woman creates a kind of cognitive dissonance: Maud desires at once to be mild and peaceful and to be treated fairly and with respect. Du Bois notes that two opposing and “unreconciled strivings” are often a result of double consciousness, and it is the incompatibility of Maud’s belief with her ability to act that fuels her frustration and rage.

As Maud listens to Miss Johnson’s “self-solace” or justifications for her equable behavior, her anger increases. Miss Johnson brushes the incident off rationalizing “‘Why make enemies? Why go getting all hot and bothered all the time?’” (Brooks 284). Upon hearing Miss Johnson’s superficial explanation, Maud is driven to silence and merely “stare[s] steadily into Sonia Johnson’s irises” (Brooks 284). As the vignette ends, Maud “[says] nothing. She just [keeps] on staring into Sonia

Johnson's irises" (Brooks 284). Because Miss Johnson, in this instance, represents the white perspective, Maud's resolute and determined actions at the end of the vignette are all the more potent. She is not just staring in the eyes of her friend who she feels is propagating the diminishment of blacks, she is also staring into the prejudices of white society itself.

Though Esther Greenwood's world is very different from Maud Martha's, she, too, struggles with understanding her identity throughout the course of *The Bell Jar*. While Maud's shifts in identity lead to internalized rage, Esther's lead to psychosis. Esther is a nineteen year old college student and burgeoning writer, and, as the novel commences, she has won an internship to work at a magazine in New York City. On the surface, Esther seems to be fulfilling her dreams, yet despite her successes, she suffers a series of mental breakdowns throughout the novel. While the catalysts of these breakdowns are numerous as the breakdowns themselves, Esther's split personalities undoubtedly play a role in her mental downfall.

Important in considering Sylvia Plath's work is an understanding of the author herself. Examining Plath's work from an autobiographical perspective, as it often is, reveals the first of many cases of multiple identity found throughout the work. Instances of multiple personas emerge on countless pages of *The Bell Jar*, beginning with the title page itself. When it was originally published in 1963, *The Bell Jar* was not published under the name Sylvia Plath; rather the author was listed as "Victoria Lucas." Read autobiographically, Plath's use of the pseudonym becomes particularly important. In Victoria Lucas, Plath shapes a new identity for herself, through which she can explore a second literary form: prose. Plath was notoriously anxious about her prose. In fact, she wrote off *The Bell Jar* as "autobiographical apprenticeship work" (Perloff 4). In inventing a new persona, Plath creates an outlet through which she might consider a second form of narrative with less anxiety about critics' opinions. Plath's invented selves do not end with Victoria Lucas, however. As she retains her usual identity as Sylvia Plath, she also embodies the personalities of Victoria Lucas, Esther Greenwood, and Esther's own creation, Elly Higginbottom. Sylvia Plath's identity is divided and recreated again and again, each time spawning a new conception of herself.

Plath's motivations for creating numerous identities might best be reflected through the actions of her protagonist, Esther. As an embodiment of Plath herself, Esther grapples with the same anxieties that Plath did. Both character and author worry that positions as writer, mother, wife and independent woman might only be viable at the expense of secondary aspects of the self. The options for a female writer and intellectual living in America in the mid-nineteen hundreds might best be articulated through Plath's famous fig-tree metaphor. The metaphor simultaneously presents female possibilities as limitless and inhibiting; a woman has a plethora of options, but "choosing one mean[s] losing all the rest" (Plath 89). As Esther considers the possibilities that lay before her she grapples with choosing only one identity above all the others:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. 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, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

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, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (88-9)

Esther's figs are Plath's figs as well, and both author and literary character are equally aware that social identity is only possible through the exclusion of other selves. Esther herself "tries on" various formations of identity at the suggestion of people around her. As critic Marjorie G. Perloff points out, it is clear that from the onset of the novel, Esther attempt to fit other people's prescriptions of her identity. She contends that Esther "has always played the roles others have wanted her to play" (Perloff 509). Perloff notes that for her mother, Esther plays the role of a perfect daughter; to her physics teacher, she is the ideal student; and for her love interest, Buddy Willard, she sets aside her literary goals because, in referring to a poem as a mere "piece of dust," he simply doesn't understand Esther or her love of literature (Perloff 509-10). Like Maud Martha, Esther is heavily influenced by what society would have her be, and in all of these instances, Esther upholds the standards other consider important. Esther's experiences in New York, however, mark a very important change in the way she negotiates her identity. Rather than fulfill the roles others assign to her, she invents her own alternative personas for herself, which allow her to consider such positions as writer, mother, virgin, deviant and cover girl.

Unfortunately for Esther, establishing her own potential identities is just as destructive as having other people tell her who she is because even these roles must be held exclusively, and thus only account for a portion of her spirit. The repression of certain identities in order to privilege others (even identities that she herself is choosing) becomes unbearable, and these restrictions on selfhood cause Esther's descent into chaos. Like Maud Martha, Esther's madness is intrinsically linked to the social situation she finds herself in, and though she seems to have many options (more, in fact, than Maud), the necessity of choosing one persona above others effects Esther's downfall. Instead than finding her ideal identity through her created selves, Esther loses her sense of self even more. Her gender, race, aspirations, and sexuality all dissolve before her eyes, and she is left hopeless and psychotic.

The first instance of Esther's fractured persona comes as she begins to contemplate herself as a person with sexual desires. One of Esther's primary concerns centers on her sexual purity or impurity and the degree to which she should seek to maintain customary standards of female sexuality. Intrinsically, Esther feels the injustice in conventional sex roles for women. She thinks of Buddy Willard's multiple liaisons and exclaims "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not" (Plath 93). To challenge this social script, Esther invents a second personality for herself, one who allows her the sexual liberation she craves. Seated at a bar with her friend Doreen and disc-jockey, Lenny, she introduces herself saying "My name's Elly Higginbottom...I come from Chicago" (Plath 13). Esther justifies her alias saying "I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston" (Plath 13). In removing herself from the virtues and moral rectitude of her old self, Esther prepares for night of debauchery and sexual experimentation. Elly Higginbottom, then, becomes an outlet through which Esther can leave her "good girl" image behind and become attuned to her own sexual identity.

Despite her attempt to embody her promiscuous "other," Esther's fake identity proves useless when she becomes a mere spectator of the sexual encounter of another. She sits on a bear skinned rug watching Lenny and Doreen kiss and dance the jitterbug, and the adventurous, open-minded Elly becomes less real and less substantial. Elly fails to provide the means of sexual exploration that Esther was after, and she articulates her fading identity saying "I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs and that pine paneling. I felt like a whole in the ground" (Plath

17). Elly is meant to provide Esther with a slew of new possibilities, but she ironically has the opposite effect. The Elly persona does not afford Esther any great insight into herself; rather she simply reminds her of how isolated and alone she is.

Just as Sylvia Plath's "Esther" spawns new personalities, Esther's Elly also produces a multiplicity of new and conflicting personas, and on the way home from Lenny's apartment Esther's identity spins off into several directions. She steps into the elevator in her building, and discovers "a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into [her] face" (Plath 19). This bright, cover girl has transformed into a dirty, unkempt "other." The face that appears in the elevator mirror has lost any trace of Esther as she knows herself; she is no longer an innocent and her face is neither clean nor pretty, but dirty and smudgy-eyed. Her desire for and attempts at sexual deviance are reflected in this tainted image of herself. Her psychological distortions continue as she peers into the mirror above her bureau. She surveys her image and recounts that "the face in [the mirror] looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury" (Plath 21). Now, Esther is no longer human. She makes no attempt to describe her features or her facial structure as she described the eyes of her Chinese self; her personality has become so warped that she can no longer recognize herself. Others, too, conflate Esther's mixed up personalities. She wakes to a knock on the door and two voices whispering "Elly, Elly, Elly" and "Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood" (Plath 23). At the end of the episode, Esther acknowledges that she possesses a "split personality" that is a "concrete testimony to [her] own dirty nature" (Plath 23-5). This psychological fracturing only grows throughout the novel, creating vast and unbreachable fissures in Esther's spirit.

The rupturing of Esther's self intensifies when she uses her sexual doppelgänger a second in a liaison with a sailor. As Esther and the sailor stroll along, his hand wrapped around her waist, she describes her false identity to him: her name is Elly Higginbottom, she comes from Chicago, she is an orphan, and she is 30 years old. None of these odd details dissuade the sailor from his purpose and he intercepts saying "Listen. Elly, if we go round to those steps over there, under the monument, I can kiss you" (Plath 156). Esther is complacent in his sexual propositions, and she does nothing to prevent him from touching her or coming on to her. In fact, she encourages his advances by continuing to flirt with him throughout the scene. She seems completely at ease masquerading as an experienced 30 year-old woman until the moment she notices Mrs. Willard and her entire demeanor changes. It is only when her old identity threatens to be revealed that she rejects the sailor's advances. As her old identity as Esther impinges upon her new Elly persona, Esther's concerns shift: "Could you please tell me the way to the subway?" she asks the sailor, quickly changing the subject (Plath 156). The closer Mrs. Willard comes to Esther and the sailor, the more removed she becomes from her Elly persona. Mrs. Willard approaches, and Esther is forced back into her non-sexualized, virginal self. She commands the sailor to "take [his] hands off [her]" (Plath 156). Esther tries to maintain both identities simultaneously and she makes an excuse for her odd behavior citing a bad memory of the orphanage. But embodying two disparate personalities at once proves impossible, and Esther ends up in tears. Stuck between two selves, sexually experienced and innocent virgin, Esther breaks down and has a mental collapse.

Positioned once more in a vague, ambiguous state between two unfulfilled and unfulfilling identities, Esther's deterioration becomes more and more pronounced. The events immediately following the sailor scene are especially informative of Esther's mental decline. Just after the sailor scene, Esther's mother informs her that she is to undergo electroshock therapy because her doctor has not see any improvement in her condition. Esther is now in her worst state yet. She goes weeks without sleeping, can no longer read or write or even swallow. Despite her mental malaise, Esther is still cognitive of who and what is contributing to her unease, namely, Mrs. Willard. Sobbing with the sailor by her side, Esther examines the source of her anger asserting "that lady in the brown suit [Mrs. Willard]...was responsible for [her] taking the wrong turn here and the wrong path there and for

everything bad that happened after that” (Plath 157). For Esther, Mrs. Willard, like her own mother, is a champion of the limiting, sexually repressive patriarchal society that surrounds her. It is Mrs. Willard and men and women like her, who prompt Esther’s anxieties and contribute to her inability to discover a true self. Esther’s troubles stem from the perfect mix of her own psychological conditions and the repressive sociological conditions that challenge her own ideologies.

While Esther struggles with her sexual purity or impurity, Maud’s concern is her sexual desirability for her husband, Paul. The climate of Maud Martha’s society and its cultural signifiers of beauty play a prominent role in Maud’s anxieties. While Maud does not experience the same degree of sexual inhibition as Esther does, she does struggle to find her place in a world with standards of beauty that she does not align with. The culture in which she lives presents Maud with a very narrow definition of feminine beauty, and these conceptions of beauty plague her throughout her life. As a child, Maud is well aware of her own dark skin. She is shunned by a potential admirer who refers to her as an “old black gal” and who privileges her sister Helen’s lighter complexion over her own (Brooks 176). Maud enters her marriage armed with an assortment of inhibitions concerning her physical appearance and her suspicion of Paul’s preference for white women does nothing to quell her worries. Throughout her marriage, Maud’s psyche is split in two by a dual perspective where she engages in Paul’s world view while steeped in her own understanding of reality.

Maud’s split identity manifests itself as she obsesses over Paul’s aesthetic preferences. Even before Maud and Paul marry, Maud occupies Paul’s mind in order to read his system of values. She steps outside herself and contemplates Paul’s notion of beauty and its relationship to her:

But I am certainly not what he would call pretty. Even with all this hair (which I have assured him, in response to his question, is not “natural,” is not good grade or anything like good grade) even with whatever I have that puts a dimple in his heart, even with these nice ears, I am still, definitely, not what he can call pretty if he remains true to what his idea of pretty has always been. Pretty would be a little cream-colored thing with curly hair. Or at the very lowest pretty would be a little curly-haired thing the color of cocoa with a lot of milk in it. Whereas, I am the color of cocoa straight, if you can be even that “kind” to me.

He wonders, as we walk in the street, about the thoughts of the people who look at us. Are they thinking that he could do no better than—me? Then he thinks, Will, hmp! Well, huh!—all the little good-lookin’ dolls that have wanted *him*—all the little sweet high-yellows that have ambled slowly past *his* front door—What he would like to tell those secretly snickering ones!—That any day out of the week he can do better than this black gal. (194-5)

In this moment, Maud examines herself, not from her own internal perception, but from Paul’s. She contemplates her hair as Paul would contemplate her hair, and she sees her ears as Paul might see them. Finally, she holds herself up to Paul’s conventional assessment of what is pretty. Pretty, to Paul is “a cream-colored thing with curly hair,” and Maud knows she will never be this kind of pretty. Even more telling than Maud’s embodiment of her husband’s intellect is her performance of his negotiations of other peoples’ assessments of him and his wife. Maud immerses herself so far into the mind of her husband that his insecurities become hers, and her insecurities are projected on to him. As Paul, Maud wonders what people think of him and the dark skinned woman he is with. The confusion and conflict Maud has about her own physical appearance climaxes when, through Paul’s mind, she considers how society views the couple. She fears that her looks might undermine her place

with her husband and negate her importance as a human being. While this instance does not necessarily lead to an internalized rage, a second experience in which Maud assumes Paul's point of view does have dastardly and potentially violent effects.

Paul's attraction to white women appears confirmed to Maud when he dances with a woman who is "red-haired and curved and white as white" at the Foxy Cats Club (Brooks 227). Immediately Maud enters Paul's perspective and attempts to understand his motivations. Internalizing Paul's mindset, Maud muses "she's pretty, isn't she?" (Brooks 228). Just as Esther acts as an onlooker when observing Doreen and Lenny dance, Maud, too, takes an outsider's perspective. Embodying her "other"—Elly—is overwhelming for Esther who feels her isolation even more deeply than before, and Maud's experience is similar. Her internalization of Paul's thoughts, feelings, and preferences engulfs her and she retreats back into her own mind concluding that it is "[her] color that makes [Paul] mad" (Brooks 229). Maud's continually shifting double conscious perspective which forces her to acknowledge harsh truths fuels a deep madness that rages within her. As she fumes over the impossibility of fulfilling her husband's desires, Maud considers that she could "go over there and scratch [the woman's] upswEEP down. I could spit on her back. I could scream" (Brooks 230). Maud could impart her madness on the world, but she is halted by the same societal proprieties that prevent her from standing up to the racist saleswoman. Maud's double consciousness allows her to see two vastly different possibilities for herself. This unnavigable territory between property and personal justice once again incites Maud's rage.

Both Maud and Esther struggle to align themselves with societies that treat them as disproportionate citizens, but their greatest (and most maddening) trial comes when they are unable to contribute their talents and perspectives to the world. The inability to find personal fulfillment has devastating results for both women. For Esther, her literary aspirations are stymied by those who insist she perform female duties—as wife, virgin, submissive girlfriend, and mother—at the expense of her duties to herself. Maud's ability to contribute to her world is similarly stifled by the division between her humanity and the value her society places on her. This pervasive, irreconcilable battle of self and society challenges the way she imparts truth both to herself and to her daughter.

One of Maud's greatest tribulations comes when she must explain the prejudiced actions of another, not to herself, but to her daughter. The suppression of her own humanity becomes a mere triviality when she is forced to watch her child's dignity become compromised. It is Christmastime during the vignette "trees leaving trees" when Maud takes her daughter to a local mall to see Santa Claus. Maud's daughter, Paulette, is a bundle of anticipation, but when she finally reaches the lap of Santa, Paulette realizes he is not the jovial old man she had envisioned. Santa Claus treats Paulette contemptuously, hardly acknowledging her presence and shoving her off his lap as soon as possible. Maud looks on as her daughter is treated with such hate, and her psyche, once again, becomes divided. This time she embodies her sister Helen's persona as she debates how to respond to the situation. Like Miss Sonia Johnson before her, Helen represents the white perspective that insists on black submission. Maud considers how Helen might have reacted to Santa Claus' cruelty and concludes that "Helen...would not have twitched...[she] would not have yearned to jerk trimming scissors from her purse and jab jab jab that evading eye" (Brooks 317). Helen would easily align herself with societal protocol and dismiss Santa Claus' behavior. Maud is much more strikingly affected by this revolting situation. One of her consciousnesses tell her that Helen is right, that she should ignore the acts of hatred committed against her. Her second consciousness, the one that encompasses her true sense of right and wrong is not so ready to dismiss. Maud's internal reaction is one of violence. While Helen would resist taking out her scissors and jabbing Santa in the eye, Maud yearns to; she wants to destroy the source of hatred that had made her life so difficult and threatens to do the same to her daughter's life.



Once again, though, Maud does not acquiesce to her violent whims. Instead, she internalizes her sense of injustice and feels immense anger because of it. After witnessing the treatment of her daughter, Maud can “neither resolve nor dismiss. There were scraps of baffled hate in her, hate with no eyes, no smile and—she especially regretted, called her hungriest lack—not much voice” (Brooks 318). The lack of voice Maud experiences is directly related to her inability to impact or contribute to her world. She is unable to impart her own moral voice, her own sense of truth to the situations she encounters. Her society forces her to remain a passive victim.

The story of Maud Martha comes to its conclusion soon after the Santa Claus incident, but the threat of her rage and mistreatment reverberate throughout the novel’s conclusion. It is true that most of the time, Maud is able to see the beauty in her life, despite her unfair treatment and the prejudices she encounters. Yet, there is a lingering uncertainty in the novel’s ending that takes on a sort of urgency. Maud’s patience and good will, the novel suggests cannot, and will not, last forever. If she is to coexist in society, it is society, and not her, that must change.

Esther Greenwood’s inability to find a satisfying identity also hinges on the constraints placed upon her by her culture. Esther’s primary goal is to be a writer, but a slew of societal voices belittle her goals and aspirations, urging her instead to choose a more feminine identity. From the beginning, Esther rages against the value systems that would have her fulfill one role over any other. Her mother insists that a writing career is impractical and that Esther should instead pursue a career as a secretary. Esther lashes out against this suggestion saying “I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters” (Plath 87). She continues to work against established transitions by refusing to give in to Buddy Willard’s romantic propositions. As Buddy flirts with her she flatly informs him “I’m never going to get married” to which Buddy responds “You’re crazy. You’ll change your mind” (Plath 108). Despite Esther’s forceful dismissal of unsuitable female options, she remains in a perilous state. Rejecting all these positions, it turns out, does not enable her to find an alternative self, and in fact, contributes to her insanity.

The multitude of identities that are constantly pushed on to Esther eventually take their toll. Her sense of self shatters, and, as she sits under the metaphoric fig tree, she is no longer able to determine who she is or to distinguish what she wants. This loss of self is most vividly depicted as Esther stares into a mirror after being committed to a hospital for attempted suicide. When she first looks into the mirror, she does not recognize the reflection as even a reflection, but a picture. The mirror, which is meant to depict Esther’s reality and who she really is, becomes inadequate. Sitting in the hospital bed, Esther has no self. She has lost her ambitions, goals and dreams, and is, literally and metaphorically, situated on the outskirts of humanity.

As Esther describes the face in the mirror, her division of self becomes clear:

You couldn’t tell whether the person in the mirror was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person’s face was purple and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person’s mouth was pale brown with a rose-colored sore at either corner. The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colors. (204)

As Esther sits on the outskirts of society, her identity becomes less and less real. She peers into the mirror and sees not herself, but a stranger. She has lost any demarcation of who she is. Her gender has faded and she can no longer tell if she is male or female. Further, her race, too, becomes ambiguous. Now, she is not a white suburban college girl, but a blotchy, spotted other-worldly figure.

The effects of her varied and irreconcilable identities have come full force for Esther in this moment, and despite all of her potential options, she is left with nothing.

In the end, both Maud Martha and Esther Greenwood seem to triumph over their mental battles. Esther is released from the asylum and Maud Martha realizes the beauty in her life and vows to take advantage of it. Despite these novel's apparently triumphant endings, many questions remain for each protagonist. The societies in which these women live have not changed, and both Maud and Esther will continue to have to negotiate the rules of these cultures. Because there is no definitive ending in either of the novels, both *Maud Martha* and *The Bell Jar* act as cautionary tales for what could happen in a culture that places unreasonable expectations on women. The madness that Maud and Esther experience continues to resonate long after the novels' final pages.

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