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The Cold War and Agency Panic in *The Bell Jar* and “Three Women”

In *Letters Home*, Sylvia Plath wrote to her mother in 1956 about a change in her writing from the “love lyric” to

“...bringing the larger social world of other people into my poems...Now, I am making a shift. The world and the problems of an individual in this particular civilization are going to be forged into my discipline...” (Plath, 222).

Plath’s comment demonstrates that her work did not focus solely on her own experiences.

Rather, Plath used her poetry and prose to connect personal experience to the larger political concerns of her lifetime. In the 1950s, the Cold War and the threat of Communism dominated American public discourse. This “larger social world” is the backdrop for and inflects Plath’s literary investigation of the clash between the private life of the individual and greater forces of authoritative control. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath frames Esther Greenwood’s identity crisis and mental breakdown in context of Cold War politics and domestic ideology, while the poem “Three Women” explores conflicting gender roles with pregnancy. In both works, female characters experience “agency panic,” in which they place too much or too little agency in themselves and others in response to oppressive geopolitical and gender ideologies.

Sylvia Plath began writing the novel *The Bell Jar* in the spring and summer of 1961 while living in London. With the Cold War happening, the relationship between the United States and Soviet Union was tense. Although Plath lived overseas at the time, she was not exempt from Cold War political anxieties. As Robin Peel mentioned in *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*, Plath lived in London when the Soviet Union launched the first satellite Sputnik, the Berlin Wall was erected in Germany, the United States and Soviet Union began H-bomb tests, and in England the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was founded (Peel, 56). While Plath is not generally considered a political writer, Peel posits that the Cold War influenced her work. For even though Plath was geographically alienated from the United States, she lived in a world where the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war were constant. These political events prompted the historical backdrop of *The Bell Jar*, although the novel takes place in the United States in an earlier time period. Plath set the novel in the 1950s, the during “McCarythyite anti-communist witch-hunts” in America, a time when citizens feared Communism (Peel, 48).

The fear of Communist infiltration was paramount in the 1950s as tensions rose between the United States and Soviet Union in the struggle for power. The United States contrasted American freedom and democracy against the Soviet Union. According to Deborah Nelson in her article “Plath, history and politics,” the government portrayed the Soviet Union as a “totalitarian regime, which by definition claimed all human activity for the state” (Nelson, 23). However in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Elaine Tyler May posits that: “The Soviet Union loomed in the distance as an abstract symbol of what Americans might become if they became ‘soft’ ” (May, 10). McCarthyism then, was also a response to internal threats within the country that could

jeopardize American freedom and security. According to Al Strangeways in *Sylvia Plath*, McCarthyism cultivated paranoia, and the “fear of invasion, subversion or even destruction by covert agencies” (Strangeways, 84). With the threat of Communism and the power of the American government combined, many feared these influences could lead to a loss of individual freedom and control. The tensions of the era caused people to ask how much control they really had, and who was truly in control. The panic became a crisis of human agency where individuals felt they were unable to create social action, or even unable to control their own behavior.

In *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Timothy Melley analyzes the pervasive fear, during this period, of one’s inability to take meaningful social action. He calls this phenomenon “agency panic,” and defines it as “...intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control—the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been ‘constructed’ by powerful external agents” (Melley, 12). He identifies two main components of these feelings of intense anxiety. The first is high uncertainty about the cause or motives for individual action (Melley, 12). The individual may believe external forces somehow manipulate his or her behavior, or that he is surrounded by “brainwashed” people. The second is the belief that people or organizations knowingly control others through meticulous planning. The phenomenon emphasizes the power struggle between the individual and external forces: the individual concludes that social control cannot coexist with liberal individualism, and that the situation can only be met with panic.

Amidst the panic and paranoia of the Cold War, Americans cultivated Cold War domestic ideology in response to Communism and nuclear conflict. According to Pam

Liesk in the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*, domesticity took place in the private setting of the home, where “women [were] associated with activities such as the bearing and raising of children, cooking, housekeeping, and nurturing and supporting men and children” (Liesk, 119). Indeed, society during the Cold War felt that creating a comfortable living space within the home was the best contribution a woman could make to the United States’ involvement in international politics. As stated by May, these secure homes were ways that married couples could “ward off their nightmares” and “live out their dreams” despite the chaos of Cold War politics (May, 24). The private home space cultivated the idea of a shelter where families could be protected from nuclear anxiety. The anticommunist mentality revered the roles of mother and wife. As stated by Marsha Bryant in “Ariel’s Kitchen: Plath, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and the Domestic Surreal,” mass media idealized women in these roles with countless magazines, television programs and advertising (Bryant, 30). Society gave women very few options to pursue later on in life, as their sole purpose was to become a homemaker. With so few choices, women also experienced agency panic about the loss of their autonomy and individuality.

The framing of the 1953 Rosenberg trial and execution in *The Bell Jar* simultaneously evokes Cold-War era anticommunist paranoia, and foreshadows Esther Greenwood’s mental breakdown and her electro-convulsive therapy (ECT). The execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg serves as a political background during Esther’s internship in New York. She sees the government’s use of McCarthyism to control Communistic threats, and their power in deciding the fate of those who disobey authority. These extreme actions pressured many people to agree with the government, for fear of

being labeled as a Communist. Esther witnesses this conformity when she talks to another girl about the trial:

“ ‘I’m so glad they’re going to die.’
 ...The night before I’d seen a play where the heroine was possessed by a dybbuk, and when the dybbuk spoke from her mouth its voice sound so cavernous and deep you couldn’t tell whether it was a man or a woman. Well, Hilda’s voice sounded just like the voice of that dybbuk.
 ...So I said, ‘Isn’t it awful about the Rosenbergs?’
 ‘Yes!’ Hilda said, and at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat’s cradle of her heart.
 ...It’s awful such people should be alive.’ ” (Plath, 96)

With Esther comparing Hilda to a dybbuk, Esther imagines the American people as mouthpieces of government anti-Communist ideology. The people conform to one opinion out of fear, losing their individuality to a powerful external agent. Esther, however, is not possessed by a political dybbuk. She still has her individuality in feeling sympathy for the Rosenbergs, and tries to coax a human response out of Hilda. The passage foreshadows Esther’s agency panic in *The Bell Jar*. To Esther, people brainwashed by the government and McCarthyism surround her. Esther maintains her individuality, but she is aware the government threatens her self-control. The Rosenbergs’ fate communicates the need to control nonconformity and disobedience with electricity. Thus, the trial foreshadows Esther’s struggle with agency, her failure to comply with societal standards, and the ECT used for her mental breakdown.

Various moments in *The Bell Jar* suggests that Esther’s identity crisis largely stems from ideas of American domesticity and the gender ideology of the Cold War. Like many women of the time, Esther feels pressure to marry and have children. Having children was a way to express citizenship, and to pass down American political agendas (May, 160). Visiting Buddy Willard, a former boyfriend, at Yale Medical School, Esther

sees a baby being born. After Buddy tells Esther the woman was on a drug that made her incapable of recalling the pain of childbirth, Esther thinks:

“I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn’t groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been” (Plath, 64-65).

The passage is Esther’s critique of how society sees women only useful for reproduction. It is also a rebellion against American domesticity and the patriarchy that rules it. Agency panic ensues when Esther realizes she is part of a society that believes all women should be mothers. In order to compensate for feeling she has no control over her role in society, Esther believes the patriarchy meticulously plots against women by creating a drug that tricks women into having lots of children. The passage is one of the first that demonstrates Esther’s fight for agency and beginnings of a mental breakdown. Although rationalizing powerful men conspire against women does not quell Esther’s agency panic, it makes the situation more manageable.

Esther compares Eisenhower to a fetus as a way to show her distrust of Cold War politics, and despair in how powerful men control women. Looking through *Time* and *Life* magazines Esther thinks: “The face of Eisenhower beamed up at me, bald and blank as the face of a fetus in a bottle” (Plath, 86). The reference to Eisenhower links back to previous scene, when Esther and Buddy look at fetuses in jars at the hospital prior to watching the childbirth. Esther uses her hospital experience to compare president Eisenhower not just to a baby, but a freak specimen. Likening Eisenhower to something abnormal and dead communicates the futility of Cold War politics. Instead of focusing on the fears of Communism, she analogizes it to the lack of freedom wives and mothers have. Eisenhower as a fetus means that powerful political leaders like him want women

to create more controlling men. Esther places agency in Eisenhower to cope with feeling she has no control over her place in society as a woman. It shows how she believes it is patriarchy, not Communism, that rules over her.

Similarly, Esther conflates Communism with family life. Observing Buddy's mother, Mrs. Williard, who is a housewife, she thinks: "So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (Plath, 82). Here, Esther associates the fears of being "brainwashed" by Communism to the accepted idea that all women in society were destined to be wives and mothers. She turns the concept of McCarthyism on its head by equating American domestic ideology with the very worst of Communism. Esther fears the Communistic-nature of marriage and motherhood, in which the home becomes a slave labor camp. Esther's agency panic reasons "brainwashed" homemakers surrounded her, and that she too will meet the same fate.

Esther tries to imagine herself as a wife, only to realize it would be a waste of academic talent. She pictures Constantin, a man she met in New York, as her husband. Being a wife meant lots of cooking and cleaning, or as Esther sees it: "...a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's..." (Plath, 82). In a postwar society, Esther knows people expect her to become a wife and eventually have children. However, these expectations clash with all the good marks, academic prizes and grants she worked hard for. Although many educated women "...'professionalized' homemaking and it made it their career" Esther does not want to use her education for the domestic sphere (May, 159). With immense pressure to conform to a role she does not want, Esther feels she is not in control of her life.

With her identity as a student coming to end, the thought of having limited options afterwards overwhelms Esther. She uses the image of a fig tree to demonstrate the hard life choices she faces. Each fig represents her options— One represents a wife and mother, another a “famous poet,” or a “brilliant professor,” among others (Plath, 75). Esther wants all the figs, but realizing she can only have one, Esther sees herself

“...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 (Plath, 75).

The fig tree is a representation of Esther using her education to choose a new, exciting identity, or lose her agency in marriage and motherhood. For Esther the choice is in black and white—she must choose only one identity or have none at all. In a postwar society that expects women to stay at home, Esther sees it impossible to reconcile the roles of a homemaker and a successful career. The prospect of sacrificing her education and academic achievement overwhelms Esther. Torn between an impossible decision, Esther’s identity crisis worsens and she feels powerless.

And so, Esther’s last night in New York marks the rejection of the identity Cold War society assigns to all females. The night before leaving for home, she throws away her wardrobe: “Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind...the gray scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York” (Plath, 106). The gesture symbolizes a rejection of the life society offers her. The *Mademoiselle* internship prepped her for domestic life, focusing on clothes and looking good to impress boys. Esther throws away these clothes to signify she does not

want a life focused on looking attractive only to find a husband. Esther's rejection of this identity marks the beginning of her fight to control her destiny.

Returning home from New York, Esther neglects her appearance as a form of passive resistance to social norms. She does not wash her hair or clothes, reasoning: "It seemed so silly to wash one day when I would only have to wash again the next...I wanted to do everything once and for all and be through with it" (Plath, 121). Esther's refusal to take care of her appearance is her way of rebelling against the societal expectation that females must look nice to attract boys. She sees the ritual of cleaning to maintain a good girl image as "so silly," and cuts all ties with the idea of being a proper girl. In doing so, Esther tries to reclaim her identity from society.

Just as the government punished the Rosenbergs for Communist affiliations with electricity, Doctor Gordon prescribes ECT to Esther in attempt to control her rebellious behavior. Esther finds herself two metal plates strapped to the side of her head, and Doctor Gordon gives her "a wire to bite" (Plath, 136). The scene parallels the Rosenbergs' execution. Just as McCarthyism leads the Rosenbergs to electrocution, Cold War gender ideology influences Esther's mental breakdown. Men like Doctor Gordon use ECT to treat Esther, so that she can rejoin society as a proper woman who wants to be a housewife. Esther's thought "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done" reiterates the idea the ECT is punishment for not conforming to societal expectations (Plath, 136).

Desperate for control, Esther places too much agency in herself through suicide. She first tries to kill herself with razor blades, but finds she cannot do it. She thinks: "It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under

my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at” (Plath, 140). Esther’s ultimate solution cannot address the larger gender struggle she faces in society. By thinking suicide solves her identity struggle, Esther fools herself into believing she has the power to gain ultimate control. Esther then fights against her body by trying to hang and drown herself. When Esther tries to hang herself, she realizes: “...my body had all sorts of little tricks, such as making my hands go limp at the crucial second, which would save it, time and again...” (Plath, 150). Using this method, Esther realizes has less agency over herself than she thought she did. The same happens when she tries to drown herself on the third attempt, only to find her body’s natural buoyancy keeps her alive. The three attempts emphasize that placing too much agency in the self leads back to powerlessness.

Although Esther succeeds in controlling the mind and body with sleeping pills, she still renders both into a powerless state. Esther finds agency over her mind by swallowing. It is a commonplace action, and her mind does not see it as a harmful motion it has to stop. The sleeping pills involve no pain or blood, making it is less likely for the mind to intervene. Neither will the body revolt, as pills will prevent Esther’s body from fighting back at all. The pills go into effect, and Esther’s mind and body enter a powerless state: “The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep” (Plath, 160). Although Esther claims agency, she has to force her mind and body into a powerless state to do so. These unclear distinctions between agency and powerlessness posit that Esther does not fight to reclaim agency. She instead maneuvers through a reality where absolute agency is nonexistent.

Ending up in a mental institution after her failed suicide attempt, Esther places too much agency in the doctors. Her agency panic reasons that all the doctors conspire against her: “I thought the doctors must all be in it together, and that somewhere in this hospital, in a hidden corner, there reposed a machine exactly like Doctor Gordon's, ready to jolt me out of my skin” (Plath, 178). Esther tries to rationalize her loss of agency by thinking that all the doctors knowingly work against her. However, blaming the doctors means admitting to powerlessness. With Esther placing control in authority to rationalize her total loss of control, she puts herself in a powerless state.

Again, Esther’s second round of electro-convulsive therapy ties together Cold War politics and mental illness. The Rosenberg execution was the government’s attempt to control the spread of Communism, and to protect American values. Similarly, doctors treat Esther with ECT so she can return to society to uphold the American domestic ideology. In this sense, “The institutions such as...hospitals, psychiatric wards...begin to be viewed as agencies of political control” (Peel, 149). Her entire stay at the institution comprises of doctors and nurses dictating what she can and cannot do. Esther’s repeated shock therapy sessions towards the end of *The Bell Jar* parallel repeated attempts to control Ethel Rosenberg, who “...had to be given extra charges of electricity because she was still alive following a dose that had been sufficient to electrocute her husband” (Peel, 69). Just as Cold War politics controlled any potential Communistic threats, so does society against those that threaten domestic ideology.

Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* is ultimately a critique of female identity and mental illness through the lens of Cold War politics and domestic ideology. The novel

ends with Esther's unanswered question: "How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (Plath, 226). The bell jar symbolizes the fears of the Cold War, the descent into mental illness, and ultimate containment. Just as Esther fears her mental illness could overtake her at any moment, society feared nuclear warfare could strike at any time. Even the title *The Bell Jar* suggests the "influence of something beyond the individual of that self" (Peel, 66). A bell jar then, is the representation of outside forces containing the individual. For the United States in the 1950s, it was Communism and the government. For Esther, it is domestic ideology that influences her mental breakdown. Esther's agency panic is a response to these oppressive forces that attempt to control her. At the end of novel, the metaphorical bell jar hangs above Esther, offering no answer as to whether societal control or her mental illness will contain her again.

Sylvia Plath wrote "Three Women" in the spring of 1962, a year after writing *The Bell Jar*. As stated in Douglas Cleverdon's article "On Three Women," the BBC Third Programme broadcasted the poem on September 13 that same year (Cleverdon, 229). Ingmar Bergman's 1958 film *Nara Livet* (*The Brink of Life* or *So Close to Life*), inspired Plath to write "Three Women." Like many in the 1950s, Plath admired Bergman's work for its Modernist approach. *Nara Livet* takes place in a hospital maternity ward. The three women in the film are: a secretary who miscarries in her third month of pregnancy, a wife devastated her child is a stillborn, and a nineteen-year-old girl wanting an abortion. At the end of the film she decides to have and raise the child. Bergman shot the film in Stockholm's Karolinska hospital. Marc Gervais notes in *Ingmar Bergman: Magician and Prophet* that critics praised the film's setting as "stylistically antiseptic," complementing

the “beautiful study of the female psyche” (Gervais, 62). Plath mimics this atmosphere in “Three Women” by using Bergman’s hospital setting and three female characters. Each woman’s situation does not align exactly with the film. Unlike the wife in *Nara Livet*, the Wife in “Three Women” gives birth to a healthy boy. The Girl in Plath’s poem does not terminate her unwanted pregnancy, but gives the child up for adoption. It is only the Secretary in the “Three Women” that mimics the secretary’s experience in Bergman’s film entirely.

Unlike *The Bell Jar*, “Three Women” makes no direct reference to the Cold War. However, the three women in the maternity ward use their different stages of pregnancy to navigate domestic ideology of the Cold War. While the women face different challenges regarding female identity, motherhood, and fertility, they all negotiate gender expectations with agency panic. The women do not experience the same types and degrees of agency panic, nor do they reconcile gender expectations in the same way. Yet all three place too little agency in themselves, and too much in other people and inanimate objects to handle identity and gender expectations.

As the Wife waits to deliver the child that will make her a mother, she realizes the event brings consequences she was not prepared for. The thought of enduring pain to become a mother, the possibility of losing her own identity, and her role as a mother changing over time creates agency panic. The panic associated with the physical and emotional aspects of pregnancy makes the Wife look for agency in objects and people to make sense of motherhood.

Anxious about the impending event of childbirth, the Wife searches for agency in the moon to calm herself. She thinks:

“The moon’s concern is more personal:
 She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse.
 Is she sorry for what will happen? I do not think so.
 She is simply astonished at fertility” (4-7)

By comparing the moon to a nurse, the moon’s concern for the Wife becomes personal. But the Wife does not find much solace in the moon, as she believes the moon is not apologetic for the pain of childbirth she will feel. Instead, the moon is only “astonished at fertility.” The moon as “astonished” means she is surprised, and even oblivious to the effects of fertility. The moon then, is only an observer of the Wife’s pregnancy, rather than an agent of direct influence and control. The description makes the moon just as powerless about the birth as the Wife is. While the Wife searches for agency, it merely foreshadows the agency panic the Wife will feel in childbirth. In the search for agency for an event that excites and scares the Wife, she dismisses the moon as a source of control and looks elsewhere.

The Wife also refers to herself as object to emphasize her impending agency panic: She states: “I am dumb and brown. I am a seed about to break. / The brownness is my dead self, and it is sullen:” (100-101). The description of the seed refers to the Wife’s pregnancy. She is a large seed “about to break,” or give birth. Her body as “dumb and brown,” indicates her passive state in which she has no control over when she will go into labor. The brownness as the Wife’s “dead self” shows her eagerness to shed the outer layer of the seed, and to have her child. The following line “Dusk hoods me in blue now, like a Mary” is another comparison that likens to agency (103). The Virgin Mary had no control over her pregnancy, yet eagerly awaited the miracle birth of Jesus. The comparison suggests that Wife does not experience agency panic fully. She meets her

pregnancy with excitement and anticipation even though she is anxious about the nearing event.

The Wife then places her body's agency in the nurses. She is "Swabbed and lurid with disinfectants, sacrificial" (108). The word "sacrificial" emphasizes the power nurses have over her as they ready her body for childbirth. As a patient, the Wife can only comply with their actions. The word "sacrificial" also implies the nurses are offering her body to a greater force. In this case it is the helplessness of childbirth. The Wife may look to the nurses for control, but they are only preparing her for something that is out of their hands. She tries to make sense of the agency loss from her pregnancy by comparing herself to a shell lying on a beach, feeling "...the first wave tug / Its cargo of agony toward me, inescapable, tidal" (110-112). The "cargo of agony" is the start of childbirth pain. The Wife is a shell—all she can do is lie in a passive state and endure the pain. For the Wife there is no escape, whether she believes the nurses have control over her body or not. The realization points to the Wife's desperate attempts to find agency in others when none can be found.

In agency panic, the Wife creates metaphors in order to find a cause for her physical suffering. She states: "I am dragged out by the horses, the iron hooves" (129). She imagines horses are in control, dragging her around helplessly. By experiencing agency panic through metaphor, the Wife locates the source of her agony. The horses reassure her that agency exists elsewhere, and they somehow can end her suffering. Even though the Wife feels she has no agency, she reasons it exists in the horses, and therefore can be reclaimed. In placing agency in the metaphor of horses, it makes up for her lack of control she feels. She also emphasizes the passivity of pain through the metaphors

stating: “Can such innocence kill and kill? / It milks my life” (135) and “I am used. I am drummed into use” (146). The phrases “It milks my life” and “I am drummed into use” focuses on the passivity of her suffering. Like the horses, external forces inflict pain onto the Wife that she has no choice but to endure. By placing agency in imagined subjects, the Wife imagines there is some control in her physical suffering.

After the birth of her son, the Wife’s imagines motherhood as losing agency. She portrays breastfeeding as a passive act by comparing herself to inanimate objects: “One cry. It is the hook I hang on. And I am a river of milk. / I am a warm hill” (337-340). In the sentence “It is the hook I hang on,” she imagines herself into a limp object that cannot act, dependent on a hook. Her son’s cry is what she hangs on to—her son is in control. While the Wife is able to provide for her son, she still feels some degree of powerless. Similarly, the Wife calls herself “a river of milk” and “a warm hill,” both of which are passive objects. Instead of describing breastfeeding in a way that emphasizes her active role, the Wife sees it as threatening her agency. These comparisons highlight the Wife’s agency panic, and her helplessness towards her new identity.

The Wife experiences agency panic over her relationship with her son, fearing she will lose agency as mother when her son gets older. She thinks during her son’s delivery: “I shall be a wall and a roof, protecting. / I shall be a sky and a hill of good: O let me be!” (140-141). While both a wall and roof are only structures, they function as forms of protection. Here The Wife assumes a more rational view of agency. However, in the next sentence the Wife makes herself the sky and “a hill of good,” neither of which symbolize control. The lines show the Wife’s conflict between a rational amount of agency, and no agency at all. After the birth of her son, the Wife realizes there will come

a time when she will no longer be able to protect him as a wall or roof would. She says: “How long can I be a wall around my green property? / How long can my hands / Be a bandage to his hurt...” (399-400). By making herself a wall that protects, and having hands that can “be a bandage to his hurt,” the Wife recognizes she has some agency. However, she still worries about the future when she can no longer treat her son like a child. Even though the Wife comes to terms with her agency, it still does not quell her anxieties about losing control.

At the end of the poem, the Wife reconciles her agency panic by accepting the gender expectations of motherhood. She states: “I shall meditate upon my little son” (428). The statement reflects the Wife’s new duty to focus all her energy on her son. This means staying the domestic sphere to take care of her son and husband. Her monologue ends with the lines: “I will him to be common / To love me as I love him, / And to marry what he wants and where he will” (438-440). The Wife asserts she will raise her son to be common, or normal in society. She hopes he will return her love, and “to marry” not just of what he will love, but who he will love as a spouse. In imagining this kind of future for her son, the Wife not only accepts her gender expectations as a female, but expectations for her son as well.

The Wife responds to the agency panic of motherhood by placing agency in objects, people, and imagining herself as object. In doing so, she reassures herself that agency exists and can be claimed. She often associates herself with lifeless objects, yet also with things that function as protection. And so, by accepting the gender expectations of a mother, the Wife is still able to find some agency despite her panic.

For the Second Voice, or the Secretary, agency panic results from a miscarriage.

She cannot accept the miscarriage as an event with any cause or reason, and so she places too little agency in herself, and too much in other people and objects. The Secretary's agency panic puts much of the blame on men, who she compares to death. The miscarriage creates an identity struggle over two roles—to be a wife in the working world, or to procreate and be a mother. Because the Secretary may only choose one role, she navigates these conflicting gender expectations with agency panic.

When her miscarriage happens at work, the Secretary experiences agency panic by blaming the men in the workplace. She says: “They were so flat! / There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it, / That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions, / Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed” (16-19). The Secretary equates their flatness to a male ideology of death. They come to represent a death and destruction that includes “Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks.” The Secretary believes that she has caught this flatness and death from them, like a contagious disease. In becoming one of them, she miscarries her child and becomes physically flat again. The Secretary says: “I am dying as I sit. I lose a dimension,” She holds no child inside of her, and is once again barren (30). The statement “I am dying as I sit” shows she thinks the men took away her agency.

In order to explain her miscarriage, the Secretary rationalizes that powerful men seek out to make her flat because of their jealousy. She exclaims: “The faceless faces of important men. / It is these men I mind: / They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods / That would have the whole world flat because they are” (85-88). They are “jealous gods,” all powerful beings that somehow lack the ability to create. Yet the Secretary also associates the men with Christianity, as a way to justify their actions:

“I see the Father conversing with the Son. / Such flatness cannot but be holy. / ‘Let us make a heaven,’ they say. / Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls’ ” (89-92). The Secretary perceives the men as regarding the flatness as holy, justifying their need to flatten all souls for heaven. With the men making a heaven out of their destruction, they conform to their standards.

During her stay at the hospital, the Secretary animates hospital objects to make sense of the miscarriage. She observes the hospital sheets: “How white these sheets are. / The faces have no features. / They are bald and impossible, like the faces of my children, / Those little sick ones that elude my arms” (66-68). The whiteness is the “bald and impossible” nature of her infertility. She connects the absence of color to the “impossible” presence of the fetus she has miscarried. The Secretary also contrasts the white to color as a way to compare children to her miscarriage. She states: “Other children ... have too many colors, too much life. They are not quiet, / Quiet like the little emptiness I carry” (69-70). The Secretary uses the sheets to show that other children do not behave like her child, the “little emptiness.” Her search for agency is not agency panic entirely as she only projects her frustration onto the sheets, animating a lifeless object.

Spending the night at the hospital ward, the Secretary links moonlight to her miscarriage. She states:

“There is the moon in the window. It is over.
 How winter fills my soul! And that chalk light
 Laying its scales on the windows, the windows of empty offices
 Empty schoolrooms, empty churches. O so much emptiness!
 There is this cessation. This terrible cessation of everything” (177-181).

To the Secretary, the moonlight causes empty space by permeating through each building. The empty offices, schoolrooms, and churches symbolize an empty womb, a place she intended for life. The moonlight too, fills her soul with a cold, wintry emptiness. The Secretary tries to understand her lack of agency through the moonlight, because the moon does have control over women's bodies. By trying to understand agency using the moon, the Secretary can only see it filling everything with emptiness, causing a "terrible cessation of everything." The "terrible cessation" is the end of the Secretary's pregnancy. By looking for agency in other entities like the moon, the Secretary tries to come to terms with her loss of agency.

The Secretary then blames the moon directly for causing her miscarriage. In her agency panic she personifies the moon as a harsh agent of control:

"I feel it enter me, cold, alien, like an instrument.
 And that mad, hard face at the end of it, that O-mouth
 Open in its gape of perpetual grieving.
 It is she that drags the blood-black sea around
 Month after month, with its voices of failure.
 I am helpless as the sea at the end of her string.
 I am restless. Restless and useless. / I too, create corpses" (175-191).

The Secretary portrays the moon is a force that enters her body and controls her. The lines "It is she that drags the blood-black sea around / Month after month" has a bitter, resentful tone. Because of the connection between the menstrual cycle and phases of the moon, the Secretary "blames" the moon for bringing menstruation month after month when she wants pregnancy. The "blood-black sea" may also tie to the blood during a miscarriage. In either case, the Secretary holds the moon accountable for her inability to conceive and keep a fetus in the womb. The moon constantly reminds the Secretary "month after month" with her menstrual cycle that she is a failure, unable to conceive.

Her comparison of herself to the sea emphasizes her helplessness, as the moon controls the tide. The Secretary's declaration that she is "restless and useless" sums up her agency panic. The only "useful" act she believes she is good for is creating death. With the moon representing loss of control and failure, the Secretary can only see the moon as an embodiment of grief.

Blaming external forces for her miscarriage, the Secretary struggles to establish an identity based on gender expectations. The Secretary desires to participate in the working world and the domestic sphere, but she cannot inhabit both. She explores this dilemma by stating: "I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman, / Neither a woman, happy to be like a man, nor a man / Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack" (193-195). Caught in between two different identities, the Secretary sees herself as "a shadow" with no definite identity. For she is not content with just being a secretary, a career woman who is "happy to be like a man." In not wanting to be only like a man, the Secretary defies the flatness associated with male ideology. While the Secretary rejects the idea of having only one identity in society, being an undefined shadow does not give her a complete sense of identity or control.

Having no clear sense of identity heightens the Secretary's agency panic, leading her to being a "heroine of the peripheral." She has an identity crisis and feels like she has no agency: "I cannot contain my life" (198). Because the Secretary must choose between the identity of a secretary or a mother, she feels she has no way of establishing who she wants to be. The problem leads her to take on a role that does not conform to societal expectations: "I shall be a heroine of the peripheral. / I shall not be accused by isolate buttons, / Holes in the heels of socks, the white mute faces / of unanswered letters, /

coffined in a letter case. / I shall not be accused..." (199-203). The Secretary moves into the periphery by rejecting the roles of domesticity. She will not "be accused by isolate buttons" or "holes in the heels of socks." In refusing the agency associated with the role, the Secretary tries to align herself with a peripheral identity that is not defined by societal expectations.

But because she cannot be a mother and be a part of the workplace, the Secretary accepts the identity nurses give her. The Secretary observes: "The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity. / It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen. / ...I am one in five, something like that...I am beautiful as a statistic" (343-348). The Secretary lets the nurses define her as a number. She is a statistic, the one in five women who have a miscarriage. This is the identity the Secretary takes with her when she leaves the hospital. She refers to herself as "a beautiful statistic," rather than a woman who just had a miscarriage. As the Secretary cannot have the identity she wants, she lets the nurses define her as who they see her to be.

Leaving the hospital the Secretary not only accepts her new identity; she no longer rebels against the male ideology of flatness and death. She says:

"I am myself again. There are no loose ends.
I am bled white as wax, I have no attachments.
I am flat and virginal, which means nothing has happened,
Nothing that cannot be erased, ripped up and scrapped, begun again" (378-381).

The miscarriage and hospital stay left her "bled white as wax." The Secretary associates the color white with being "flat and virginal." The Secretary is "flat" after the miscarriage; there is no visible evidence she had sexual relations with another man. However, the Secretary contradicts her former statements of repulsion toward flatness. Now she sees it as pure and virginal, a positive attribute. The Secretary even sees the

miscarriage as a positive event, reasoning nothing in her can be destroyed, "...erased, ripped up and scrapped, begun again." Contrasting to the start of the poem, the Secretary no longer fears the flatness and emptiness. She instead embraces it, signaling conformity to the powerful men in society and their "flat ideals."

By the end of the poem, the Secretary forfeits the idea of being both a mother and career woman in society. She reconciles gender expectations by accepting her role as a wife. Returning home from the hospital, Secretary says: "I think I have been healing" (462). She heals from the miscarriage, and in doing so leaves behind the idea of having more than one identity. She says, "I find myself again. I am no shadow" (472). She is no longer a "heroine of the peripheral," a woman who cannot be labeled by society. The only shadow she has is a physical one, the one "starting from my feet" (473). Confident in her role, she states: "I am a wife" (473). As the Secretary no longer questions her identity as a female and accepts her role in the home, her agency panic subsides.

While the Wife struggled with her new identity as a mother, the Secretary must come to accept her miscarriage as a random, unfortunate event. In losing her baby, the Secretary loses her identity as a mother and must reconcile her role in society according to gender expectations. As the Secretary no longer faces the dilemma of taking on mutually exclusive roles, she quells her agency panic by accepting her role as a wife. A victim of biological forces, the Secretary conforms to societal expectations and takes on one role. In doing so the Secretary is flat physically and metaphorically, passively accepting of what society wants her to be.

The Third Voice is a college student whose unplanned pregnancy creates agency panic and a crisis of female identity. Needing to feel in control, the Girl compares her

situation to impregnation myths and places too much agency in hospital doctors. While the Girl manages her agency panic by deciding to give the child up for adoption, she cannot help but have misgivings about her choice. The Girl's experience is not only about agency panic in response to an uncontrollable event, but the conflict of biology tied to gender expectations.

Plath alludes to Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan" in the beginning of the Girl's monologue to symbolize her powerlessness. The reference to the poem begins with the lines: "I remember a white, cold wing / And the great swan, with its terrible look, / Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river. / There is a snake in swans" (49-52). The lines coincide with Yeats' "Leda and the Swan," the Petrarchan sonnet that retells the Greek myth of Zeus transforming into a swan to rape Leda, the queen of Sparta. In the poem, Yeats' describes Zeus with "great wings beating still" above Leda, the "staggering girl" (1-2). Zeus renders Leda powerless, holding her "helpless breast upon his breast" (4). The Girl in Plath's "Three Women" takes the swan in rape of Leda and applies it to her own feelings of powerlessness.

In experiencing agency panic, the Girl places agency in the swan in attempt to understand her feelings and find the cause of her situation. She recalls: "I remember a white, cold wing / And the great swan, with its terrible look, / Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river. / There is a snake in swans" (49-52). The Girl sees the swan as a menacing creature. It has a "terrible look" and the phrase "coming at me" suggests aggression. The snake in the swan also symbolizes wickedness and sin. The Girl describes his eyes as "a black meaning," suggesting he has malicious intentions. These descriptions of the swan are the Girl's way of looking for the cause of her

pregnancy. She treats the swan as if it intentionally made her pregnant, claiming she sees in its eye: “Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act” (55). To the Girl, the swan is responsible for one act leading to another, to the unplanned pregnancy. While the Girl uses the swan to express her helplessness, she evades responsibility for her actions instead of accepting the consequences.

In the hospital, The Girl experiences agency panic in believing the doctors are to blame for her pregnancy. She resents them stating:

“The doctors move among us as if our bigness
 Frightened the mind. They smile like fools.
 They are to blame for what I am, and they know it.
 They hug their flatness like a kind of health.
 And what if they found themselves surprised, as I did?
 They would go mad with it” (115-118).

Like the Secretary, the Girl experiences agency panic by believing the doctors conspire against her. She becomes paranoid, thinking the doctors deliberately cause her suffering and “know” they are responsible. The thought that they “smile like fools” indicates she thinks the doctors only pretend they are not responsible for the Girl’s helplessness. Like Secretary’s description of the doctors, they too are flat, suggesting they aim to destroy all they are jealous of and cannot have. In placing agency in others, the Girl becomes a victim of her own paranoia. The thought of doctors being incapable of handling her situation gives her pleasure, but it is only imagined. The Girl’s attempts to understand her own loss of agency by imagining others in her place do not resolve her situation—it only increases her agency panic.

With the pregnancy altering her identity, the Girl wishes she could reclaim her identity as a student through abortion. The doctors say to her: “ ‘This is where you will come when you are ready,’ ” meaning when she is ready to have her child (124). Her

response is: “I am not ready for anything to happen. / I should have murdered this, that murders me” (126-127). The girl does not want “anything to happen.” So much has happened to her that was beyond her control, that she would much rather have *nothing* happen. That way, there would be no need for control. Because the Girl was not ready for the pregnancy, she does not see herself “being ready” to have the baby. The Girl boldly states regret— she wished she had “murdered” the pregnancy, as it dictates how she must live her life. She attributes power to the unborn baby inside of her. However, the statement is more than just wishing she had an abortion. It also portrays her desire to reclaim her identity. The Girl wishes she had “separated” the baby from her, but decides not to. Even though having an abortion would exercise agency and control over her body, she would “murder” a part of herself. Having the child but not being a mother is the Girl’s compromise.

The poem emphasizes the tension between agency and identity when the Girl leaves the hospital and her daughter. Her leave-taking is the conclusion to her nightmare; in a way the situation is resolved. However, the Girl has anxiety leaving the hospital. She thinks: “There is an emptiness. / I am so vulnerable suddenly. I am a wound walking out of hospital. / I am a wound that they are letting go” (372-375). The Girl characterizes herself as a wound to contrast with the hospital’s main function of healing. She places agency in the hospital, saying it released her without fully mending her. By letting the hospital control her restorative state, the Girl does not minimize her anxiety. However, the Girl suggests she does have some agency, as she is “walking out of hospital.” The contrast of being a wound yet still walking accentuates the Girl’s struggle with agency in freeing herself from motherhood, but also leaving behind a part of her identity.

Returning to college, the Girl again uses the metaphor of the wound to come to terms with the balance between agency and no agency. Instead of saying “I am a wound” she states: “I had an old wound once, but it is healing” (411). The shift in language means a change of perspective—the pregnancy no longer impacts her as it once had. Her new attitude also applies to her daughter: “I had a dream of an island, red with cries. / It was a dream, and did not mean a thing” (412). Unlike the time she left the hospital, the Girl no longer feels guilty about leaving her child behind. Her cries no longer “mean a thing.” The wound reassures the Girl she is reverting back to her “old identity.” She goes on to graduate from college, and is not burdened with motherhood. However, a wound healing is not exactly the Girl actively gaining control. The wound closing is her body’s natural response to repairing itself. It also pertains to her emotional wound closing on its own over time. In both scenarios, the Girl did not necessarily play an active role in the healing process. In searching for agency, the Girl comes to terms with agency as a balance between two extremes.

Even though the Girl feels her situation is resolved, she still feels a lacking she cannot pinpoint. Her monologue closes at the river, where it began:

“The swans are gone. Still the river
Remembers how white they were.
It strives after them with its lights.
It finds their shapes in a cloud.
What is it that bird that cries
With such sorrow in its voice?
I am young as ever, it says. What is it I miss?” (448-454)

The swan’s reoccurrence suggests she will never have complete agency over her situation. Even though the Girl feels free from maternity roles, she will always question if she made the right decision to give up her child. Though the swans are gone, as is the

pregnancy and birth, the events still weigh her down. Imagining the swans also suggests placing agency onto others that have nothing to do with her situation. The Girl again places agency in these objects to assess her feelings, as she finds the shape of swans in the clouds. The question “What is it I miss?” suggests the Girl does not feel as she thinks she should. She has no child as a burden to take care of, but she still feels emptiness, as if something is missing from her life. The monologue closing with the swans emphasizes the Girl’s dissatisfaction, and the unresolved question of whether she should have been a mother.

For the Girl, agency panic results from unplanned pregnancy, and the social implications that go along with it. The Girl struggles between maintaining her identity as a student, and the moral obligation to be a mother. In attempt to find a cause behind these events, she creates metaphors to make sense of her feelings, and places the blame in others. Unlike the Wife and Secretary, the Girl’s monologue ends in uncertainty, suggesting the Girl feels guilt in not giving into society’s belief that a woman is shaped by her biological functions.

Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and “Three Women” show that politics influenced Plath’s writing process in both direct and subtle ways. Combining the personal with the political in these works, Plath emphasizes the struggle between the individual and external forces of control, real or imagined. In the midst of a Red Scare and paranoia about Communist power, Plath suggests that what we have to fear is nearer to home and more pervasive, in the form of societal expectations that oppress the individual and limit or rob her of her agency.

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