Despite her obvious need for tenderness, the idea of same sex relationships
Esther, while living in Belsize, witnesses a relationship between Joan and
We can also see sexuality as violence in Esther's encounter with Marco
incident with Doreen and Lenny Shepherd.
sexuality as related to violence and pain, earlier established during the
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she sees in bottles at the hospital.
Irwin ends up in the emergency room with major hemorrhaging. Pamela
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sexual encounter is with Irwin who she describes as “a tall young man with
and dictate their thrilling letters, she says: “the trouble was, I hated the idea
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Also there is Betsy, an innocent girl who Esther soon
also seems to become more and more lost. First there is Jay Cee; she is
find. These women are all different and, in an attempt to find herself, Esther
at Ladies Day and offers Esther career advice, telling her she
must be more decisive and offer more that the run-of-the-mill person. Despite
Ester, while in New York, tries to identify with any strong woman she can
experience sex for the first
time. It can be seen that perhaps Sylvia Plath used Esther as a form of
catharsis, to express her own feelings and fears:
Esther, like any woman, has desires. She longs for many things; one of
these things she desires is to be a sexual creature. Her first “successful”
sexual encounter is with Irwin who she describes as “a tall young man with
a rather ugly and bespectacled, but intelligent face” (237). She talks about
her wound (242); this idea of a wound can be found in the writings of Anais
Nin where the woman is purely used as an object and is repeatedly
“stabbed” by the man's penis, giving the idea that all penetrative sex is
violent. This is certainly the case in The Bell Jar. Esther sees her virginity
as a “millstone around her neck” (240) and when she finally has sex with
Irwin ends up in the emergency room with major hemorrhaging. Pamela
Cooper states that, in the repertoire of physical functions, blood marks both
the site of the wound where life ebbs away, and the viability of the uterus
where life declares itself. If the fragility of the flesh opens it to mortal injury,
that same openness – read through the grid of gender as the sexual,
reproductive openness of the female body – proclaims a potential for
renewal realizable in exactly the same terms as violence and destruction:
dying in the body, we are also (re) born through it (Cooper, p.89).
Buddy Willard is the boy everyone tells Esther she should marry: “All I'd
heard about, really was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the
kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for” (71). Esther tells how
Buddy took her on an excursion to his medical school where she witnesses
a woman giving birth, Mrs Tomolillo, during which she describes the birth
channel as “some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless
corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again” (p.68).

Esther does not desire to be of service to a man. In response to her mother
telling her she should learn short hand in order to gain the attention of men
and dictate their thrilling letters, she says: “the trouble was, I hated the idea
of serving men in anyway. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters” (79).
This can be seen as not wanting to have children; when we look at all
penetrative sex as violence and Esther not wanting to serve men in anyway,
we can see a desire not to have children. According to Jeremy Ross, Plath
uses intense medical imagery, often grotesque, to portray this first
perspective on sexuality; she perceives this in terms of procreation that
ends in either painful, agonizing childbirth or in the macabre stillbirths that
she sees in bottles at the hospital.
In Plath's time, the American dream, for women, consisted of living for
nothing but the hopefully inevitable proposal of marriage, as being
responsible for the patriarchal imago of women as interchangeable (sexual)
objects of exchange. This is something that Esther can be seen to despise
when Buddy asks her to marry him. She tells him: “If neurotic is wanting two
mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm as neurotic as
hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and
another for the rest of my days.” (98). This also confirms Esther's view on
sexuality as related to violence and pain, earlier established during the
incident with Doreen and Lenny Shepherd.
We can also see sexuality as violence in Esther's encounter with Marco
who tries to rape her. She says: “It’s happening”, I thought. “It’s happening.
If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen” (114). Esther manages to
fight him off and goes home. There is another element to sexuality in the novel.
Esther, while living in Belsize, witnesses a relationship between Joan and
Dee Dee. This could be the perfect solution for Esther; she despises
patriarchal values and having a relationship with another woman could give
her the freedom she so longs for. But as she discusses with Doctor Nolan:
“What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?”
Doctor Nolan paused. Then she said, “Tenderness.” (231)
Despite her obvious need for tenderness, the idea of same sex relationships
seems to be repulsive to Esther, and she responds to Joan's announcement
that she likes Esther with a stinging rebuke: “I don’t like you. You make me
puke, if you want to know” (232). These ideas exemplify sexuality in
American writing.
Violence is a key element in, The Bell Jar, not only violence in sexuality
but also violence that Esther commits unto herself. In darkly comic suicide
attempts she gets into a bath with a Gillette blade and cuts the calf on her
right leg only to cover it with band-aids when she realizes that it's time for
her mother to come home (155); she tries to drown herself by diving
underwater but she keeps popping up like a cork (170); and she tries to hang
herself with the silk cord of her mother's dressing gown only she can't find
anything to fix it to, so she tries to hang herself, “pronethe style, by holding
the cord in the air with her hand (167-68) (NAFF online resources 1996).
Quite possibly the most significant of the violence Esther experiences is
during Electroshock therapy.
Cooper states that, obsessed with the electrocution of the Rosenberg's,
Esther herself experiences electrical torture at the hands of the incompetant
Dr. Gordon. The shock treatment he prescribes makes Esther feel punished,
like a felon "burned alive all along [her] nerves.” Through this imagery, the
novel develops a metaphor of martyrdom through ritual incineration with
the same angry intensity as many of the Ariel poems. Her fear and disgust of
electrocution turns out to be justifiable when she herself is "electrocuted":
"There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath.
Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me
like the end of the world.
Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shivered, through an air cracking with blue
light, and with each flash a great jolt dumbed me until I thought
my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant.
I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done.” (151-52)

While at the asylum Esther discovers that she will be subjected to more
electro-shock therapy at first this idea is terrifying to her, but as Doctor
Nolan promises her that everything will be all right Esther agrees and
numbly goes to the treatment. She bites down on something set upon her
tongue and “darkness wiped me out like chalk on a chalkboard” (226). It
has been suggested (NAFF course resources 1996) that Joan is both a
reflection and a reverse image of Esther: “Sometimes I wondered if I had
made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop up at
every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been
through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose.”
(231). This gives rise to the idea that American writing is concerned with
communal and individual identities.
Esther, while in New York, tries to identify with any strong woman she can
find. These women are all different and, in an attempt to find herself, Esther
seems to become more and more lost. First there is Jay Cee; she is
Esther's editor at Ladies Day and offers Esther career advice, telling her she
must be more decisive and offer more that the run-of-the-mill person. Despite
her sharp manner, Jay Cee consoles Esther, who greatly admires her.
Esther sees herself in Jay Cee; she longs to be a successful woman. She also
sees her self in Doreen; or rather she wants to see herself in Doreen.
Doreen is confident in her sexuality, something that Esther has yet to
experience. Doreen is sophisticated. She is everything that Esther thinks
she wants to be. Also there is Betsy, an innocent girl who Esther soon
realizes more closely resembles herself than Doreen. In trying to find herself
Esther explores the individual identities of the closest females in her life.
Steven Gould believes that Plath relied heavily on Virginia Woolf as her
model, both in her writings and in her life. He suggests that there are many
parallels between Plath and Woolf's lives including their feelings of being
disenfranchised from the hegemonic, patriarchal worlds in which they lived,
their writing as an attempted “cure” for their disenchantment, and their
repeated and ultimately successful suicide attempts (p. 6 NAFF course
resources 1996). One can also see Plath disguised in Esther. Perhaps
Plath was looking for a catharsis, looking to explore her own identity in the
only way she knew how, by writing. Looking at the similarities between
Esther and Plath there are many: both lost their fathers at a young age; both
were writers; both were from the Boston area; both won scholarships to intern
at prestigious places; and, finally, both were suicidal. The Bell Jar was
published just a year after Plath’s death; perhaps one could imagine that she was trying to discover her own identity through exploring that of her alter ego. This is indeed an example of the individual identity not just of Plath but also of her protagonist Esther.

When thinking about communal identities it can be seen that Esther felt very separated from the crowd. The night of her assault by Marco she returns to her apartment and proceeds to throw her clothes out of the window. When she comes home she further withdraws from society and communal living. She informs her friend Jody that she won’t be staying in her flat in Harvard for the summer, even though she could easily take another course. This withdrawal from society can be seen as Esther not feeling she has a valid communal identity. This is an element of depression, the mental illness that Esther suffers from. Esther has lost interest in the usual pleasures of life. Her self doubt about her career as a writer becomes evident when she returns home from New York, she says: “I felt it was very important not to be recognized” (120) also “I had nothing to look forward to” (123).

Esther does not want to get dressed, she does not want to eat, she cannot sleep, eventually she cannot read and she cannot write. Esther’s huge investment to writing may have contributed specifically to her sensitivity and thus predisposed her to depression according to Mark A Runco.1 In her meeting with the Sailor (139) she again calls herself Elly Higginbottom, as she did when she met Lenny and Frankie. This signifies a withdrawal from society. By changing her name and altering her history Esther is changing her communal identity from the successful student and promising writer who is suffering from an illness that makes her life a misery. To a mysterious girl from Chicago, it seems that by doing this she is denying her illness and thereby denying her communal identity as a sufferer of a mental illness. After her sexual encounter with Irwin, she again denies her communal identity by asking him to take her to Joan’s instead of back to the Asylum. It seems there is a cultural paranoia of the mentally ill and for Esther, to admit to her illness would be admitting that she has lost something, to admit that she is/ was suicidal is something that she cannot bear to do.

In conclusion it can be seen from the examples given above that American writing is particularly interested in the relationship between, on the one hand, sexuality and violence and on the other, communal and individual identities. For Esther Sex and violence go hand in hand, after the attack on her by Marco, and the disastrous intercourse with Irwin, to witnessing the birth of Mrs. Tomolillo’s baby. All these things combine to make Esther feel that patriarchal society is wrong and that it is something she does not wish to subscribe to. Her infliction of her own pain, through her many suicide attempts. Her individual identity can be seen in Joan and also in the women she encounters in New York: Jay Cee, Doreen and Betsy. Most significantly her identity is drawn through the parallels between her life and the life of her creator Plath. Her communal identity can be seen as a denial of her true self. All these combine to prove that sexuality, violence and communal and individual identities combine to make The Bell Jar a prime example of American literature.

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