Aurelia Plath, Sylvia Plath’s mother concluded at the end of *Letters Home* (1976) that even though Sylvia had for a long time been ‘gallant and equal to her life-experience’, her physical condition had been negatively affected by ‘illness, anxiety and overwork’ until she had finally been unable to continue (1976, p.500). Sylvia committed suicide on February 12, 1963. In one of Sylvia’s letters home to her mother on January 16, 1963 Sylvia writes ‘I just haven’t felt to have any identity’ describing how she felt about trying to cope with the demands of trying to look after two young children on her own and maintain a career as a writer (1976, p.495).

The events of Sylvia’s life such as the separation from her husband in 1962; her desperate financial position; working on her writing; and the regular sickness experienced by her children and herself in the cold winter of London would have been self-destroying for any single woman. Although she tells her mother of her difficulties in the letters she wrote home, she does not share the deep desperation she must have felt before her suicide. In her last letter to her mother, dated eight days before Plath died she announced that she would go to see ‘a woman doctor, free on the National Health’ (1976, p.500) but she did not cry out for help. Although concern for the depth of her despair is shared in letters between her family and friends, the optimism and hope she expressed in her letter writing perhaps hides the harsh reality of her fears and prevents her from gaining the help she so desperately needed. Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* tells of how Esther Greenwood, a young woman aged nineteen years detaches from the world and eventually plans her own destruction.

The *Bell Jar* is an ‘adolescent crisis novel’ where Esther Greenwood’s account of her behaviour is symptomatic of her emotional detachment. Through Esther’s insights of what it’s like for a young woman to live in the 1950s in the western world, the author brilliantly engages us in a story that could only be told by a woman. Even though Esther’s character is written as an adolescent, Plath’s focus on Esther’s innocence and naivety allows her character to boldly question the life that a woman of those times was expected to follow. In doing so, Esther is able to look within herself to try to find what she thinks and where she fits in her society. There is much written discussion about whether Esther’s continual inner turmoil within the novel perhaps reflects the difficulties the writer endured in her own life. Whether this is so or not, the content of the novel courageously peers into the struggle women experience in creating their own identity rather than being ‘used as a tool or an object by others’ (West cited in Davidson & Wagner-Martin 1995, p.309). Unfortunately, it is through Esther’s awkward and inadequate approach to the events in her life almost leading to her own destruction that we, as the reader get to review her behaviour and thus benefit from her mistakes and her learning.

In the novel, Esther moves from New York City where she experiences the adult values of America; to Wellesley, her home, where she finds it difficult to make any life decisions for herself; and then to the mental asylum for treatment for depression (Aird cited in Bundtzen, p.116). Although Esther had won a prize to New York for her writing and is treated to expensive hotel accommodation, expensive clothes, parties and the opportunity to work as a writer for a magazine, she realizes that she is not comfortable there: ‘I felt very still and very empty’ (1983, p.3). Bundtzen suggests that Esther’s depression begins in the external environment of New York where she becomes isolated from others. Esther’s friends, Doreen and Betsy are both prizewinners too and at first, she identifies with them, but then rejects them for the very thing that attracted her in the first place. Esther describes what she does to Doreen after a night out together ‘the only thing was to dump her on the carpet and lock my door’ (p.23). Esther becomes divided about her own identity as she questions why she can’t do ‘what [she] should’ by being like Betsy, a good girl, or ‘what [she] shouldn’t’ by being like Doreen, a bad girl (p.117).

The pressure to make decisions about her future in a culture that is alien to Esther becomes too great for her. Smith (cited in Billman 2003) suggests that Esther lives in a reality that is ‘mediated through graven images’ such as photographs, movies and magazines. Smith also argues that Esther and the other girls react to these stereotypical images by vomiting when they view a film that shows ‘a nice blonde girl who looked like June Allyson but was somebody else’ (44). The food poisoning the girls suffer at that time after the Ladies Day lunch suggests that the ‘film itself is also a form of poisoning’ for them (2003, p.9). How would Esther be able to become a great writer as a woman when there was cultural pressure for her to be like those images, something she did not want to be? How could she find her place when she was surrounded by people who had views and values that were alien to her, such as when her boyfriend Buddy tells her that a poem is just a ‘piece of dust’ (69)? He also suggests that after Esther has children [she] wouldn’t want to write poems anymore’ (p.69). Billman claims that the pressure for Esther to conform to something she is not leads her to turn inward and detach from others (2003). Such confusion for Esther develops further as she realises that despite the fact that her mother has steered her into thinking that a girl should only sleep with her husband and only after they were married (p.86), she develops an awareness that it is different for males. She finds out that her boyfriend, Buddy has been sleeping with a girl for some time and then she is told that ‘most boys were like that’ (p.74). Buddy’s mother views men as ‘an arrow into the future’ and women as ‘the place the arrow shoots off from’ (p.75). But Esther wants to ‘shoot off in all directions [herself]’ (68). Crowther suggests that Esther despises the ‘patriarchal image’ of women in American society that dictates their role as objects. This is illustrated when...
Buddy asks Esther to marry him and she tells him that she will always be neurotic (p.98). Bonds (cited in Billman 2003) argues that Esther's hope to be a serious writer is repressed by her writing for a fashion magazine, a totally expected form of writing for the woman in the patriarchal society of America (2003, p.9). Esther's inability to make decisions for herself together with her continual conflict with the people and values around her pushes her further into isolation and she begins to see her future as a 'desolate avenue' (p.135).

Esther's self-destructive attitude toward herself is significantly vindictive and unforgiving. Through her continual insistence that she cannot do anything, she projects hostility toward herself. She judges herself harshly in situations of which she has no knowledge and then attempts to hide the fact from others, never acknowledging to the fact that they may acknowledge and accept her young, natural, inexperienced behaviour. In a bar in New York she is afraid that she will look like a fool and drinks a full glass of vodka instead of 'saying [she'd] have it with ice or soda' (p.11). Her inner-self talk insensitively counts all the things she can’t do such as 'cooking, shorthand, dancing, riding a horse or skiing' (p.80), and she surmises that the only thing she can do is win a scholarship 'which was coming to an end' (p.81). The deep frustration she feels toward herself is sadly reflected in the story of the fig tree where she realises that she cannot make up her mind whether she wants to be a mother, a poet, a professor, or an editor working overseas. The story reminds her that she cannot hope to be all. Because of her indecision, she sees herself starving to death as all the figs 'plop to the ground at [her] feet' (p.81). Billman (2003) contends that a woman living in the 1950s could only choose one path, and in doing so, must sacrifice the others. This affects Esther's concept of herself in that she can only be what is prescribed and not an authentic self (2003, p.10). Crowther maintains that Esther is violent toward herself when she tries to commit suicide. She cuts herself with razor blades (p.155); tries to drown herself (p.170); and attempts to hang herself (pp.167-168). Esther's attempt to develop an identity becomes fruitless. Her continual referral to her destructive thoughts together with the inability to find a resolution to her difficulties eventually blurs Esther's reality until she falls into a deep depression in which she is unable to function.

Esther is unable to embrace the opportunities she has been given. Through her indecisiveness in not knowing what career path she has planned, she limits the possibilities that Jay Cee, the editor of the New York magazine might offer her. Jay Cee announces that the girl that was at the magazine before Esther 'went straight from this office on to 'Time' (p.33) because she had focused on learning while she was there. Fitzsimmons suggests that perhaps if Esther had been in a better frame of mind she may have reacted to Jay Cee's interest with much more excitement. But when she realises that she really doesn’t know what she wants to do ‘the future seems more and more of a problem’ (2001, p.3). Esther feels incredible hostility toward her mother even though her mother supports Esther financially and emotionally. She divulges that she will not stay in the same house with her mother ‘for more than a week’ (p.125). Crowther suggests that Esther never feels part of the crowd, and does not attempt to become part of it. She withdraws from society when she comes home and does not stay with her friend Jody at Harvard even though she could have taken any course (2001, p.10). When Esther first visits Doctor Gordon, the psychiatrist, she plans how she will only reveal what she wants and thus determine the image he draws of her, instead of assisting him in ways that could help her (p.137). The severity of Esther's depressed state becomes very clear when she goes to the beach with Jody and friends and instead of taking the opportunity to enjoy their company and perhaps share her fears with them, she swims out to sea to try to drown herself (p.165). Crowther also claims that Esther further isolates herself from people in the community by denying her depression as an illness. In her untriumg emotional detachment from others, Esther loses opportunities presented by many people that may have helped to limit her suffering.

The last attempt Esther makes to kill herself almost succeeds. But in her attempt she is finally rescued from the alien world and taken to a protective sanction, the asylum, where she is treated for her mental illness. Esther's visit to her father's grave before she tries to kill herself is significant because for the first time she realizes that she hasn’t grieved for her father at all. The emotional frustration she feels in her isolation, her inexperience in trying to come to terms with her difficulties, and the anger she feels towards her father for abandoning her, finally drive her to destruction 'I had a great yearning lately to pay my father back for all the years of neglect' (p.174). Runco suggests that some writers who write from a very personal perspective place a 'large psychic investment' in their writing and because of this have a lot to lose if their writing is rejected. Runco also contends that this can lead to depression and 'suicide ideation' (1998 p.641). It is obvious that Esther demonstrates behaviours that are akin to an adolescent in crisis. At times Esther's thoughts are divided into those wanting to protect her and those wanting to destroy her. When she and Buddy are trying to ski even though they are inexperienced her 'interior voice' tells her not to be a fool and ski down the mountain slope, she does not listen and becomes badly injured. Perhaps this inner voice also manifests at times when Esther sees the world in more humorous terms. When she is at the hospital, she names the doctors 'Doctor Syphilis and Doctor Pancreas' (p.188) and when she observes the behaviour of the negro serving food to the hospital patients she says, “I could tell we were his first crazy people” (p.189). Perhaps if Esther had been able to embrace her intuition and the lighter side of her...
personality more often, instead of being influenced by destructive thoughts she may have been able to cope more effectively with the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

One of the saddest outcomes in the novel is that Esther, an intelligent and independent young woman never really finds a way to fit into any part of 1950s society. Provoked by the deep psychological split between what she is and what society expects her to be, Esther develops a deep fear of going mad: ‘everything I read about mad people [stays] in my mind’ (p.163). Regarded by her Class Dean as an ‘interesting experiment’ (p.35), Esther obsessively and excessively peers into the bell jar to examine and analyse her own behaviour until her fears become a reality and she is forced to enter into psychological treatment for depression. Her first electro-shock treatment with Doctor Gordon goes terribly wrong and the horror of the ‘great jolt’ (p.151) catapults Esther into believing that she is being punished for her condition: ‘I wondered what terrible thing it was that I [did]’ (p.152). Meeting other women in the asylum who are considered misfits by society such as the lesbian, Joan Gilling, only seems to reinforce the hopelessness that Esther feels towards herself and others ‘forced together… by war or plague’ (p.237). The only way that Esther believes she can find any peace is with the use of shock treatment as she observes ‘the bell jar [hangs] suspended, a few feet above my feet. I [am] open to the circulating air’ (p.227). Esther's fall from her own mental wellbeing and the following psychiatric treatment she receives, reflects the inadequacies of the 1950s society to embrace those normal, young women who provided insight and vision outside traditional boundaries.

Plath masterfully uncovers the depths of Esther’s symptoms of vulnerability as we are taken on her adolescent journey in her endeavour to find a place in society. We witness her inability to make decisions about her life direction, her self-destructive attitude, her hostility toward others, and her tragic downfall into depression and suicide. Such a disastrous choice of path at this stage of growth is not news to us as it exists for too many young people in this twenty-first century. The question remains of how can we find a place in our society that is authentic for each of us? In The Bell Jar, Plath bravely and authentically weaves a resonance for all women in opening such wounds of her time. Plath’s sensitive sharing and understanding of the deep sufferings we all may experience at some time in our lives encouraged me to open to a deeper awareness and reflect on the authenticity of who ‘I am’.

Reference list


