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### Keywords

*The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath, J. D. Salinger, American Literature



## Salvation and Rebirth in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*

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Critics often consider J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* in the same light. Both novels are set in the 1950's and depict the protagonist's struggle with both time-inclusive and time-exclusive social standards. Not that the novels are entirely forums for social commentary; on the contrary, the main character in each book, Salinger's Holden Caulfield and Plath's Esther Greenwood, becomes very real to the readers when they realize the depth of the personal turmoil and depression that each character so keenly suffers. Thus, we see a two-fold interpretation for the construction of Holden and of Esther: first, a critique of society by the author as filtered through the eyes of his or her character; second, the author's creation of a life-like and wholly suffering character, emotionally and intellectually introspective and often modeled after the author's own life. I shall refer to the former--the character examining and reacting to his or her circumstance--as the outwardly directed self, and the latter--the character examining and reacting to his or her internal--emotional and mental--world--as the inwardly directed self.

With a suffering character in a suffering world, the central need and push in both novels is for some sort of salvation and rebirth if there is to be any growth or ascension from depression. Furthermore, we come to realize as readers, this salvation is wholly contingent upon the protagonist's relationship to humanity. For Holden, his rebirth comes when he turns from the outwardly directed self to the inwardly directed self. Holden's journey involves mostly his outwardly directed self, feeling alienated and confused by unsettling social standards, searching for a real human connection. All of the characters he discusses or encounters become failed figures of rescue for one reason or another, until he meets with Phoebe towards the end of the novel. With Phoebe, Holden finally discovers a real human connection, and consequently this connection allows Holden to turn inward and realize his own need for rescue. This realization becomes Holden's salvation and, at the

same time, an important rite of passage.

Salvation for Esther, however, is a bit more complicated. Her transition from outwardly to inwardly directed self does not occur as an epiphany at the end of the novel. Rather, Esther's turn inward is in the form of a slow descent brought about by severe depression. In fact, the majority of the latter half of the novel focuses on Esther's inwardly directed self, as she is removed from society and placed in a mental institution. With this kind of juxtaposition of being immersed in and then removed from society, Esther grapples with this question: what really needs to be fixed, the society or the self? For Esther, contrary to Holden, the turn inward and then the institutionalization represents rock bottom--the hit after the fall--rather than some sort of turning point. So why does the transition from outwardly directed self to inwardly directed self work for Holden but not for Esther?

Human connection is the key. How can one have human connection in a society which is so flawed? Holden struggles with this throughout the novel, but somehow he stumbles upon this connection that he so desperately needs through Phoebe's character. Thus, in *The Catcher in the Rye*, we get a sense that the society may not be able to change, but human connection is still possible regardless of whether or not social standards change.<sup>1</sup> This is what Holden needs in order to be redeemed from his isolation and depression: he chooses to change, and the proof of that choice is his institutionalization. Holden does not need to be the catcher in the rye. Rather, he needs to be caught. In *The Bell Jar*, there is also a sense of an immobile society, but Esther is unable to come to terms with this stagnation. Plath creates a stickier relationship between the individual and the society here. Something needs to change in order for Esther to form a connection to other people. However, because of her depression and her conflict with what society and the people closest to her would have her be, Esther keeps society away and society keeps Esther away. In a sense, Esther doesn't know who to be in order to find a real connection. The debate between whether the society needs to change or she needs to change is unresolved, and remains so even at the end of the novel. Consequently, we are not sure whether or not Esther can escape the trap of being under the bell jar even at the novel's conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, whether it be because of the opposite genders of the protagonists or differing intentions on the part of the authors, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*--though similar in their structures and motifs--provide us with an intriguing and wrenching stalemate on the possibility of redemption for the struggling soul. Strangely, the construction of the two novels is comparable with respect to the overpowering need for redemption through reconnection, but the end results of nearly identical desires are vastly different. While Salinger implies that real human connection is possible for the once outcast person in spite of society, Plath asserts that this is a quite questionable conclusion because of social expectations and the nature of the per-

son who cannot conform to its norms. Who is more realistic? Perhaps it depends upon the individual. Holden and Esther are, after all, very different characters despite any similarities of circumstance. Perhaps Esther has not yet discovered what Holden has, or maybe Holden's epiphany is, in actuality, merely a suspension of his own bell jar. Or perhaps both authors are on target, and we can account for the novels' varying outcomes by acknowledging the contrasting treatment of men and women at the time. Whatever the case, there is a definite divergence that begs for closer examination.

In *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden seems to wander aimlessly--from boarding school to boarding school and then from place to place in the city--but in actuality, he is on a mission, as embodied throughout by the symbol of the red hunting cap. Holden's mission is one for connection, something real, a touch of humanity, in the midst of a world he sees as fake and disturbing. As he travels, he encounters various characters, through whom we discover Holden's great disgust for society and the root of his seemingly self-imposed isolation. With every person Holden actually meets in the course of the novel, there is some reason or other he cannot connect with him or her. For instance, the novel opens with Holden standing alone on a hill next to a cannon overlooking the football game where all of his schoolmates are. This is how Salinger introduces us to Holden: a somehow shunned and disconnected figure, about to be kicked out of school, unable to tell his parents, and ambivalent between a desire for retribution and a yearning for reconnection due to his lack of belonging, due to his homelessness.

From this, it is easy to see why Holden has such feelings of inadequacy, of disappearing in the heart of winter just as his ducks do. He describes his journey to Old Spencer's house at the beginning of the novel:

It was icy as hell and I damn near fell down. I don't even know what I was running for--I guess I just felt like it. After I got across the road, I felt like I was sort of disappearing. It was that kind of a crazy afternoon, terrifically cold, and no sun out or anything, and you felt like you were disappearing every time you crossed a road.  
(5)

This sense of disappearing continues throughout the novel until Holden ceases his journeying, which staggers back and forth throughout between running away and searching, searching and running away. Perhaps Holden does both at once. That is, he flees from an incomprehensible and artificial world wrought with impossible social expectations, and at the same time he searches for human connection. An insoluble, heartbreaking circumstance. Either way, Holden is outwardly bound. Alienated and disconnected, he cannot possibly understand himself, just as he cannot bear to go home.

Conveniently--for Holden's isolation, that is--the people Holden actually encounters, he despises, and consequently, they become failed figures of rescue for this troubled and lost young man. Old Spencer is the first character Holden physically encounters--as opposed to just discussing--and he sets up the precedent of misunderstanding and disconnection for Holden. Holden speaks of Spencer somewhat favorably and nostalgically before he actually goes to Spencer's home:

...if you thought about [Spencer] just enough, and not *too* much, you could figure it out that he wasn't doing too bad for himself. For instance, one Sunday when some other guys and I were over there for hot chocolate, he showed us this old beat-up Navajo blanket that he and Mrs. Spencer'd bought off some Indian in Yellowstone Park. You could tell old Spencer'd got a big bang out of buying it. That's what I mean. You take somebody old as hell, like old Spencer, and they can get a big bang out of buying a blanket. (7)

Holden admires Spencer's ability to find life worthwhile, through something as insignificant as a Navajo blanket, despite his old age and the fact that "...whenever he dropped a piece of chalk at the blackboard, some guy in the first row always had to get up and pick it up and hand it to him" (7). However, this admiration does not imply connection, and we come to see that Spencer and Holden do not understand each other at all. Spencer's great advice to Holden is "Life *is* a game, boy. Life *is* a game that one plays according to the rules"(8). Of course, we already know from the outset--Holden's being manager, instead of member, of the fencing team, and his failure to show up at the big football game--that Holden somehow cannot or is determined to not be a participant in any game. Thus, Holden and Spencer remain disconnected, and Spencer fails as an authority figure and role model. So when Holden "shoot[s] the old bull to old Spencer" (13), his mind lingers--as it will periodically throughout the novel--on his homeless ducks. Finally Holden has to leave Spencer, just as he leaves his home and his school:

I felt sorry as hell for [Spencer], all of a sudden. But I just couldn't hang around there any longer, the way we were on opposite sides of the pole, and the way he kept missing the bed whenever he chucked something at it, and his sad old bathrobe with his chest showing, and that grippy smell of Vicks Nose Drops all over the place. (15)

Suddenly, Holden can only see Spencer as a decrepit, sick old man who keeps missing the point, who cannot teach Holden how to be content with a Navajo blanket.

Human connection fails for Holden with his peers also. The majority of this derives from misconstrued conceptions of masculinity. For instance, Holden sees Stradlater as the social ideal for a man: athletic, handsome, "oversexed," self-absorbed, and insensitive. Holden's introspection and sentimentality, however, interfere with his ability to identify with Stradlater, who couldn't care less that Jane's name is Jane and not Jean, that Jane is a dancer, that when she and Holden play checkers, she never moves her kings from the back row. As Holden muses, "That kind of stuff doesn't interest most people" (32). Stradlater proves his lack of sensitivity once again when he rejects Holden's essay about Allie's baseball mitt. Holden has great respect for Allie, whose mitt "...had poems written all over the fingers and the pocket and everywhere. In green ink. . .so that he'd have something to read when he was in the field and nobody was up at bat" (38). With this image, Allie is able to do something Holden cannot--that is, merge sensitivity with masculinity. This sentiment for Allie also makes it difficult for Holden to be a man in the same way Stradlater can. Holden describes how he punched out all of the windows in the garage after Allie's death. He explains, "My hand still hurts me once in a while when it rains and all, and I can't make a real fist any more--not a tight one, I mean" (39). After relating this inability to make "a real fist" Holden gets into a fight with Stradlater, who, in Holden's eyes, prefers to see Jane as a girl to "give the time to" rather than as a real person. Holden, who ends up with a bloody face from Stradlater, cannot bring himself to hit Stradlater with anything but words. On that note, Holden leaves school for good.

Thus, characters Holden physically encounters in the book fail as saviors or teachers or role models, which only exacerbates his disconnection both from them and from his own inner self. However, Holden holds on a pedestal the characters whom he is unable to encounter physically, such as Allie or Jane. Holden only reminisces about them--about Allie's baseball mitt, or about the single tear Jane leaves on the checkerboard. The problem here is one of reconciliation of self with world and is metaphorically linked to Holden's struggle with masculinity, which in itself is a culmination of greater social expectations. Holden cannot reconcile physical and emotional intimacy: masculinity as defined by Stradlater's character is undercut for Holden by his own sentimentality. For instance, when Jane drops that tear on the red space of the checkerboard, Holden has genuine sympathy for her, but when she is sobbing on the swing a few minutes later, Holden does not quite know how to comfort her--his kisses teetering on the boundary between something consoling and something sexual. Holden even admits that this incident "...was the closest we ever got to necking" (79). Jane--whom Holden describes as different from other girls because she does simple, sweet things like holding Holden's sweaty hand through a movie--becomes a purity

symbol for Holden. Unlike Stradlater, Holden sees Jane as untouchable. And throughout the novel, Holden is unable to call her, though he cannot get her off his mind. Jane's significance, then, is similar to Allie's: the absent possibility of salvation and reconciliation. Holden cannot stop thinking of Jane, just as he continually prays to Allie every time he steps off a curb:

Every time I'd get to the end of a block I'd make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. I'd say to him, "Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Please, Allie." And then when I'd reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I'd *thank* him. (198)

Allie is dead, however, and Jane is untouchable.

The impossible manifestation of the ideal, embodied by Jane and Allie, is what Holden runs to; Stradlater is what Holden runs from. And all the time, Holden is running, searching. In order to stop this, in order to live, Holden needs a reconciliation between the impossible and the unavoidable, between purity and sickness, between the aspirations of self and the reality of society. Holden almost finds this in Mr. Antiolini, himself a figure somewhat removed from society, yet functioning within it. His advice to Holden is to stay in this world, to not disappear. He says:

Something else an academic education will do for you. If you go along with it any considerable distance, it'll begin to give you an idea what size mind you have. What it'll fit and, maybe, what it won't. After a while, you'll have an idea what kind of thoughts your particular size mind should be wearing. For one thing, it may save you an extraordinary amount of time trying on ideas that don't suit you, aren't becoming to you. You'll begin to know your true measurements and dress your mind accordingly. (190)

Mr. Antiolini is trying to encourage Holden to turn from his outwardly directed self, with so much contempt for society, to his inwardly directed self, so that Holden can begin to know himself and, subsequently, have a place in society. Mr. Antiolini warns Holden from assuming the "catcher in the rye" role: "'I don't want to scare you,' [Mr. Antiolini] said, 'but I can very clearly see you dying nobly, one way or another, for some highly unworthy cause'" (188). Mr. Antiolini then gives Holden the quote by Wilhelm Stekel: "'The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one'" (188). It is as if Mr. Antiolini anticipates Holden's desire to be the catcher, to be the one to save the children from falling off the cliff, to save what is innocent and pure and real from the world, to wipe off every "fuck you" inscribed on the

stairs in schools, in museums, on gravestones. But this desire emphasizes the distance between the real and the ideal, a circumstance which torments Holden. Mr. Antiolini tries to bridge the gap between these two realms by inverting the dynamic between savior and saved. He tells him that it is *Holden* who is heading “. . . for a special kind of fall, a horrible kind” (187). Rather than being a savior, Holden needs to be saved. Unfortunately, this advice is undermined by the homoerotic scene in which Mr. Antiolini affectionately strokes Holden’s head. Holden immediately bolts, taking with him another failed possibility of human connection. Whether or not this is a sexual gesture, Holden perceives it as such, and the integration between self and society fails with this further confounding of sexuality and affection.

Ironically, Holden’s salvation comes through his interaction with a child rather than with an adult. It is due to Phoebe, his eleven-year-old, pre-adolescent sister, that Holden is saved from his “fall.” She very pointedly corrects Holden when he relates his desire to be “the catcher in the rye”: “It’s ‘If a body *meet* a body coming through the rye!’ old Phoebe said” (173). Thus, she subtly alters Holden’s perception of his place in the dynamic of human interaction: it is about connection, meeting, rather than saving. Still, reconciliation of all of the polarities Holden struggles with is not yet attainable. Throughout the final scenes in the book, Phoebe is relentless in her caring for Holden and in her unguarded emotions. Something abstract for Holden is now manifest in a real human form. Phoebe has purity and innocence. She is unafraid to show herself. Yet she is not naive. She is intelligent and shrewd when it comes to the ways of the world. She is the picture of integration and reconciliation. However, Holden resists Phoebe’s reaching out to him, as he is stuck on continuing his fall alone. He thinks he is protecting her against his fall by leaving her.

The turning point in Holden’s mindset comes when he realizes Phoebe will not let him go. Holden thinks he is meeting with Phoebe to say good-bye, but Phoebe has a different agenda:

Finally, I saw [Phoebe]. I saw her through the glass part of the door. The reason I saw her, she had my crazy hunting hat on—you could see that hat about ten miles away. . . I went out the doors and started down these stone stairs to meet her. The thing I couldn’t understand, she had this big suitcase with her. She was just coming across Fifth Avenue, and she was dragging this goddam big suitcase with her. She could hardly drag it. When I got up closer, I saw it as my old suitcase, the one I used to use when I was at Whooton. (205-206)

Phoebe is determined to go with her brother, with his cap and his suitcase. For Holden, this is another child about to fall off the cliff, and he re-

fuses to let her come with him. Phoebe, however, is relentless and sticks to him all the way to the zoo. Contrary to what Holden thinks, Phoebe wants to save him--by showing him that she will *meet* him, stay with him, connect with him by way of the hunting cap and the suitcase. No matter what Holden says, Phoebe will not accept Holden's leaving alone. It finally settles into Holden's mind that he cannot be the catcher when he watches Phoebe on the carrousel:

. . . [Phoebe] walked all around it. Then she sat down on this big, brown, beat-up-looking old horse. Then the carrousel started, and I watched her go around and around. . . All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them. (211)

Holden cannot be the catcher because he would be preventing life from happening. Watching Phoebe teetering on her horse in the pouring rain, Holden observes,

I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all. (213)

Finally, Holden is connected to someone, to a child, to innocence and purity living in this society, teetering on a beaten up old horse, reaching for the gold ring, going around and around. It is all right that Phoebe is on the brink of a literal and metaphorical fall because she is reaching for the gold ring, and unrelenting. There is an inevitability to the fall. Holden has himself been a child who has fallen while reaching for the gold ring, the aspiration of being the catcher. It is as if Holden is watching the past few grueling weeks of his life in watching those children on the carrousel. He has been going nowhere, and it is time for Holden to outgrow that ride. At the same time, he, along with Phoebe, along with the entire world, is immersed in a circular process: fallen becomes caught becomes catcher becomes fallen becomes caught. This realization is integration, living, and salvation.

Just as Holden's struggle is wrought with the irreconcilability of polarities, so too is Esther's struggle in *The Bell Jar*. Both characters are stretched and torn in the limbo zone between what they want and what they think the world wants for them. In this way, both feel alienated from society. Conse-

quently, both are in desperate need of salvation from this isolation and of rebirth into society through human connection. However, we cannot help but to feel the novels' dissenting moods with respect to this salvation. If we consider the metaphor of the bell jar, it is as if we are able to throw the casing entirely off Holden, to view him wholly without the barrier. With Esther, we can only raise the bell jar so far; peek in at her sheepishly; slide our vague glance at her through a tiny crack. We can almost get a better view of her through the glass--a frustrating dilemma: to see her real self partially or to see her displayed self wholly. Holden is freed, released, while Esther is only teased with the possibility of a similar freedom. Consider the ending in both novels: ironically, Holden's freedom coincides with his checking himself into a mental institution, while Esther's almost-freedom coincides with her pending release from a mental institution. Furthermore, though it hardly seems possible, Esther's struggles throughout the novel are infected with even more vagary and ambivalence than Holden's. Consequently, there is a subtle and ambiguous fall into Esther's inwardly directed self, as opposed to Holden's more blunt realization of his own self at the end of *Catcher in the Rye*. Esther's shift into her inwardly directed self parallels her institutionalization, as does Holden's. Here, Holden's narrative ends abruptly, while Esther's takes on a whole new life, so to speak. In *The Bell Jar*, this drawn-out narrative shift--Esther's fall into her inwardly directed self--is a lonely one, without connection, and thus we do not get the sense that someone has saved her by the end of the novel.

There seems, sadly, to be too much of the "almost" with Esther. In fact, the closest Esther comes to a successful connection is with her woman psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan. Dr. Nolan tries to provide Esther with emotional liberation through psychiatric treatment, just as she tries to give her sexual liberation through the recommendation of birth control. Esther describes her visit to the gynecologist:

I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: "I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because what they did, they would do anyway, regardless. . . ." (182)

This freedom, however, only results in more pain, in an uncontrollable flow of blood, in yet another visit to yet another hospital, in more doctors trying to sew her up, in a clinical, cold, and lonely reward. Whenever Esther tries to be who she wants to be, the world around her still imprisons and chants: neurosis is unacceptable; institutionalization is weakness; women must be virgins until they marry. It is as if there were bell jar on top of bell jar on top

of bell jar. Society is a large, unrelenting hand ready to slam the casing back down every time Esther tries to lift it. It is fitting that Esther literally encounters glass everywhere she goes.

Furthermore, just as we do not know whether Esther is saved, or reborn, we do not know whether her failed attempts at human connection are a result of society's standards or of Esther's own desires. For example, when Esther recalls Buddy's diagnosis that Esther is neurotic for wanting to live both in the country and in the city, she replies to him,

Well, you were right. I *am* neurotic. I could never settle down in either the country *or* the city. . . . If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days. (76)

True to her word, Esther does want mutually exclusive things throughout. She desires to be reborn, yet the images she describes of birth and reproduction are clinical and grotesque: twisted fetuses in jars and an anonymous woman in the midst of a painful and blood-soaked delivery. Esther describes with contempt the drug they give the woman so that she will not remember her pain in delivery:

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, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again. (53)

It is fitting that Esther identifies with this woman: Esther knows that rebirth is necessary, and death is necessary for rebirth, whether this death be one of memory or of pain. Yet, why desire to be reborn when it only entails reliving what has been forgotten or feeling what has been numbed; that is, reviving what has been killed in order to live again? Similarly, Esther wants to lose her virginity, yet she scoffs at Buddy's nakedness, at his "turkey neck and turkey gizzards" (55). She feels herself diseased and sick, then pure and innocent from countless baths--". . . I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water" (17)--and from the simultaneous coffin and womb of the breezeway where she swallows a bottle of pills.

Even in her connections to other people, Esther wants mutually exclusive things. This conflict of desires continues through to the novel's conclusion and reinforces Esther's ultimate inability to connect with another per-

son. For example, her indecision over whether to identify with Doreen or with Betsy at the beginning of the novel parallels Esther's feeling of ambivalence towards who she is as a woman. The difference between Doreen and Betsy is comparable to the difference between the sexy girl and the nice girl, respectively, that Esther sees in the movie:

Finally I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along and was now packing off to Europe on a single ticket. (34)

On one hand, Esther chases after Doreen, Doreen's independence, Doreen's complete disregard for the activities and functions that the fashion magazine maps out for her. On the other hand, Esther sees that Doreen loses in the long run for stepping out of the rigid social standard of what a woman should be. Esther muses, "I felt if I carried Doreen across the threshold into my room and helped her onto my bed I would never get rid of her again" (18). If she marries herself to who Doreen is, she cannot ever be what Betsy is--the pure and innocent, perfect picture of what society would have a woman be, the "Pollyanna Cowgirl" (5). After leaving Doreen in the hallway instead of taking her "across the threshold" of Esther's room, Esther says,

I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart. (19)

As if to prove this assertion to herself, Esther then takes a bath to purify herself and wash off all of the dirt she has collected from spending time with Doreen. Sure enough, however, Esther reneges on her decision by going out with Doreen again, by recollecting the layers of dirt she has just scrubbed off. This leaves Esther ambivalent between what she should and should not be: ". . . I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should anymore. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this make me even sadder and more tired" (24-25).

Likewise, Esther's relationship with her mother and father exemplifies her internal conflicts between living and dying, confronting and ignoring, health and illness. Esther's mother's idea of resolution is forgetting and ignoring. "'We'll take up where we left off, Esther,' [her mother] had said, with her sweet, martyr's smile. 'We'll act as if all this were a bad dream'" (193). Of this Esther thinks, "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped

as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (193). Ironically, this insistence on the part of the mother to cure by overlooking is combined with her overbearing physical presence and importance of holding the family together. Esther's father, however, is dead, markedly absent from Esther's physical life, yet emotionally haunting because of this absence. Thus, Esther's mother consumes her physically and ignores her emotionally, while Esther's father consumes her emotionally and ignores her physically. It is difficult to tell which parent Esther finds more contemptible.

Thus, the ambiguity surrounding the possibility of Esther's redemption stems from repeatedly failed human connections. Though she tries to connect just as much as Holden does, Esther never really has a Phoebe. When Holden turns inward at the end of his narrative, it is a safe, positive move because he is united with the rest of the world in the shared modern condition of the inevitability of fall. This connection is pointedly absent from Esther's shift inward. The only fall seems to be Esther's. Society screams: you are sick, neurotic; you need to be fixed; you are not like the rest of us. Thus, her institutionalization is only a continuation of a lonely and personal descent into madness. This is why Esther's recovery is less hopeful than Holden's at the novels' conclusion: while Holden resigns his desire to be the catcher in the rye, Esther cannot seem to entirely break free from the bell jar prison. She carries it with her, or rather, it follows her, like the ghost of her past, as an eerie premonition and reminder of Plath's own suicide ten years after the biographical events in her novel. Thus, we are not at all calmed by the conclusion, or lack thereof. We are just as confused as Esther is on the question of her rebirth. In fact, the most conclusive image that Plath offers of her salvation from the imprisonment of the bell jar also leaves us doubtful of resolution. Esther explains at a crucial moment towards the end of the novel, "The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head" (176). We want confirmation of her salvation and rebirth, and so, too, does Esther: "There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice--patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (199). Somewhere in this statement whispers a resignation that there is no such ritual. In actuality, we never even hear the doctors' verdict concerning Esther's sanity at the end of the novel, and Esther does not tell us what it is.

Thus, while we can sort out the ambiguity and tensions in Holden's struggle, we can only describe these things in Esther's. There is no reconciliation of polarities for Esther, and therefore, her tenacious possession of mutually exclusive facets of her life remains intact. She is freed into another kind of imprisonment, just as she is reborn into a slow death process. Unlike Holden, Esther does not procure connection to others in this process. With Esther, it is only *her* process, lonely and clinical; with Holden, it is a shared, universal, and human process. The danger of delving inward without human connection is apparent in this contrast between Esther and Holden. Salva-

tion comes with reconciliation, with *meeting*. It is a complicated web involving the inwardly and outwardly directed selves and human connection in the midst of both. Holden's salvation is achieved through this connection; Esther's salvation will depend upon the glass that stands between her and the rest of the world.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Carol and Richard Ohmann's review, "Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye*," for another possibility of reconciliation between social and personal desires. Through the nostalgia created from art, from writing, and from remembering, reality seems less oppressive. Specifically, they say, "Art forms the needed bridge between the desirable and the actual, provides the mediation by which social experience, rendered through much of the story as oppressive, can be embraced" (34): *Critical Inquiry: A Voice for Reasoned Inquiry into Significant Creations of the Human Spirit* vol. 3 (1976): 15.

<sup>2</sup>Some critics believe this conclusion to be more resolute and more optimistic in terms of Esther's recovery. Susan Coyal, for instance, describes the final scene in terms of a birth scene, and is thus confident in Esther's recovery: see "Images of Madness and Retrieval: An Exploration of Metaphor in *The Bell Jar*," *Studies in American Fiction* 12.2 (1984): 161. However, considering Plath's suicide ten years after the events in her book and her novel's largely autobiographical nature, I believe the question of Esther's recovery is a bit more complicated and difficult to ascertain.

### Works Cited

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