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A Note on *The Bell Jar* (1963)

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Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, which first appeared in print fifty years ago, is a thinly veiled depiction of a particular time in the author's life, the summer of 1953. The protagonist and stand-in for Plath, Esther Greenwood, comes of age on the cusp of societal changes in the role of women in the US. Naming plays a central role in the development of Esther, a more pivotal one than has previously been recognized. Throughout the novel, Esther's journey toward mental breakdown and inability to find her true identity is paralleled by a failed struggle to accurately name herself.

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Fifty years ago, in 1963, Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* was published in the United Kingdom. This anniversary seems to have revived an interest in the writer, who committed suicide a month after the novel appeared in print. In January 2013, a biography of Plath was published by Andrew Wilson, who portrays Plath as an author who took little pains to disguise autobiographical facts in her writing. She was a recorder of her life. She kept detailed journals and corresponded with her mother in almost daily letters (cf. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000); *Letters Home* (1988)). Speaking specifically of *The Bell Jar*, Wilson characterizes it as an autobiographical novel and as "the culmination of [Plath's] compulsion for chronicalization" (38).

The Bell Jar is indeed a thinly veiled look back at a moment of crisis for Plath in the summer of 1953; it keeps the facts true to life, barely changing names. Plath's mother, Aurelia Plath, and Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, campaigned against publication of the US edition, which eventually came out in 1971, claiming that the identities of persons living and dead would be too obvious (and hurtful) all around.

The book did cause pain, and one lawsuit. A former college friend of Sylvia's sued the Plath estate for libel after the 1979 film version of the novel was released. Jane Anderson had already been stung by her own appearance in the book as "Joan." Real Jane and fictional Joan both spent time hospitalized for mental illness, and Plath has fictional Joan take her own life. In fact, Plath herself was cognizant of the gossamer nature of her fiction and published the novel under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. Anne Stevenson, another biographer of Plath from the 1980s, noted the added

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distancing of this penname, one which derived from elements of another person's life: "Victoria" came from the name of a favorite cousin of Ted Hughes and "Lucas" was the name of one of Ted's friends. Since Plath died a mere month after the book's publication, she had no say in the name used in future editions. A 1967 UK edition gave authorship back to "Sylvia Plath."

While *The Bell Jar* has been read and studied as a text in classes as wide-ranging as psychology, women's studies, and American studies, the book has not yet been examined from the viewpoint of onomastics. Naming, in fact, plays a central role in the development of the novel's protagonist, a more pivotal role than has previously been recognized.

Sylvia's alter ego is Esther Greenwood. The reader does not actually discover her full, real name until page 29. We first encounter the protagonist — who is narrating the story — as she accepts a pick-up from a stranger; spontaneously it seems, she calls herself "Elly." "'My name is Elly Higginbottom [. . . .] I come from Chicago.' I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston" (11). Her mate Doreen, who accompanies Esther on this impromptu date with the stranger, adopts the "Elly" label with ease, calling the heroine Elly and continuing the charade. "She seemed to think Elly was who I really was by now," says the narrator somewhat later that same evening (14).

The next morning, asleep back at her room at the Amazon Hotel for women in midtown Manhattan (the real Barbizon Hotel), "Elly" is woken "[. . .] when I heard the knocking. I didn't pay any attention at first, because the person knocking kept saying 'Elly, Elly, Elly, let me in', and I didn't know any Elly" (19). Then she hears another knock, another voice, and another name: "Miss Greenwood." "'Elly, Elly, Elly,' the first voice mumbled, while the other voice went on hissing 'Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood', as if I had a split personality or something" (20). Two different forces are pulling at the protagonist, but even combined — or because of the contrast — they both fail to reach her.

Miss Greenwood works at a fashion magazine in Manhattan as a summer intern (as did Plath in the summer of 1953). Her boss is identified as Jay Cee, most likely a spelling of the initials J.C. Here is another masked identity. "Doesn't your work interest you, Esther?" asks Jay Cee (29). And finally the reader can put a full name to the protagonist: Esther Greenwood.

As one point, Esther muses about her own future as an editor. She would call herself Ee Gee (mirroring the initials of her boss) with "a pack of [. . .] lovers with queer names" (73). Esther soon accepts a date with a United Nations simultaneous translator, who calls her up and identifies himself as "Constantin Something-or-Other," according to Esther (47). "I couldn't make out the name, but it was full of S's and K's" (47). This blasé approach to the man's full name makes sense, since Esther "collected men with interesting names. I already knew a Socrates [. . .] I knew a White Russian named Attila" (48). Constantin's last name must be something interesting as well, although Esther does not bother to process it. Why should anyone else have a real name to anchor him if Esther herself has not found her own yet? A simultaneous translator could be seen as an apt match for Esther, a perfect reflection of a woman toggling between labels and identities. Yet Esther, it turns out, cannot easily switch between codes.

It is useful to place the novel (both setting and publication date) in context. Both Esther and Plath existed on the verge of major changes in women's roles in society. Both had college educations and talents enough to land a competitive internship; and they both bristled at being locked into traditional female roles. Esther attends a prestigious eastern women's college; she wins a competitive internship; she is smart and talented. In spite of these achievements, inside she is deteriorating. Throughout the book, this disintegration, this failed struggle to find her identity, is paralleled by a failed struggle to name herself.

Soon after her magazine internship ends, Esther returns back home in Boston, and must be hospitalized for depression. As with the boyfriends in her life, the (male) doctors she encounters also seem to have "queer names": "I'm Doctor Soandso" (172) they all seem to say in their introductions. "One of them had a queer name that sounded like Doctor Syphilis, so I began to look out for suspicious, fake names, and sure enough, a dark-haired fellow [. . .] came up and said, 'I'm Doctor Pancreas'" (172). Esther meets a new doctor in his office and notices "Doctor Gordon's name in Latin" on his medical license (112). Why should she know who she, herself, is if others have masks and aliases and coded names, even medical experts?

By flirting with names and identities for so long, Esther cannot now rely on any stable sense of self, when it is most needed. Nor can she allow others to do so. She overhears her roommate at the hospital being addressed as a "Mrs. . .' [. . .] the name sounded long and full of l's, like Mrs Tomolillo" (171). It is also a "Mrs Tomolillo" — or so Esther also hears — who gives birth as Esther watches alongside Buddy at the Yale Medical Center (62). A nurse at the hospital snidely calls Esther "Lady Jane" one day, and Esther cannot detect the insult. "I found it strange that the nurse should call me Lady Jane when she knew what my name was perfectly well" (200). But who does know Esther's real name? She has been in flux the entire book.

When Esther is first admitted to the hospital, she notices that a "nurse was writing something over and over on little pieces of adhesive tape. I leaned across the gate of the door to see what she was writing, and it was E. Greenwood, E. Greenwood, E. Greenwood, E. Greenwood " (180–181). If Esther will not (or cannot) settle on a name, the labeling system for clothing and other possessions will, forcing her to go back to her birth name, over which she had no control.

Esther undergoes a series of electric shock treatments twice. The first time, "something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world" (138), as if in punishment for something terrible Esther had done. The second time, which winds up being shortly her before release, Esther has another round of electric shock treatment, supervised by the more compassionate Doctor Nolan (her first female doctor), who ensures the dosage and procedure are correct this time. She is woken by Doctor Nolan calling her, the real her: "'Esther, Esther, Esther.' All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace" (206).

After these series of hospital stays, an old identity makes a reappearance. Esther meets a soldier on the Boston Common and is asked, "Hi there, what's your name?" (126). She introduces herself as Elly Higginbottom:

> I thought that if I ever did get to Chicago, I might change my name to Elly Higginbottom for good. Then nobody would know I had thrown up a scholarship at a big eastern women's college and mucked up a month in New York and refused a perfectly solid

> medical student for a husband who would one day be a member of the A.M.A. and earn pots of money. In Chicago, people would take me for what I was. I would be simple Elly Higginbottom, the orphan. (127)

No family, no family name, no failures. And she would prefer the blank slate to being told who she was. She needs to be the decider of her own name, not some man: "How would you like to be Mrs Buddy Willard?" asks a boyfriend. "I had an awful impulse to laugh" (88).

Sylvia/Esther is later turned into "Elaine." Esther dreams of writing a novel. "My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. Elaine. I counted the letters on my fingers. There were six letters in Esther, too. It seemed a lucky thing" (116). And six letters in "Sylvia."

In his recent biography of Plath, Wilson points out the disguised names from Plath's life in *The Bell Jar*. "Plath disguised her friends' names — Marcia is Jody, Dick is Mark, and Mel is Cal — but little else" (216). One could easily construct a glossary of name-associations. "Buddy Willard" was Plath's boyfriend Dick Norton. "Jay Cee" was in real life *Mademoiselle* managing editor Cyrilly Abels. Fellow intern "Betsy" was Janet Rafferty. The stranger "Lenny Shepherd" who picks up Elly and Doreen was Art Ford. "Doreen" was Carol LeVarn. "Doctor Nolan" is Plath's psychoanalyst Ruth Beuscher. "Constantin" is Gary (Igor) Karmiloff, a Russian-speaking simultaneous translator for the UN. "Irwin" is Edwin Akutowicz. And so on.

But such a parlor game would get tedious without understanding the onomastic themes at work in the book. Esther is both drowning in, and starved of, names. And unlike Constantin, she lacks the skill to simultaneously translate.

Fittingly, doubles and twins run throughout Plath's writing. Plath's senior thesis at Smith College analyzed the imagery of doubles in the works of Dostoevsky. Plath also had her "twins," close friends at college. Jane Anderson, who later on sued for libel, was a classmate at Smith.

> Sylvia regarded Jane — or "Andy," as she was known at college — as her "double" [. . .] Sylvia would use Jane as a basis for the character of Joan Gilling in *The Bell Jar*; in fact, in the draft version of the novel Plath named her Jane. The book, which ends with Joan's suicide, had such a devastating effect on Jane that, much later, she sued both the Plath estate and the makers of the 1979 film for libel and invasion of her privacy. (Wilson, 2013: 122)

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's father's birthplace is described as "a manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia" (15). Another twin can be found in Olive Higgins Prouty, the author of *Stella Dallas* ("Stella," another six-letter name), who was Sylvia's benefactor at Smith. Prouty had also undergone shock treatment for depression as a young woman. Esther has a benefactor, too, in Philomena Guinea who, yes, was hospitalized and received shock treatment at one point.

Wilson quotes a teenage friend of Plath's as saying "'if we were ever in a situation where we didn't want people to know we were referring to ourselves, we would use biblical names — I would call myself Ruth, and Sylvia liked to use Esther,' the Jewish queen who saved her people from annihilation" (290). While not Jewish, Plath was from a German background and often used Holocaust imagery in her poems. *The Bell Jar* starts with mention of the impending execution of Julius and Ethel

Rosenberg . Here is an immediate allusion to Jews, electrocution, and betrayal of one's identity (here as Americans).

The clarity of the right name has been so missing for Esther that, when she does hear it, she lets it reach her and acts. Not sure where to go at one point, she wanders into the Boston main bus terminal.

> The loudspeaker crackled into life and started announcing the stops of a bus getting ready to leave in the parking lot outside. The voice on the loudspeaker went bockle bockle bockle, the way they do, so you can't understand a word, and then, in the middle of all the static, I heard a familiar name clear as A on the piano in the middle of all the tuning instruments of an orchestra. It was a stop two blocks from my house. (134)

Esther goes home.

Plath's final resting place is in Yorkshire, close to where her husband Ted Hughes grew up. For many, the name Sylvia Plath is more familiar as a symbol of repressed women than is her writing. Many see Hughes as having kept his wife's talents hidden so he could publish his own poetry and of driving Plath to her death by his philandering. Plath's tombstone continues her complicated relationship with names. The name Sylvia Plath Hughes is frequently defiled by visitors to the gravesite chiseling away at the "Hughes," attempting to liberate Sylvia and restore her true name.

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