“THE MAGIC MIRROR”
UNCANNY SUICIDES, FROM SYLVIA PLATH TO CHANTAL AKERMAN

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ABSTRACT

Artists such as Chantal Akerman and Sylvia Plath, both of whom came of age in mid-twentieth century America, have a tendency to show concern with doubles in their work—Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman*—and oftentimes situate their protagonists as doubles of themselves, carefully monitoring the distance they create between themselves and their double. This choice acts as a kind of self-constitution, by which I mean a self-fashioning that works through an imperfect mirroring of the text’s author presented as a double in a fictional work. Texts that employ self-constitution often show a concern with liminality, mirroring, consumption, animism, repressed trauma, suicide, and repetition.

It is the goal of this thesis to examine these motifs in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and the early work of Chantal Akerman, all of which coalesce to create coherent—but destabilizing—texts that propose a new queer subject position, and locate the death drive—the desire to return to the mother’s womb—as their source. I will examine the uncanny on various levels, zooming out from the micro-level elements of the text to its broader relationship to its environment: from rhetoric, to the physical landscapes of the texts, to characters of the text, to the structure of the text (as confined by its frame), and then, finally, outside the text itself, to the author’s relationship with her double. What I will argue here is that Akerman and Plath—in doubling on both the extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels of their work—propose a queer liminal space that siphons and ultimately expels repressed uncanny desire, allowing for both self-sustainability and personal integrity.
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CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION
Akerman’s and Plath’s Landscapes

8 CHAPTER ONE
The “Undeath” of the Author: Barthes and *Sante ma ville*

19 CHAPTER TWO
Her Other Self: *The Bell Jar* as a Feminist Revision of the Uncanny

22 Freud

25 Plath’s Thesis

33 Mirroring, Concealment, Animism

40 Repetition and Rebirth

47 Queer Sustenance

60 Sylvia, Esther, Frieda

62 CHAPTER THREE
Sugar and the Pen: Repetition and Repressed Trauma in Chantal Akerman’s Early Films

68 Performing Trauma

70 Repetition, Digestion, Words

81 CODA
Toward a Queer Center Space

85 WORKS CITED
Perhaps the remedy for suppressed talent
is to become queer:
queer and isolate,
yet somehow able to maintain one’s queerness
while feeding food & words to all the world’s others.

January 21, 1958
The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath
INTRODUCTION

Akerman’s and Plath’s Landscapes

An early draft of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* contains a marked-up passage ultimately excised from the novel:

I could never be a nurse. The idea of being noble service to the sick and the injured and the crippled and the malformed and the queer aborted monsters hidden deeply away in public or private brick buildings as [sic] always appealed to me, but when it comes to the test I turn my back. I want to kill them. They disgust me so profoundly I lose my humanity. I want to stamp them out, extinguish them under my feet like cockroaches or poisonous rats. They make me feel I am looking into a warped diabolical mirror that shows the reality behind the mask, and what I see is nothing but myself. (Fig. 1)

Its precision in mapping the anxieties of the novel is perhaps what led to its removal, but the passage provides a vivid description of the polarities that haunt Esther, the repressed demons that she longs to squash because of the horrific self-reflection they provoke. And Plath’s undergraduate thesis on two of Dostoyevsky’s protagonists—Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, of *The Double*, and Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov, of *The Brothers Karamazov*—contains a line that sheds light on a possible explanation for the passage. Before his suicide, Ivan’s final clash with his double, Pavel Fyodorovich Smerdyakov, results in ambivalence as he recognizes himself in his purest, truest form and is succeedingely disgusted by this portrait. Such recognition, Plath claims, results in the protagonist’s

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1 Please see Figure 1 for a facsimile of the original passage. What appears to be the word *deeply*, for example, is obscured by Plath’s edits.
“fresh insight into himself; this is the ultimate shock of recognition toward which he has been moving, in simultaneous repulsion and attraction, all along” (“The Magic Mirror” 43). While Plath’s concern with this concept is evident in nuanced forms throughout her novel, the excised passage explicitly lays out the anxiety of the double that permeates The Bell Jar, while also reflecting the gender anxieties driving the novel, mirroring what, exactly, is expected of Esther due to her position as a young, beautiful, scholastically-accomplished woman living in the 1950s. Much of the rhetoric points to a desire to destroy Esther’s sexual fertility: the “malformed aborted monsters” she does not wish to see, an indication of Esther’s revulsion at the expectation she become a mother, reflect her disgust at the possibility of becoming a nurse, a “noble service to the sick and the injured.”

Artists such as Plath, who came of age in mid-twentieth century America, have a tendency to show concern with doubles in their work—Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Maya Deren’s Meshes of the Afternoon, Cheryl Dunye’s The Watermelon Woman—and, while similar concerns and techniques haunt the work of earlier artists, these twentieth-century writers and filmmakers oftentimes situate their protagonists as doubles of themselves, carefully monitoring the distance they create between themselves and their double. This choice acts as a kind of self-constitution, by which I mean a self-fashioning that works through an imperfect mirroring of the text’s author presented as a double in a fictional work. Texts that employ self-constitution often show a concern with liminality, mirroring, consumption, repressed trauma, suicide, and repetition. It is the goal of this thesis to locate uncanny desire—by which I mean, the drive to return to the mother’s womb—as the source of these elements. What I will argue here is that, in creating iterations of uncanny doubles on both the extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels of their work, Akerman and Plath both propose and situate their doubles in a circuitous queer space that siphons and ultimately expels repressed uncanny desire, allowing for release, independence, creative prolificacy, self-actualization, and nourishment.
While Akerman and Plath were born a generation apart and in different countries—Akerman, in Belgium, and Plath, in the United States—their personal histories are thematically alike. Plath was born in the United States in 1932 and moved to England in 1955, when she was twenty-three (*Letters Home* viii-ix); on the other hand, Akerman moved to the United States when she was in her twenties, in 1971, but she was born in Belgium in 1950 (*The Telegraph*). Similarly, both Plath and Akerman have a history of familial trauma that was repressed by their mothers. Plath’s father, Otto Plath, fell ill in 1935, and between then and his death in 1940, Aurelia Plath, Sylvia’s mother, made a concerted effort to hide her husband’s illness from Sylvia and her brother Warren. Otto stayed in a first floor study, and Aurelia, in her words, made the upstairs playroom “the center of [the children’s] lives,” making up stories “to fill them with imagination and fun” (*Butscher* 11). Aurelia framed trauma as familial taboo; she constructed a fantasy world to protect the children from their dying father.

The history of Chantal Akerman’s mother was also inaccessible to the filmmaker. After fleeing to Belgium from Poland, Natalia Akerman—Chantal Akerman’s mother—was sent to Auschwitz, where her own parents died (Donadio and Buckley). As I will discuss later, several interviews demonstrate Chantal’s longing to protect her mother because of the trauma she experienced during the Holocaust. Furthermore, Akerman had bipolar disorder, and while Plath was not diagnosed during her lifetime, her *Journals* have been aligned with symptoms of the disorder.\(^2\) The work of both creators also shows a relentless concern with suicide.

There are, moreover, intertextual crossovers between Akerman’s and Plath’s work. The transnational mother-daughter correspondence of Plath and Akerman is well-documented: Aurelia Plath published a book of Sylvia’s letters titled *Letters Home* after Sylvia’s death, and Akerman, after adapting *Letters Home* for the screen, made a film called *News From Home*—the title is taken from one

\(^2\) See, for example, Edward Butcher’s *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness.*
of Plath’s letters to her mother in which she denies that a poem she wrote was about the home
Aurelia created—that documents correspondence her mother sent from Belgium (Letters Home).
While an attempt to separate out autobiography from fiction is not relevant to this analysis, I do
wish to examine the ways that Akerman, in particular, calls forth repressed familial memories in her
work, and the influence the index between author and protagonist has on the audience. Whereas
Plath consciously endeavors to remove herself as an author from Esther Greenwood for the reader,
Akerman, in many of her early films, claims a relation to her protagonists in choosing to play them.

Akerman was promoting her 2015 film No Home Movie when she committed suicide. The
documentary followed the final days of her mother’s life, and though the subject of the Holocaust
came up in the film, it was quickly evaded. Akerman had a complex relationship to her Jewish
heritage. While her mother spent time in Auschwitz, Akerman explained in many interviews that it
was never discussed (Foster 97). Akerman said,

When I look at my parents, I see that they are very well integrated here. They have strong
ties to Belgium. For them, coming here represented an extraordinary opportunity. They
don’t have this feeling of exile. In a way, they have made a break with their past. They have
found a place here. They have found something more easily than I have. I think that we
represent the generation in which the repressed comes back. That’s why we have problems.
Instead of asking questions about the past, they had to rebuild their lives. And because they
didn’t tell us about that past, because they didn’t pass it down to us, what they did pass down
was precisely this sense of uprootedness. (Foster 98)

Akerman explained that the passing down of familial history was disrupted because Holocaust
survivors wanted to “spare” their children: “People of my parents’ generation told themselves: we
are going to spare them the story of what happened to us. Because they did not transmit their histories, I searched for a false memory, a kind of imaginary, reconstructed memory rather than the truth, as if I had no access to the things that were true” (Foster 98). Akerman thus was forced to construct stories out of history that was available to her: “Instead of knowing my history by having it passed down directly from parents to child,” she said, “I had to go through literature and read, for instance, Isaac Bashevis Singer. But that wasn’t enough. His memories could never really be mine. So, from one kind of borrowing to another, I am constituted by imaginary memories” (Foster 98).

Like Akerman—who organizes these memories by constituting a persona in her fictional films, while, on the other hand, presenting a version of herself in her documentaries—several versions of Plath are available, but in textual form: the version in her Journals, the version she presents to her mother in Letters Home, and the self-constituted persona she constructs in The Bell Jar. Letters Home illustrates the persona Plath constructed for her mother; “Syyvie” is relentlessly cheerful, ambitious, and resilient, even in times of great stress for Plath, in contradistinction to the Sylvia of her Journals. Plath often wrote journal entries and letters to her mother on the same day, and her journal entries tend to be melancholic, whereas her letters are stubbornly optimistic.3

Alice Miller, in For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence, uses the Sylvia-Aurelia relationship to demonstrate the effect of a parent who communicates to the child the necessity of constructing a false self: “The deep tragedy of Plath’s life...lies in the very fact that she could not have written any other kind of letters, because her mother needed reassurance, or because Sylvia at any rate believed that her mother would not have been able to live without this reassurance” (Miller 255). In a letter to Warren, Sylvia wrote:

3 See, for example, the Journal entry and letter home from February 25, 1956.
One thing I hope is that you will make your own breakfasts in the a.m. so mother won’t have to lift a finger. That is the main thing that seems to bother her. You know, as I do, and it is a frightening thing, that mother would actually kill herself for us. She is an abnormally altruistic person, and I have realized lately that we have to fight against her selflessness as we would fight against a deadly disease. (Letters Home, 112)

Yet, Sylvia routinely expressed her hatred of her mother in her Journals, going to great lengths to protect Aurelia from depictions that could challenge her mother’s image of herself.

This anxiety, for example, is expressed in a 1962 letter, in which Plath gave her mother an alternative explanation for a line in “Stars Over the Dordogne.” Plath said that the final line of the poem—“And drink the small night chill like news of home”—refers to the letters her mother writes her, explaining in to Aurelia, “The ‘News From Home’ is, of course, your letters, which I look forward to above all” (Letters Home 452). Tracy Brain, in The Other Sylvia Plath, claims that in the poem “Home is not a place for which the narrator in ‘Stars Over the Dordogne’ is nostalgic, but rather, something that she associates with a chill” (Brain 69). But Brain also notes that “Plath might have wished to counteract the possibility of her mother reading the poem in this way” by writing the letter to her (Brain 82). Sylvia also published The Bell Jar under a pseudonym—Victoria Lucas—in order to prevent her mother from recognizing herself in it, and critics have taken the stance that Plath would not have wanted the book to be published in her mother’s lifetime (Jordison).

Miller attributes Plath’s suicide to the false self Plath constructed and maintained for her mother, arguing that “We can learn from this example what suicide really is: the only possible way to express the true self—at the expense of life itself. Many parents are like Sylvia’s mother. They

4 News From Home is also the title of an Akerman film. The film, in its entirety, is composed of Akerman reading letters over a voiceover she receives from her mother after moving from Belgium to New York City.
desperately try to behave correctly toward their child, and in their child’s behavior they seek reassurance that they are good parents” (Miller 257). Echoing this sentiment, in The Bell Jar, Esther Greenwood’s mother unintentionally provides the means for Esther to carry out her suicide attempts: Esther tries to use the cord from her mother’s bathrobe to hang herself, and she finds the sleeping pills with which she attempts suicide in her mother’s cabinet (Wagner-Martin 39). I am not a psychologist, and the reasons for Plath’s and Akerman’s suicides are too complicated for any literature scholar to diagnose, but these biographical elements shed light on the persistent trauma that haunts Plath’s and Akerman’s work.

This thesis will take as its point of departure depictions of suicide and doubling in the work of Chantal Akerman and Sylvia Plath. Both women died by suicide, and it is a prominent theme in the pieces of both creators: The Bell Jar, Plath’s only novel, features a protagonist who attempts suicide, and Saute ma ville, Akerman’s first film, depicts the protagonist—played by Akerman—committing suicide. Moreover, the psychoanalytic composition of the personas Plath and Akerman create intersect and oppose each other in ways that illuminate their texts’ concerns with motherhood, familial history and trauma, and mental illness. While I began this project by resurrecting the biographical bodies of Akerman and Plath to invite the reader to consider alongside me how these bodies haunt their work, this thesis will not be largely informed by biographical analyses, instead using patterns of food consumption, repetition, the mother-daughter relationship, and self harm in fictional works that depict an authorial persona—Akerman’s Saute ma ville, La chambre, and Je tu il elle, and Plath’s The Bell Jar—to examine the acute expression of the desire to return home to the mother’s womb that structures these works etymologically, visually, acoustically, and, finally, psychoanalytically.
CHAPTER ONE
The “Undeath” of the Author: Barthes and *Saute ma ville*

Chantal Akerman’s 1968 *Saute ma ville* (*Blow up My Town*) ends with the film’s protagonist, played by eighteen-year-old Akerman, committing suicide by way of a gas stove. Her character lights a letter that hangs above her stove on fire, turns on the stove, places her head on top, and then waits for the explosion. Throughout the twelve-minute film, Akerman hums in the voiceover. After the final explosion, the screen goes black, suggesting the character’s death. But Akerman continues humming, and then she reads the credits over the voiceover. Her final line—“Direction, Chantal Akerman”—acknowledges her role as the film’s director, blurring the boundary between Akerman the director and Akerman the character, as well as the confines of the film itself.

In complicating these edges, the film presents a direct contrast to Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” which contends that as soon as “the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (142). The tension created by the destruction of Akerman’s character’s body in the film and the survival of Akerman’s voice as the director is both analogous and challenging to Barthes’ theory. In this chapter I will examine the beginning and end of *Saute ma ville* to argue that Akerman’s choice to appear in the film as both a character and director—through both body and voice—embody Barthes’ claims in order ultimately to belie them. In doing so, Akerman carves out a new author position that binds together the female-object and male-subject positions of cinema. This position situates itself within the multiple selves that, as Foucault argues in “What Is an Author?,” impose necessary limits on the work’s meaning. That Akerman exists in multiple forms as different subjects does not negate her role as the originator of the film. Instead, it is the pervasiveness of these subjects, I suggest, that locate her authorship as the origin of meaning, rendering futile an attempt to extract author from work.
Akerman proposes a new androgynous cinematic position that espouses female subjectivity, linking her character to her role as the author of the film. In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman claims that film theory is preoccupied with psychoanalytic lack because of its relationship to male subjectivity; such preoccupation, she argues, “is really a preoccupation with male subjectivity, and with that in cinema which threatens constantly to undermine its stability. This obsession with the coherence of the male subject informs the debates on realism and suture as well as those on sexual difference and representation” (2). While Akerman emphasizes female subjectivity through placing copies of herself throughout the film—in body, voice, and text—these copies oppose Silverman’s point: they do not structure Akerman as a coherent entity. But, even so, we read the text through her authorship. Silverman points out that films are constructed in such a way that women are typically confined to the internal elements of the narrative—their bodies, for example, or a show within the film—whereas male subjectivity is bolstered by a position that frames the work, as in a disembodied voiceover or reference to the director himself (54). Akerman inhabits both positions: her character exists as an element of the inner narrative, but her narration as the author at the beginning and end of the film frames the work. These roles do not suggest that Akerman is one being, instead forcing us to read the work through her authorship and consider the multiple perspectives her different selves provide, as well as the layers of meaning that these subjectivities generate.

Barthes argues that the text must stand independent of its author. As he points out, “The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us” (143), instead asserting that “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” (142). For him, the author is this point of origin, and once the author is removed from the text, interpretation may begin; the reader thus exists to organize the work’s meaning; the author does not have an organizing function (148). This is because reading a text
through the author imposes unnecessary limits on meaning. Instead, Barthes proposes that removing the author opens up the work to an array of interpretations (147). Ultimately, for him, “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away…starting with the very identity of the body writing” (142). Akerman depicts this trajectory in her film: in blowing up her character, she destroys Barthes’ “identity of the body writing,” suggesting that writing has begun; however, the persistence of Akerman’s voice past the film’s end challenges his “destruction of every voice” (Barthes 142). The body that has made the work no longer exists, but the author’s voice does.

In *Saute ma ville* the hazy, floating position of Akerman’s voice reveals that her authorship is connected with this voice and language, as Akerman collapses her voice with her character’s voice; she obscures the distinction between the external and internal diegesis in blending the frame with Akerman’s character, even after her death. Before Akerman is visually depicted in the film, her voice hums behind a black screen. She continues humming in the voiceover until after we see her body for the first time, and this choice conflates Akerman’s voice (as the author) with Akerman’s body (as the character). Akerman stops humming when her character enters her apartment, but the structure of the beginning of the film is reflected at its end: after her character dies, Akerman again begins humming behind a black screen, blurring the boundaries of *Saute ma ville* in allowing the humming to seep from the framing of the film into the film itself; it is not clear where the film begins and ends, whether the title shot and credits are part of the film. While Akerman at times conflates the subjects of her film in merging the voiceover with her body, they also engage in dialogue with each other as if they are separate entities. In creating multiple selves through body, voice, and text, Akerman disperses herself as multiple subjects. But her voiceover at the end returns to Akerman’s role as the originator of the story.

We are implicated in the narrative before seeing Akerman, and thus embody Barthes’ claim that writing begins with the “birth of the reader” (148). “RECI” (story), which flashes on the
screen in big block letters, announces Akerman’s role as the narrator and director of the story. The sign also presages the self-referentiality that pervades the film: the door of her character’s apartment has a sign that says “C’est moi!” stuck to it, the character looks at herself in the mirror several times and scribbles indecipherable notes on it, and Akerman slips from character to director when her character looks at the camera, as if to check to see whether it is recording her. While Akerman’s voice loses its origin in the destruction of her character’s body—which provides a literal representation of Akerman, the author, in Barthes words, “[entering] into her own death”—her voice endures. However, this persistence also suggests that the author’s voice is the film’s origin, indicting Akerman’s role as the mediator that performs the narration to the audience. Barthes argues that historically, “the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose ‘performance’—the mastery of the narrative code—may possibly be admired but never his ‘genius’” (143). Akerman’s gestures toward her directorial narration—as in the “RECIT” sign—suggest that she is performing as an author, and that her authorship and the work are conflated.

In layering subjectivity on top of subjectivity—Akerman’s character’s subjectivity through bodily performance, and Akerman’s subjectivity in the voiceover and direction—Saute ma ville constructs an authoritative female subjectivity that revises cinematic conventions typically used to uphold the male-subject position. As Silverman notes, “It is…only through an endless series of trompes l’oeil that classic cinema’s male viewing subject sustains what is a fundamentally impossible identification with authoritative vision, speech, and hearing” (54). Trompes l’oeil (tricks of the eye) are used in Saute ma ville to create the illusory perception of a three-dimensional film, as Akerman constructs authoritative subjectivity in these expressions of female vision, speech, and hearing. In an interview, Akerman said, “The way I shoot, I always place the camera at my height” (Anderson). In Saute ma ville we view the film from a different vantage point—a female one—than to what we are
accustomed. Akerman’s voiceover as a director in the credits honors female speech, and the sound effects are emphasized in the film—the sound of the tape as Akerman’s character seals the door, the sound of the brush on Akerman’s character’s leg as she shines her shoes—to force the audience to inhabit the experience of Akerman’s character as she listens, constructing the hearing, speech, and vision in the film from a female-subject position and imposing this on the viewer. In these optical illusions, the film achieves authoritative speech that claims and subverts the female-object position of cinema, usurps the male-subject position, and proposes a new position that combines the male and female roles. Finally, while Akerman’s presence shapes the meaning of the text, it does not make interpretation vacuous, as Barthes argues. Instead her emphasis on female subjectivity does just the opposite: it forces the viewer to reconsider the vantage points from which they viewed films before hers. In simplifying the discovery of the author at the film’s end, Akerman inverts Barthes’ claim: we do not have to work to find the author, but we do have to work to decipher what the author’s presence means.

Authors such as Marcel Proust—who blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, and the author’s life and the author’s work—interrogate the implications of the author’s presence in a work. Barthes claims that though “the sway of the Author remains powerful…certain writers have long since attempted to loosen it” (143). As he argues, Proust “was visibly concerned with the task of inexorably blurring, by an extreme subtilization, the relation between the writer and his characters; by making of the narrator not he who has seen and felt nor even he who is writing, but he who is going to write.” Finally he claims that “By a radical reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as is so often maintained, he made of his very life a work for which his own book was the model” (144). But Proust’s decision to name the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* “Marcel” suggests, in contrast to Barthes’ notion, that Proust seeks to tighten the “sway of the Author,” not “loosen” it. Just as in *In Search of Lost Time*, Akerman’s body in *Saute ma ville* links her character in the film with
Akerman the director, and Akerman’s decision to allow her voice as the author to persist after her character’s death binds her authorship to the work. She performs Barthes’ notion of the death of the author in order to demonstrate that she—as an author—continues to haunt the film, even after her death. In existing both inside and outside of the text, and claiming the disparate Akermans dispersed throughout the film, *Saute ma ville* proposes a new androgynous position that binds the internal and external diegesis, claiming the importance of the author’s role in both organizing meaning, while also highlighting gender’s significance in this structure.

Proust is significant to this argument because he influenced Akerman. In her film *La captive* (2000) she adapted *La prisonnière*—the fifth volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, in which Proust first identifies his narrator as Marcel—for the screen (Proust 91). Both authors use self-constitution as I defined it earlier, as Proust creates a fictional double of himself in choosing to name his narrator after himself, and Akerman creates a double in acting in her films. In these choices they claim the character, and thereby a relation between their authorship and the fictional work’s meaning. Of the decision to star in *Je tu il elle*—Akerman’s first feature-length film—Akerman explained in an interview that “I started to direct an actress and soon I noticed that her perfection went against the project. I also thought [it] more appropriate…to oppose the mise-en-scène’s rigidity with my own uneasiness” (Margulies 112). Akerman’s choice to star in her films is as deliberate as Proust’s choice to name his narrator Marcel, and such manipulation of the index between author and protagonist influences the readerly perception of these characters, obscuring the position of protagonist as neither lucid subject nor lucid object.

Both Proust and Akerman delay their overt entry into the text to disturb the interpretation, forcing the reader to consider the role the author played all along. Proust provides Marcel’s name late into *In Search of Lost Time*, during the fifth volume, and Akerman appears as the director most explicitly at the very end of her film, when she reads the credits. In these cases, the author does not
recede from the text but claims that they were, in fact, organizing meaning from the moment of the reader’s interpretation. This delayed entry shapes the viewer’s understanding of the perspective from which the work is interpreted, illuminating and making salient narrative subjectivity.

One layer of this meaning is the position and influence of Akerman’s voice, which, in part, claims male subjectivity; it locates her as the author—as the textual origin—further asserting her relation to the text. As Silverman argues, “Hollywood’s soundtrack is engendered through a complex system of displacements which locate the male voice at the point of apparent textual origin, while establishing the diegetic containment of the female voice” (45). Thus, female interiority “implies linguistic constraint and physical confinement—confinement to the body, to claustral spaces, and to inner narratives” (45). While Akerman’s character inhabits this recessed space, Akerman makes it a point to situate herself as the author outside of the narrative. She does not show herself directing; she does not depict her body as the director. Instead, Akerman’s voice is disembodied. At moments her multiple selves conflate into one—as when her humming pervades the film—but at others they exist as separate subjects, as when Akerman hums after her character’s death. Her authorship penetrates the work on different levels and in various forms, making it impossible to excavate Akerman from the film.

While one could claim that Akerman’s decision to present herself in various forms is a way of dispersing herself—thereby demonstrating that the author is not one single originating feature and bolstering Barthes’ argument that the text’s meaning exists in its reception—it instead inhabits this convention to disprove it. Akerman ends the film with her voice to instead return to herself as the author and assert her role in unifying the text, and in so doing, she demonstrates the power of the author’s voice to continue controlling the narrative even after the author’s death. She exists in multiple forms in Saute ma ville to show the authoritative influence she has over the film’s meaning, returning to her voice at the end of the film to bind the film to the origin of the author.
Akerman’s multiple selves claim a queer subject position, an embodiment of, and challenge
to, Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author,” which was written in response to Barthes’ paper and
argues that a text must be read through the author. While Barthes and Foucault agree that the author
imposes limits on meaning, Foucault asserts that this limit is necessary: without the author—or the
author function—the array of interpretations becomes infinite and dangerous (222). Foucault lays
out four major characteristics of the author function: (1) it is related to legal proceedings due to the
notion that the author must take responsibility for what he writes, (2) it operates differently based on
its context, (3) it works through complex processes rather than an immediate association between
the author and the work, (4) and it does not point to one human but multiple selves (216). Akerman
most explicitly interacts with the fourth one.

The multiple selves that Akerman presents in her film—the writing self who refuses the
pronoun, the voice, and the body—interrogate Foucault’s fourth characteristic. Of this final feature,
Foucault notes that the author function “does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since
it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects—positions that can be occupied
by different classes of individuals” (216). Foucault argues that one must examine the “privileges of
the subject,” “not in order to reestablish the theme of an originating subject but to grasp the
subject’s points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies” (221). Thus, in
Foucault’s words, we should no longer ask questions such as “How can a free subject penetrate the
density of things and give it meaning?” or “How can it activate the rules of a language from within
and thus give rise to the designs that are properly its own?” Instead we need to ask “How, under
what conditions, and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse?”
and “What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it assume, and by
obeying what rules?” He finally concludes that this question of the subject “is a matter of depriving
the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and
complex function of discourse” (221). Akerman is the originator, but she is also a “complex function of discourse,” and while she claims her role as the film’s origin in ending *Saute ma ville* with the assertion of her directing credit, she also acknowledges that she simultaneously functions on varying levels of the film’s discursive meaning, even after the writing body’s death. Here, the body of Akerman’s character is conflated with Akerman’s writing body.

Foucault also acknowledges the role of pronouns in constructing an oeuvre, endowing the title of *Saute ma ville* with authorial import. His paper attempts to delineate the boundaries of both an oeuvre and an author’s individual works, and he argues that the author’s name and personal pronouns are signs that refer to the author: “the author function is not a pure and simple reconstruction made secondhand from a text given as inert material. The text always contains a certain number of signs referring to the author. These signs, well known to grammarians, are personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and verb conjugation” (215). Moreover, Foucault, like Barthes, acknowledges that the disappearance of the author creates meaning, but for Foucault this disappearance remains linked to the author. He notes that “In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears” (Foucault 206). Thus to find meaning “we must locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers” (Foucault 209). Foucault notes that the “relationship between writing and death” manifests in “the effacement of the writing subject’s individual characteristics. Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence” (206-207). Finally, Foucault asserts that “It would seem that the author’s name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the
name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being” (211).

Akerman’s film uses her name to complicate these boundaries. During the credits, in the final declaration of her various penetrating roles in the film, Akerman extends the androgyny of her position, refusing the first-person “I” pronoun and instead referring to herself in the third person. This reflects the title of the film, *Saute ma ville*, which is missing a pronoun: the conjugated *Saute* could come from the “I,” “he,” or “she” pronouns. The rejection of these pronouns allows Akerman to exist as both a subject and an object in the film. In removing herself, she both imposes limits on meaning and opens up the work to new significations, and this ambiguity is necessary to allow the multiple selves to interact in the work.

The title of the film syntactically represents the author’s disappearance, and in filling the pronoun gap new subjectivities arise, both limiting and unfolding meaning. “Chantal Akerman,” “je,” “il,” or “elle” could be used to fill in the blank that precedes the title (*saute ma ville*), and each one of these carries its own subjectivity: the title could mean “Chantal Akerman blows up my town,” “I blow up my town,” “He blows up my town,” or “She blows up my town.” The combination of these forces, particularly the pronoun refusal, supports the androgynous position that *Saute ma ville* proposes while also reinforcing the multiple selves Akerman presents in the film, a rhetorical and visual literalization of Akerman’s absent body after her character’s death. Akerman’s writing unfolds at the moment of her character’s death, but that does not mean that Akerman is absent from the text; she continues to haunt it after her body is destroyed. While she conflates character and author in her performance, the subject is never fully killed off. These foggy boundaries thus demand a consideration of the credits as an integral part of the work, inviting the reader to consider her authorship as relevant to interpretation. Akerman extends the boundaries of her film in situating its
frame as critical to the work’s meaning: her voice in the credits is the center of import, and this association between voice and name solidifies the relationship between authorship and voice.

By acting out and subverting the conventions of Barthes’ “Death of the Author,” Akerman’s *Saute ma ville* asserts female subjectivity. In her character’s decision to commit suicide, Akerman represents the destruction of the author’s body, but in continuing to hum after this death, she indicates that she—as the author—exists as an organizing principle. Moreover, in her self-conscious gestures toward narration, she performs as the mediator that Barthes denies, declaring its significance in the text’s meaning. Akerman’s film subverts Barthes conventions in order to inhabit both the male-subject position and the female-object position of cinema, creating a new androgynous position while also reflecting Akerman’s performance as a character: she is both the agent and victim of her suicide. In this androgyny, Akerman envisions a new mode of subjectivity, one that is layered and multidimensional and situates authorship at the root of meaning, both making import more precise and providing new vantage points from which to glean it. Thus, “the birth of the reader” does not have to come “at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 148). Instead, Akerman proposes, even after her death, she will haunt meaning like a ghost.
“Her Other Self”: The Bell Jar as a Feminist Revision of the Uncanny

The first line of Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar sets the stage for a novel haunted by foreboding liminality: “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York.” From its outset, the novel intertwines the queer—which, according to Plath’s Journals, has several different connotations, most of which gesture toward the in-between: freedom, the urge to write, privacy, non-procreative sexual desire, a yearning to embody duality and androgyny, forgotten dreams, and, finally, homosexuality— with death and persecution. Such intermediacy is emphasized by the sentence’s fogginess, an aura that pervades the entire story; it is unclear whether the narrator is telling fact or fiction. Presenting New York City—the hub of what is real and gritty and harsh—as if it exists within a cloudy dream and, at the same time, as if the narrator is waking up from an unrecalled nightmare, prefaces the polarities that struggle against each other for the entirety of both the novel and Plath’s writing life. The Bell Jar locates Esther’s suicide attempt precisely within these oppositions. As Plath’s rhetoric demonstrates, Esther’s mental polarity, which gives birth to a double that terrorizes and then possesses Esther over the course of the novel, is the source of her desire to die.

But from its first line The Bell Jar asserts the agency of its narrator through the “I” pronoun, complicating Esther’s position; that this ostensible subjectivity is contrasted against the Rosenbergs’ persecution renders her neither subject nor object. The line presents—through the uncanny double

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5 Please see pages 110 (freedom); 332, 338 & 402 (writing); 344, 356 & 358 (forgotten dreams and nightmares); 348 & 474 (privacy and isolation); 461 (promiscuity and duality); and 357 (homosexuality) of The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath. One quotation that uses queer twice and seems a good indication of Plath’s use of the word is as follows: “Woke out of a queer hectic unremembered dream at crack, literally, of dawn—almost night, still, but that queer clear new blue undersea light heralding the change—birds, rudimentary, chirp-churping in dark pines & the waned streetlights an ungodly luminous pale green color. Washed in the half-light, the east sky a lightening cold ice bluegreen” (364, my italics).
of the Rosenbergs—one of the novel’s driving conflicts: Esther’s attempt to flee from electroshock therapy, which Plath frames as a persecution tantamount to the Rosenbergs’. It is through this alignment that Plath heightens the stakes of Esther’s treatment and her succeeding anxiety that she will endure it again. The Rosenbergs mirror Esther on several levels, raising the stakes of Esther’s persecution anxiety. Like Esther’s electroshock therapy, which is performed twice before it is seemingly successful in killing off her repressed double, Ethel Rosenberg was electrocuted twice; like Esther, the Rosenbergs masked their true identities to collect American secrets; like Esther, the Rosenbergs together compose a double, and there is one male version and one female version. Indeed, Plath’s emphasis on seizures and electrocution is one of the many uncanny elements through which she expresses Esther’s mercurial mental landscape. Ultimately the novel embraces female duality, allowing Esther to occupy a queer space reflective of Esther’s contradictory desires: her lust for non-procreative sex, her fear of persecution, and her obsessive yearning for both purity and experience. Using Freud’s psychoanalytic concepts as literary devices, Plath situates her protagonist in a queer position characterized by duality, one that Esther envies in her understanding that it is reserved for men.

To be sure, liminality is proposed throughout *The Bell Jar* as an antidote to doubling—a solution to repressed desire—and this chapter will seek to demonstrate the inextricability of repetition and suicide, indicating how repetition serves as a precursor to the several horrific deaths Esther endures, all of which coalesce to construct Plath’s novel. Critical approaches to *The Bell Jar* often note the frequency of repetition in her work. As Karen Kukil, the editor of Plath’s *Unabridged Journals* notes in her lecture, “The Bell Jar at 50”: “any thrice repeated word or phrase is extremely important.” When I asked Kukil about what she thinks triple repetition could signify, she admitted she was not sure, except that it seemed to indicate a moment of multilayered meaning, and brought up Plath’s poem “Daddy” as an example (Smith College Archives). Similarly, studies often focus on
both Plath’s and Esther’s suicide attempts. For example, Kukil suggests in her lecture that Esther’s botched electroshock therapy seems to be Esther’s reason for suicide, pointing out that in her 1962 progress report for *The Bell Jar* Plath writes that the protagonist’s “shock treatment goes wrong: there is not enough voltage and she is conscious during it, feels as if she were being electrocuted, thinks shock treatments are supposed to be like that, and says nothing. She resolves to kill herself, rather than suffer another” (Smith College Archives). Kukil cites Plath’s outline to support this cause and effect: “shock treatment at private mental hospital / windows barred / vow to kill self” (Fig. 2). Though Esther’s suicide attempt is a point of fascination for many scholars, none that I have encountered link repetition to suicide.

Studies such as Kukil’s moreover examine the analogous nature of Esther’s electroshock therapy and the Rosenbergs’ execution. Kukil’s study even goes as far to compare the therapy to *Frankenstein*. Plath’s vivid description of Esther’s electroshock therapy, in Kukil’s words, “sends chills down most readers’ spines as if they are witnessing the birth of Frankenstein” (Smith College Archives). Kukil does not note, however, that the mythic threat the monstrous double poses to the creator—the creature’s threat to Frankenstein’s life in Mary Shelley’s novel—is also a driving anxiety of *The Bell Jar*, as Esther’s double drives her to attempt suicide. This parallelism, or doubling, manifests in several different characters, all of whose experiences reflect and distort Esther’s situation. But none of these scholars have connected the repetition, suicide, and doubling Plath depicts in her work, which, as I argue, all spring from the same source: a desire to occupy a liminal space. Psychoanalysis is rendered as a literary device to construct the novel aesthetically, structurally, and on the level of character.

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6 Please see, for example, Tracy Brain’s *The Other Sylvia Plath* and Linda Wagner-Martin’s *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*. 
Freud

The uncanny can be defined by precisely what is not familiar. In his 1919 paper, Freud defines it as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (“The Uncanny” 220). The term uncanny is derived from heimlich: “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly, etc.” Thus, whatever is not heimlich is uncanny (“The Uncanny” 222). The following words are associated with the uncanny in Freud’s essay: uneasy, eerie, bloodcurdling, ghostly, mist, and fog, all literalizations of the human’s disorientation within their environment. “The better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it,” he points out (“The Uncanny” 221). Moreover, for Freud, the duality of heimlich and unheimlich is essential to their significance: “heimlich is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight” (“The Uncanny” 224-225). Anything brought to the surface that is meant to stay hidden or repressed is uncanny, and these formerly concealed elements may exist in landscapes, humans, or fiction.

Freud cites the primal fear of death as birthing the uncanny effect of human doubling, a common symptom of the uncanny, lending credence to the Frankenstein analogy Kukil makes in her lecture: the “chills [that are sent] down most readers’ spines as if they are witnessing the birth of Frankenstein” (Smith College Archives). The uncanniness of doubling, a driving anxiety of Frankenstein, is most likely due to the lingering fear that, as Freud claims, “still implies the old belief that the dead man becomes the enemy of his survivor and seeks to carry him off to share his new life with him” (“The Uncanny” 242). Symptoms of the uncanny, Freud asserts, all stem from primal fears and desires: “We must content ourselves with selecting those themes of uncanniness which are
most prominent, and with seeing whether they too can be fairly traced back to infantile sources” (234). He notes that

These themes are all concerned with the phenomenon of the ‘double’, which appears in every shape and in every degree of development. Thus we have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike. This relation is accentuated by mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another—by what we should call telepathy—, so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with another. Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. (234)

Freud cites Otto Rank’s thought to identify symbols that gesture toward doubling: mirrors, shadows, guardian spirits, and “the belief in the soul and fear of death” (235).

Freud also illustrates the evolution of the double—from mythic to psychoanalytic—that Rank lays out in his analysis. As Freud writes, “For the ‘double’ was originally an insurance against destruction of the ego, an ‘energetic denial of the power of death’, as Rank says; and probably the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body” (235). Freud also notes, however, that these ideas “have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man. But when this stage has been surmounted, the ‘double’ reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, he becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (235, my italics). For Freud, symptoms of the uncanny include animism and castration-complex imagery, both of which spring from a repressed ambivalence about death. Through these images, *The Bell Jar* literalizes the doppelgänger legend: you meet your double, and then you die.
Thus, uncanny themes such as mirrors, shadows, and spirits have a distinct effect on humans because of their tendency to arouse a reminder of mortality, providing an outlet for the ambivalent relationship with death—a mingled fear and flirtation—that defines *The Bell Jar*. For Freud, the uncanny is “undoubtedly related to all that is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites dread in general” (220). It is in the element’s effect on the human that defines the uncanny, a sense rooted in the repressed awareness of death that *unheimlich* calls forth. As Freud notes, the uncanny “is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has been alienated from it only through the process of repression” (241). Thus, Freud argues, “Considering our unchanged attitude toward death, we might rather enquire what has become of the repression, which is the necessary condition of a primitive feeling recurring in the shape of something uncanny” (242), all of which may manifest in “animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man’s attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex” (243). Employing these symptoms as literary devices, Plath locates the repressed ambivalence toward death—the fear of it, but the desire to return to the womb—as the motor behind the seemingly disparate forces of her novel.

Freud explores these concepts more deeply in “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts,” an essay in which Plath was invested and whose motifs structure *The Bell Jar*. As Plath underlined, “We now know how to explain the supposed demonism of recently departed souls” (Smith College Archives). Freud argues that rituals become a way of fending off such demonism in the “savage who believes he can change the outer world by a mere thought of his”: “The primary obsessive actions of these neurotics are of an entirely magical character. If they are not charms, they are at all events counter-charms, designed to ward off the expectations of disaster with which the neurosis usually starts” (87). Although the neurotic might project the fear of evil outwards,
performing rituals to protect the self from this demonism, the neurotic is, in truth, afraid of himself. Freud suggests that “an obsessional neurotic may be weighed down by a sense of guilt that would be appropriate in a mass-murderer, while in fact, from his childhood onwards, he has behaved to his fellow-men as the most considerate and scrupulous member of society” (87). Even so, “his sense of guilt has a justification: it is founded on the intense and frequent death-wishes against his fellows which are unconsciously at work in him” (87). It is this fear that leads to the repetition prefacing the novel’s frequent episodes of death and rebirth. *The Bell Jar* is structured in a looping fashion, consisting of death-and-rebirth scenes, as Esther sheds repressed doubles like a snake sheds skin; in the period between death and rebirth, her soul leaves her body, and then she is reborn. But, even in the novel’s final scene of this nature, which ends on an ostensibly happy note after Esther’s first successful electroshock treatment (the final of the two, which allows her to regain her sanity in ostensibly killing off her double), Plath’s rhetoric suggests that Esther’s life will continue to be bedeviled by the double, that it has merely been repressed, that these episodes will continue as assuredly as the seasons change.

*Plath’s Thesis*

Plath constructs physical landscapes to provide insight into the inner mental state of her protagonist and suggest what is to come for her, lifting concepts from her undergraduate thesis, which maps both *The Bell Jar* and her interpretation of Freud’s “The Uncanny” and “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts.” While Plath does not cite Freud’s “The Uncanny” in her thesis, mentioning it only as an “Other Literary and Critical Source” at its end, she frequently refers to Otto Rank, whose work provides the basis of Freud’s essay. Plath’s copy of “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts” resides in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, her alma mater; it is one of the few essays in her copy of *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* that is

Plath notes that the double is often used as a device to reveal both the innermost parts of a character and the driving anxieties of the literary work housing that character. She writes that “The device of the Double, although an omen of doom, is instructive since it often reveals hitherto concealed character traits in a radical manner and thus frequently throws unreconciled inner conflicts into sharper relief” (“The Magic Mirror” 3). Here, the inherent polarity of the double illustrates the conflicts Plath expresses in her novel: the relationship between sanity and insanity, death and life, sex and procreation, citizen and criminal, and man and woman. Plath’s thesis examines several Freudian motifs to illuminate these conflicts in Dostoyevsky’s character Golyadkin, who—like Esther—has an ambivalent relationship with his double. In Plath’s words these motifs “include the repetition of mirror imagery, identification with animals, and a simultaneous fear of murder and desire for death” (7), all of which pervade and structure *The Bell Jar*, situating Esther within liminal spaces of each distinction: in her gender (male/female), in her sexuality (lust/disgust at and fear of motherhood), in her social position (citizen/criminal), in her mental state (sane/insane), and, perhaps most importantly, in her orientation to life (dead/alive).

In the introduction of her thesis, Plath writes that the double is a symptom of identity formation. One might argue, as she does, that the “appearance of the Double is an aspect of man’s eternal desire to solve the enigma of his own identity. By seeking to read the riddle of his soul in its myriad manifestations, man is brought face to face with his own mysterious mirror image, an image which he confronts with mingled curiosity and fear.” Such “simultaneous attraction and repulsion arises from the inherently ambivalent nature of the Double, which may embody not only good, creative characteristics but also evil, destructive ones” (“The Magic Mirror” 1). The double may take
many forms in literature: a shadow, a reflection, a portrait, a brother, a twin, a phantom, or a hallucination (“The Magic Mirror” 2). “More often,” she asserts, “the Double assumes the evil or repressed characteristics of its master and becomes an ape or shadow which presages destruction and death” (“The Magic Mirror” 3). Plath cites Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as well as Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to illustrate examples of literary works that employ such doubling. She relies on Otto Rank’s mythic explanations of the double, the insights upon which Freud’s “The Uncanny” is based.

At the start of the novel Esther is on the brink of psychic meltdown, and, as her double surfaces, beginning its process of possessing and colonizing her body, Plath moves from describing the uncanniness of the landscape to using these elements to describe Esther herself. Plath employs mirror imagery as Esther transforms into her double, finally indicating that Esther’s double is alive once she begins to hide in shadows, just as Golyadkin does, before his death wish overtakes him and he attempts suicide, also in congruence to Esther.

Plath’s thesis illuminates elements of the uncanny that work to reveal Esther’s inner conflict. Vapor and dust fog both Esther’s view of New York City and Golyadkin’s view of St. Petersburg, exhibiting the liminal mental state of the protagonists that inhabit these landscapes. Just as *The Bell Jar* opens with a description that questions its own veracity, Plath notes in her thesis that *The Double*, in the opening description of St. Petersburg, literalizes the polarities of Golyadkin’s psyche: “At the outset of this tale, Golyadkin’s ‘inner spiritual world’ is already in a state of conflict so severe that it will give birth to its own ‘spectral vision’ against the eerie Petersburg background” (“The Magic Mirror” 8). She asserts that the opening paragraph of the novel “deftly [plants]” “the seeds of Golyadkin’s mental split,” as “the growing distortions of reality which evolve from his acute pathological condition are prepared” (“The Magic Mirror” 8-9). As Plath observes in *The Double*, “Gradually the dirty, smoke-stained, dust-covered furnishings of his Petersburg room become
familiar, the day greets him with ‘hostile, sour grimace’” (“The Magic Mirror” 9). This foggy landscape illustrates Golyadkin’s in-between state, presaging his later mental breakdown.

Plath employs these devices in her own novel to a similar effect. As in The Double, vapor and dust obscures Esther’s view of New York City in the opening, echoing the mythical Sandman—the basis of “The Uncanny”—that threatens to blind children as they sleep: “the fake, country-wet freshness that somehow seeped in overnight evaporated like the tail end of a sweet dream” opens to a nightmare, and “Mirage-gray at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered,” as if Esther is hallucinating. But this beauty is detrimental. Though it may glitter like a dream, it impedes her sense of sight and taste; the “dry, cindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat” (1). Esther, like Golyadkin, is “greeted with ‘hostile, sour grimace,”’ as is the reader of Plath’s novel. Just as in The Double, this “spectral landscape” reflects the mental landscape of Plath’s protagonist, as both Esther and Golyadkin continue to confuse hallucination and reality, resulting in nearly identical symptoms and life-threatening repercussions later on. In Plath’s words,

Golyadkin’s incipient confusion between the dream and the reality, appearing first as a normal attribute of the waking state, becomes a pathological symptom causing him to be ridiculed at home, shunned by society, and fired from his job. It is this inability to distinguish between the ‘reality’ of his own hallucinations and the reality of the outside world which results in Golyadkin’s committal to a mental hospital. (“The Magic Mirror” 9-10)

The liminal space that The Double and The Bell Jar occupy—between life and death, reality and fantasy, sleep and wakefulness—reflects the inner conflict both Esther and Golyadkin endure, one that both leads to their respective psychic meltdowns and reflects the landscapes they inhabit.
The conflation of mental and physical landscapes is affirmed once more at the end of *The Bell Jar*. Late in the novel, as Esther’s repressed matter retreats back into her psyche, a snowstorm “blanketed the asylum grounds—not a Christmas sprinkle, but a man-high January deluge, the sort that snuffs out schools and offices and churches, and leaves, for a day or more, a pure, blank sheet in place of memo pads, date books and calendars” (236). It is this description that indicates Esther’s regained sanity, while at the same time suggesting that her double has merely been blanketed, or suppressed, rather than driven away: a “deluge” capable of “[snuffing] out” the inner workings of society in favor of purity. As a woman Esther must live a “single pure life,” unlike Buddy, who, as a man, is permitted duality, “a double life, one pure and one not” (81). The superficial and precarious serenity of a just-blanketed landscape warns of another breakdown—another psychic split that cracks open like the shell of a Russian nesting doll—after the novel closes. In Esther’s words, “But under the deceptively clean and level slate the topography was the same, and instead of San Francisco or Europe or Mars I would be learning the old landscape, brook and hill and tree” (237).

While she has learned to cover her inner double with niveous purity, the conflicts continue to fester underneath the glimmering surface. When the snow melts, the landscape underneath will grow back into verdant life, threatening Esther’s psyche. Finally, after recounting the disturbing events of her narrative, Esther says, “Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover them. But they were part of me. They were my landscape” (353). The snow here reveals the double’s repression in Esther’s psyche, and, at the same time, warns that it will return to haunt her.

Plath employs the uncanny motifs of Dostoyevsky’s that she discusses in her thesis to structure *The Bell Jar*: the protagonist’s desire for concealment, and her relationship to mirrors,

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7 It is clear that Plath simply lifts descriptions of Golyadkin and applies them to Esther. For example, Esther steps into an elevator and watches as “The doors folded shut like a noiseless accordion. Then my ears went funny, and I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face.” But then she recognizes herself: “It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used up I looked” (18).
animals, seizures, doubling, and suicide. “The Magic Mirror” maps the psychoanalytic landscape of these elements, as well as the anxieties driving *The Bell Jar*, namely the novel’s crux: Esther’s suicide attempt. Plath argues that both Smerdyakov, of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Golyadkin, of *The Double*, have “attempted to exclude some vital part of their personalities in hopes of recovering their integrity. This simple solution, however, is a false one, for the repressed characteristics return to haunt them in the form of their Doubles” (“The Magic Mirror” 57). After the inner double is revealed to its originator, the creator seeks to hide away before finally developing a death wish.

The mental polarity Plath uses to structure Esther manifests in Esther’s obsession with purity. Esther’s tendency to sterilize herself, which is evident also in the desire to conceal, is one that Plath lifts from Dostoyevsky, writing in her thesis that the “motif of self-effacement is repeated with growing intensity throughout *The Double*. Golyadkin’s desire for oblivion is expressed by this tendency to hide in shadows and in back hallways; it develops into a strong wish for death” (“The Magic Mirror” 11). Esther develops similar tendencies as *The Bell Jar* progresses, coinciding with the arrival of her double and her impending suicide attempt. Plath moreover argues that this desire for obscurity is the force behind Golyadkin’s yearning for death: “This instinct to hide in the dark, whether it is the dark of a carriage, a back stair, or a woodpile, reiterates Golyadkin’s desire to be anonymous (therefore irresponsible and detached) and unseen (therefore nonexistent or dead)” (“The Magic Mirror” 25). Plath points out that the death wish “is a severe intensification of his desire to hide in the dark and originates from an acute sense of persecution” (“The Magic Mirror” 14). Esther’s analogous fear of persecution most clearly manifests in her ruminations about

This appears to be lifted straight from Dostoyevsky: Just as “Smerdyakov is ‘wrinkled, yellow, and strangely emasculate,’” (“The Magic Mirror” 35), Esther complains that “The city had faded my tan…I looked yellow as a Chinaman” (149). Plath writes in her thesis that this appearance is meant to reflect the protagonist’s mental state and status in society: “Ivan’s brilliance makes him highly acceptable in society, while Smerdyakov is ‘remarkably unsociable and taciturn.’” Like Esther and her subterranean double, Plath argues that “In physical appearance, there is no outward resemblance between Ivan and Smerdyakov” (35).
electroshock therapy, electricity imagery—as when Plath feels the “electric filaments” of a comb as she brushes her hair over her face to hide herself from Buddy—and the Rosenbergs’ execution (70). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther and her double exist inside her, lying in stark contrast to Dostoyevsky’s *The Double*, in which the protagonist and the double remain in their separate bodies.

Just as Plath writes that *The Brothers Karamazov*’s “Ivan is attractive to the ladies,” whereas Smerdyakov is “wrinkled, yellow, and strangely emasculate,” in the opening chapter of *The Bell Jar*, Plath suggests Esther’s outward beauty is merely a front, a portent of her later ugliness (“The Magic Mirror” 35). As Esther recounts,

And when my picture came out in the magazine the twelve of us were working on—drinking martinis in a skimpy, imitation silver-lamé bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle, on some Starlight Roof, in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the occasion—everybody would think I must be havin’ a real whirl. (2)

Just like Esther’s “skimpy, imitation silver-lamé bodice,” Plath suggests from the outset that Esther’s outward beauty is inadequate in confining and suppressing her double. The men are merely anonymous props, a façade of refinement. Once more, these significations are all staples of American glamour: the men that Plath describes as if they are extras on a movie set have “all-American bone structures,” her imagery coalescing to construct a beautiful but fragile mask of sophistication.

Moreover, the martinis of this scene promote Esther’s idealized vision, as throughout the novel, alcohol indicates the misleading purity of Esther’s expectations; based on the appearances of these beverages, she expects to imbibe glamour and beauty, but once she experiences it herself she
ends up disenchanted and disgusted. This image extends later in the novel, when, after Esther is prompted to order at a bar, she ruminates: “I’d seen a vodka ad once, just a glass full of vodka standing in the middle of a snowdrift in a blue light, and the vodka looked clear and pure as water, so I thought having vodka plain must be all right. My dream was someday ordering a drink and finding out it tasted wonderful” (10). Purity is consistently rendered a fragile surface for the depravity that lies below; alcohol, which Plath relates to snow—like the snow at Esther’s sanatorium—is merely a delicate covering for what lies beneath. Moreover, the vodka ad functions in the same way as her internship at Mademoiselle: “I was supposed to be having the time of my life,” Esther explains in the first chapter, just before recounting the conditions in which the Mademoiselle photograph was taken, “I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America” (2). Like all elements of beauty in The Bell Jar, Esther’s attractiveness is a glossy surface used to conceal the decadence below. The suggestion that this passage creates—that this surface will fall away—is emphasized in the statement that “everybody would think I must be having a real whirl.” The reader does not yet know what Esther is experiencing, but it is clear that she is not having a whirl. In Esther, Plath has bound Ivan and Smerdyakov together, demonstrating that both her basest and most beautiful self exist in one being, and in keeping Esther’s double within her body, Plath pushes the limits of Dostoyevsky’s art.

The level of distance between these doubles sends out strong signals about the implications of gender in these kinds of works. In The Bell Jar, just as the Rosenbergs mirror Esther, Buddy Willard also mirrors Esther. She meets herself in Buddy, but she envies his position, in contrast to the Rosenbergs. Plath structures Buddy as Esther’s male double, and Esther’s vitriol stems from her observation that he, as a man, is allowed to live a double life without repercussion; he can have affairs and still become a respected doctor; he can lose his virginity and remain pure. As Esther asserts, “I couldn’t stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able
to have a double life, one pure and one not” (81). Because Buddy is not expected to suppress the desire for extramarital sex, it does not come back to haunt him, whereas Esther’s sanity at the end of the novel is framed as a social reward for successfully concealing such repression from others.

The Buddy-Willard double is presented in contradistinction to Esther’s anxiety about recognizing herself in the Rosenbergs, as she flees from seeing herself in the Rosenberg duo, explaining on the first page that “I’m stupid about executions. The idea of executions makes me sick, and that’s all there was to read about in the papers” (1). And then the clincher: “It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves” (1). Esther’s disgust at the Rosenbergs’ execution has everything to do with her. It follows her for good reason; the novel, which is told from the far-off future,9 chronicles Esther’s attempt to flee the Rosenbergs’ fate. Esther tries to escape from electroshock therapy, and when that endeavor is fruitless, she attempts suicide, finding agency in her persecution.

Esther’s obsession with the Rosenbergs reflects her internal tension, her sense that she is under persecution for her Rosenberg-esque duality, defamiliarizing—in depicting its horror and as though it is a form of punishment—Esther’s later electroshock therapy. Plath illustrates Esther’s ultimate fate as a sane woman who conceals her repressed desires to indicate that Esther cannot embody an androgynous position; she must be either pure or tainted. But that *The Bell Jar* survives and depicts a female character who lives a double life—albeit in madness—demonstrates the depth and androgyny of Esther’s character, placing her in a position usually reserved for men.

*Mirroring, Concealment, Animism*

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8 A few pages into the novel—when Esther explains that she uses the sunglasses she was given by Mademoiselle as a toy for her baby to play with—Plath subtly reveals that the novel is being recounted from the far-off future (5).
Though *The Bell Jar* is populated with uncanny themes, three of the most ubiquitous ones that indicate Esther’s mental state are mirroring, concealment, and animism. While these images pervade the novel, I have chosen to focus, for the most part, on one of its earliest scenes—both because of its brevity and because it lucidly demonstrates how the motifs coalesce to illustrate the novel’s driving anxiety of the double—when Esther’s double threatens to overtake her for the first time.

Plath uses mirror imagery to exhibit Esther’s state at each point of *The Bell Jar*. While clouding agents—fog and dust, for example—are omnipresent at the start of the novel, these motifs soon transform into reflecting agents: mirrors, glass windows, a shiny elevator door, and mercury. These elements merge to reveal the psychic split occurring at each point in the novel. This device is first employed in the second chapter of *The Bell Jar*, when Esther steps into an elevator and watches as “The doors folded shut like a noiseless accordion. Then my ears went funny, and I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face.” But then she recognizes herself: “It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used up I looked” (18). In mirroring, Plath warns of the double’s usurpation; Esther performs the trope of only being able to see a ghost when gazing at oneself in the mirror.

As the novel continues, mirror imagery both intensifies and twists into the surreal as Esther’s double threatens and bedevils before finally possessing her. On the next page, Esther goes to her mirror and sees a warped reflection: “The mirror over my bureau seemed slightly warped and much too silver. The face in it looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist’s mercury” (19). That this mirror is a proper one, in contrast to the funhouse nature of the elevator door, heightens its uncanny effect: one would expect to see a distorted self in an elevator door, but not in a perfect mirror.
The mercury to which Esther compares her mirror—a product of her imagination—materializes concretely at the end of the novel, after one of Esther’s doubles has overtaken her. In the sanatorium, a nurse removes a thermometer from Esther’s mouth. “You see, it’s normal,” the nurse demands. “You see, it’s normal, what do you keep taking it for?” (182). Through the sheet, which Esther pulls over her head to hide herself, she feels a “slight, annoying pressure” on her leg, as Esther recounts: “A heavy naughtiness pricked through my veins, irritating and attractive as the hurt of a loose tooth. I yawned and stirred, as if about to turn over, and edged my foot under the box” (162). Then, while the nurse’s back is turned, Esther decides to kick over the tray of thermometers the nurse places on her bed.

After poking her head out from under the sheet, Esther views her devious work with happiness, an indication that we are now hearing from the double’s perspective; the droplets of shimmering mercury signify Esther’s fragmented identity. As Esther explains, “Around the overturned enamel tray, a star of thermometer shards glittered, and balls of mercury trembled like celestial dew” (182-183). The nurse reprimands her, and Esther lies, apologizing and saying it was an accident. She happily scoops up a ball of mercury: “I opened my fingers a crack, like a child with a secret, and smiled at the silver globe cupped in my palm. If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself, and if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again. I smiled and smiled at the small silver ball” (183). The mercury signifies Esther’s extant fragmented identity, an indication that it is no longer a concealed secret. An iteration of this imagery prefaces the mercury, in the form of a mirror, just after Esther’s suicide attempt, when Esther views her bruised face in the mirror: “The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin” (175). She promptly drops it, cracking the mirror to pieces—again disturbing and prompting damnation from a nurse—an illustration of the mask her suicide attempt shattered.
At this moment—through the imagery of a broken mirror that can be fused back together to present a fragile, single, beautiful mask—it is clear that the double has broken through the surface. Esther’s mask is a deceitful one, literalized by her lie to the nurse. While the thermometer is meant to diagnose Esther’s health, which, as the nurse insists, is fine, the true gauge of her mental state is what Esther decides to do with the thermometer, furiously shattering it to pieces. The toxic, intractable mercury indicates that, for Esther, the make-believe has become reality; just as the mercury that reflects Esther in the beginning of the novel exists only in her imagination—it is merely a threat—the ugly double too, which initially only lived as a paranoid delusion in Esther’s head, materializes, finally possessing her.

While mirror imagery populates the novel, especially the beginning—Esther sees herself in everything from elevators to windows to mirrors—it slowly withdraws as Esther’s various doubles overtake her. Oftentimes these reflections coexist with imagery of concealment—as in Esther hiding herself under her sheet at the hospital—which is another device Plath lifted from Dostoyevsky to illustrate the threat of the double. Esther begins to succumb to her double, for example, when a photographer comes to Mademoiselle. Esther poses for a portrait, the photographer urging her: “Come on, give us a smile” (100). She tries “concealing herself in the powder room, but it didn’t work” because Betsy, a fellow intern, sees her feet underneath the doors (100). Earlier in the novel, Esther declares that “Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart” (22). Betsy is the straight, pure double whom Esther wants to be, but Esther is unable to remain hidden, and as her photograph is taken, she feels tears beginning to surface.

Once Esther’s repressed tears spill out, she is abandoned by both Jay Cee—her mentor at the magazine—and the photographer, an indication that the double has overtaken her; it is associated with antisocial behavior whereas the creator is just the opposite: attractive to others, both in physique and personality. The adults who pursue the original Esther as a lemming or daughter
figure indicate Esther’s narcissistic lure: “Why did I attract these weird old women?” Esther wonders to herself. “There was the famous poet, and Philomena Guinea, and Jay Cee, and the Christian Scientist lady and lord knows who, and they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them” (220). So, when Esther cries and is abandoned, she tries to hide herself, “[fumbling] in my pocketbook for the gilt compact with the mascara and the mascara brush and the eyeshadow and the three lipsticks and the side mirror” that she received earlier in the story from Mademoiselle (102).

This social desirability, or lack thereof, is reflected in Esther’s physique. When she finally sees herself in the mirror, Esther recounts: “the face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell after a prolonged beating. It looked bruised and puffy and all the wrong colors.” This penal association demonstrates Esther’s obsessive fear of abandonment-cum-persecution as the double comes to the surface, just as her tears do. After Esther pulls out her makeup, she states its intention, to purify and conceal the ugly self that staring back at her. “It was a face that needed soap and water and Christian tolerance,” she explains (101).

This increasing desire for concealment literalizes the double’s rise to power. Esther explains that, in her tearful meltdown, she “had been unmasked…and I felt now that all the uncomfortable suspicions I had about myself were coming true, and I couldn’t hide the truth much longer” (29). Esther’s instinct proves valid, as the double overtakes her before provoking the death wish, which manifests in fantasies Esther has of suicide: hanging herself by the cord of her mother’s bathrobe, drowning herself, taking her mother’s sleeping pills. The connection between a desire for anonymity and death is tightened when Esther finally attempts to kill herself hidden away from the world, underneath a cellar in her mother’s home. That Esther’s suicidal ideations are inherently linked to her mother is no coincidence, as the driving force behind the uncanny is the desire to return to the safety and stillness of the mother’s womb.
The mingled imagery of reflection and concealment in this scene, a pattern constructing the novel, suggests their resemblance: just like *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, life and death, and man and woman, they depend on each other for definition; they are two sides of the same coin. Esther is reflected in both Betsy and the photograph for which she poses, revealing to her what she is not, but wants to be. Once she recognizes the truth, she attempts to conceal it. Plath uses the verb “concealing” to refer to Esther’s desire for privacy, gesturing forward to the makeup Esther uses to cover her face following her meltdown in front of the photographer. This reflects her impulse to hide in the powder room—named for its purpose to allow women privacy as they conceal themselves—before the tears surface.

Rhetoric of concealment begins to overtake rhetoric of mirroring as the double ceases to be an imaginary threat and instead commences its possession of Esther’s body, and this concealment/purity anxiety is distinctly gendered and points to a desire for death. When Marco—a tall man with dark hair, a radiant stickpin keeping his tie in place, and a flickering smile that reminds Esther of a snake she saw at the zoo that opened its jaws, as if to smile, before it “struck and struck and struck” at her (106)—tries to rape her, Esther describes that “he threw himself face down as if he would grind his body through me and into the mud” (109). After Esther is assaulted, she “[keeps] to the fringe of the shadows so nobody would notice the grass plastered to my dress and shoes, and with my black stole I covered my shoulders and bare breasts” (110). The instinct to hide in the dark and cover herself with clothing is coupled with rhetoric of an underground burial, illustrating the inextricable nature of concealment and death.

These images—of being driven into the ground, death, and a yearning for concealment—are echoed again after Esther loses her sanity, as the double once again overtakes her. Esther describes wanting to hide under her mother’s mattress:
I feigned sleep until my mother left for school, but even my eyelids didn’t shut out the light. They hung the raw, red screen of their tiny vessels in front of me like a wound. I crawled between the mattress and the padded bedstead and let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone. It felt dark and safe under there, but the mattress was not heavy enough. It needed about a ton more weight to make me sleep. (123)

Here, Esther embodies Golyadkin’s mental state: her “instinct to hide in the dark echoes her desire to be anonymous (therefore irresponsible and detached) and unseen (therefore nonexistent or dead)” (“The Magic Mirror 25). The wound Esther is helpless to neglect chimes with the inescapable, colonizing double. Plath’s mirror imagery during the initial stages of the double’s birth suggests that it is imaginary and only reflected back at her from external sources, as in mirrors and windows. But Plath’s mordant rhetoric demonstrates its penal nature: it is inside Esther, but it traps her like a jail cell, resulting in the impulse to hide from her terrifying self. That Esther associates this desire with death, indicated in her fantasy of being pressed underneath a “dark” and “safe” tombstone mattress as if she is going into the ground, is not surprising, for the crux of Plath’s thesis is this longing for oblivion that soon turns into a yearning for death.

Esther’s meltdown in Jay Cee’s office also exhibits Plath’s use of primal and spiritual rhetoric to demonstrate the primitive nature of the double. After having her photograph taken, Plath depicts her meltdown as if an animal from deep inside her body overtakes her: she explains that “with immense relief the salt tears and miserable noises that had been prowling around in me all morning burst out into the room” (102, my italics). Such rhetoric is a symptom of the double’s birth, as it becomes more real than Esther. Upon looking up after her meltdown and realizing Jay Cee and the photographer have left, Esther explains, “I felt limp and betrayed, like the skin shed by a terrible animal. It was a relief to be free of the animal, but it seemed to have taken my spirit with it, and
everything else it could lay its paws on” (102). In Plath’s copy of Freud’s “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts,” the following statement is underlined: “Human beings have souls which can leave their habitation and enter into other beings; these souls are the bearers of spiritual activities and are, to a certain extent, independent of the ‘bodies’” (Smith College Archives). But this shell of a body is evil without a soul to fill it, as Plath frames Esther’s outburst as though her body becomes empty of a soul; an animal has taken her spirit, and now only the “skin shed by a terrible animal” remains. Just as Plath points out in The Double, identification with animals both signifies the intrusion of the double and presages the desire for death.9

Repetition and Rebirth

Plath uses repetition to preface the looping scenes of death and rebirth that construct The Bell Jar. As Freud writes, the repetition compulsion “[lends] to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character,” and thus, “whatever reminds us of this inner ‘compulsion to repeat’ is perceived as uncanny” (“The Uncanny” 238). Freud describes certain situations as having an “uncanny” and “helpless” effect on the human due to recurrence: “So, for instance, when, caught in a mist perhaps, one has lost one’s way in a mountain forest, every attempt to find the marked or familiar path may bring one back again and again to one and the same spot, which one can identify by some peculiar landmark” (“The Uncanny” 237). The Bell Jar is an iterative novel on all levels. It takes up Freud’s idea of uncanny repetition in its structure (looping scenes), as well as in its language (persistent epizeuxis), symbolism (doubles), and character traits (bipolar mental states).

In her thesis, Plath discusses how Dostoyevsky uses repetition to signify doom. In The Brothers Karamazov, such repetition takes the form of knocking, and in The Bell Jar, Plath pushes

9 In her thesis, Plath notes that in The Double Golyadkin “identifies with low forms of animal life and wishes for fear or death” (13).
Dostoyevsky’s device a step further: first there is knocking, and then a version of her character’s name—an indication that the character we are witnessing is not Esther, but a facsimile of her—is repeated three times, suggesting that repressed desires and memories, in the form of a double, have come knocking at the door, killing the creator who tries to keep this muddled and devious material at bay. Like cracking open layers of a Russian nesting doll, the novel retreats deeper into Esther’s psyche, following her as she becomes smaller and smaller until the core, still, empty drive for nothingness is all that remains.

Plath observes in her thesis that Alyosha’s knocking in *The Brothers Karamazov* resembles the scene Thomas De Quincey examines in “On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth”—Act 2 Scene III of Shakespeare’s play—which conveys to the reader the psychological doom of extant murder. In Plath’s words, as Ivan dreams of the Devil, “Alyosha’s repeated knocking on the window breaks the chains of Ivan’s nightmare, which is ‘the work of darkness.’” Plath observes that “This knocking gathers into it much the same power which the ringing of the bell has in *Crime and Punishment*; it ‘makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish.’” This auditory repetition—of bells, of knocks—demands acknowledgement of sin: “with this return of the normal world of human sympathies, both the knocking and the ringing become the note of doom, demanding confession and repentance” (“The Magic Mirror” 49-50). Knocking signifies the occurrence of a murder, and, as Plath discusses in her thesis, it pulls Ivan out of the liminal space of sleep to meet the devious reality of his dream.

In *The Bell Jar* Plath employs this knocking to convey the murder that occurs before Esther’s scenes of rebirth, while also pairing it with spiritual symbols that Freud discusses in “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts.” Freud explains that names are often part of the rituals used to fend off demonism because “In the view of primitive man, one of the most important parts

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10 Plath used a typewriter for her thesis, underlining names of novels.
of a person is his name. So that if one knows the name of a man or of a spirit, one has obtained a
certain amount of power over the owner of that name” (81). Plath combines repetitive knocking
with epizeuxis in order to depict the horror of these rebirth scenes. A variation of her character’s
name is repeated thrice to rhetorically mirror the action of the scene and depict a ritual used to try to
keep the double at bay.

This epizeuxis mimics that of Macbeth’s Act 2 Scene III. Macduff expresses “O horror, horror, horror!” before exclaiming that “Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord’s
anointed temple, and stole thence / The life o’ th’ building!” (“The Tragedy of Macbeth,” 2.3.55-58).
In these scenes that depict the departure of Esther’s soul, Plath first depicts knocking, then she
repeats a version of Esther’s name three times, just as “horror” is used to mimic the doom signified
by the knocking in Macbeth. In Macbeth “The Lord’s anointed temple” acts as Esther’s body in these
scenes: “murder” has broken in and “stole thence / The life o’ th’ building!” just as the demon has
broken into Esther’s body, absconding with her soul.

Though both Shakespeare and Plath depict knocking and then epizeuxis to indicate spiritual
departure, Plath revises Shakespeare’s work in using variations of Esther’s name. Names, in Freud’s
paper, are often repeated to ward off evil:

One of the most widespread magical procedures for injuring an enemy is by making an
effigy of him from any convenient material. Whether the effigy resembles him is of little
account: any object can be ‘made into’ an effigy of him. Whatever is then done to the effigy,
the same thing happens to the detested original; whatever part of the former's body is
damaged, the same part of the latter's becomes diseased. The same magical technique may be
employed, not only for purposes of private enmity, but also for pious ends and for giving
help to gods against malignant demons. (“Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts” 79)

That Plath employs variations of Esther’s name instead of her true one suggests that while Esther’s double exists within her, they are, in fact, separate entities; the repetition of her name seeks to ward off evil, but in the novel it only comes to signal that demonism is dawning. Plath’s awareness of the ringing bell’s prophecy manifests late in the novel. After the blizzard that represents Esther’s regained sanity overtakes the sanatorium, she acknowledges that while she might show up back at school hidden “under the deceptively clean and level slate,” her therapist informs her that “a lot of people would treat me gingerly, or even avoid me, like a leper with a warning bell” (237). This bell signifies the doom that is to come, that another rebirth will occur, and the looping will only continue.

Mirroring, purity, and concealment populate these scenes of death and rebirth. In the novel’s first chapter, Esther creates a fantasy double named Elly Higgenbottom. After she introduces herself as Elly, she explains, “After that I felt safer. 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). Here, Plath provides a rhetorical illustration of Esther’s desire to both create a double and separate herself from this iteration. Suddenly, after she becomes Elly, Esther begins to “think my vodka was my drink at last,” because, unlike earlier, when she is disgusted by the taste, “It didn’t taste like anything, but it went straight down into my stomach like a sword swallower’s sword and made me feel powerful and godlike” (12). Esther’s inebriation is an allegory for the extant psychic happenings; her double is no longer repressed but materializes like a ghost. In the next scene, through alcohol, Plath emphasizes the murder that occurred in the scene before: Esther describes her drink as “depressing,” and explains, “Each time I took another sip it tasted more and mere like dead water” (16). In giving her
double a second name and demonstrating that alcohol is no longer the poison she tasted earlier, but a talisman of sorts—in its purity and ability to endow its consumer with divine qualities—Plath demonstrates that Esther’s psyche has begun to split, that these repressed desires are possessing Esther’s body.

Esther walks back to the Barbizon, and Plath constructs the scene as if Esther enters hell, signifying the demon from whom we now hear. Once she reaches the hotel, she notes that “there isn’t a soul in the hall,” an affirmation that Esther is devoid of a soul, letting herself into her smoke-filled room. “At first,” Esther explains, lacing her description with infernal allusions, “I thought the smoke had materialized out of thin air as a sort of judgment, but then I remembered it was Doreen’s smoke” (18). She sees the “china-white bedside telephone,” which, she observes, “could have connected me up with things, but there it sat, dumb as a death’s head” (19). Then she observes her face in the mirror. She feels dirty and tries to hide herself: “I thought of crawling in between the bed sheets and trying to sleep, but that appealed to me about as much as stuffing a dirty, scrawled-over letter into a fresh, clean envelope,” deciding to take a bath (19). Then, Esther is reborn. Like a baptism, Esther feels herself “growing pure again. I don’t believe in baptism or the waters of Jordan or anything like that, but I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water.” She finally concludes that “The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft white hotel bath towels I felt pure and sweet as a new baby” (20). Her bath-towel mummification gestures forward—albeit inchoately—to the scene of Esther’s final rebirth, when she awakes in a hospital, as if she has been reborn, with her eye wrapped in white gauze. Plath’s uncanny rhetoric demonstrates the deep anxieties behind this seemingly mundane scene: Esther loses her soul, moves to hell, and then she is reborn, pure and innocent as a baby.
Esther’s bath, however, is interrupted by a knocking at her door, and just as Shakespeare uses epizeuxis in the knocking at the gate scene in Macbeth, Plath uses it to signal the horror of Esther’s psychic unraveling, the peeling off of her identities. Esther explains “the person knocking kept saying, ‘Elly, Elly, Elly, let me in’” (20). But, she recalls, “I didn’t know any Elly,” an indication that Esther has returned to normalcy. Next “another kind of knock sounded over the first dull, bumping knock—a sharp tap-tap, and another, much crisper voice said, ‘Miss Greenwood, your friend wants you,’ and I knew it was Doreen.” Plath uses epizeuxis again to rhetorically mimic the horror of the knock: “‘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” (21). Again, Plath rhetorically signifies Esther’s psychic split: the evil that is knocking at both the door and her body. Next, Esther explains, “I opened the door and blinked out into the bright hall. I had the impression it wasn’t night and it wasn’t day, but some lurid third interval that had suddenly slipped between them and would never end” (21). This in-between space—between night and day, states of unconsciousness and consciousness—presages the foggy liminal period between life and death that characterizes Esther’s suicide attempt, when, instead of dying after taking too many sleeping pills, she throws them up, retreating into a coma, in the dirt basement of her mother’s home. On a structural level, these recurrent in-between states mirror the desire for duality that motivates and characterizes Esther throughout the novel.

The next time Esther’s last name is repeated three times in a row comes just before her successful electroshock therapy, when the “Greenwood” that we meet in the Elly scene retreats back into Esther’s psyche, to only be suppressed again. Although The Bell Jar is composed of these looping birth and death scenes, they change in nature over time. I will first examine the loop composing Esther’s successful electroshock treatment before moving to specific uncanny motifs in perhaps the most significant one of the novel: Esther’s failed suicide attempt. Like Macbeth’s
knocking at the gate scene and *The Bell Jar*s baptismal bath, the knocking signifies murder. Esther first hears a knocking at the door next to hers, and then the knocking moves to her door, signaling doom: “The nurse rapped on my door and, without waiting for an answer, breezed in.” Esther, earlier in the novel, comes to understand that as long as she is offered breakfast by the maid, she will be not be at risk for electroshock therapy, because those who have the therapy skip breakfast. When Esther is not offered her breakfast tray, she is prompted for her name, and she responds, “Greenwood. Esther Greenwood,” to which the maid replies in epizeuxis: “Greenwood, Greenwood, Greenwood.” And then she claims “no breakfast today” (210). Esther hides, indicating her fear of persecution and desire for death: “I curled up in the far corner of the alcove with the blanket over my head” (211).

The environment in the electroshock room mirrors the environment of Esther’s bath in the scene I examined earlier, indicating that the scenes are iterations of the same death and rebirth ritual. In her bath, Esther explains, “I remember the ceiling over every bathtub I’ve stretched out in. I remember the texture of the ceilings and the cracks and the colors and the damp spots and the light fixtures” (20). In the electroshock-therapy room, “The walls were bright, white lavatory tile with bald bulbs set at intervals in the black ceiling” (212). This description links to another important death and rebirth scene, when Esther gets sick and is in the bathroom, describing “the glittering white torture-chamber tiles under my feet and over my head and on all four sides” that “closed in and squeezed me to pieces” (44). In the scene of sickness, Plath also uses snow imagery to refer to these other death and rebirth scenes, lacing her descriptions with gestures toward electroshock: “It didn’t seem to be summer any more. I could feel the winter shaking my bones and banging my teeth together, and the big white hotel towel I had dragged down with me lay under my head numb as a snowdrift” (45). Such environmental correspondence between these scenes reflects Esther’s mental state, further reinforcing their thematic similarity: death and rebirth scenes that attempt to kill off the
double and purify Esther. But, as looking at these scenes in juxtaposition suggests, the birth of the pure Esther will only turn back into a double. Elly turns into Greenwood, who turns into the “cured” Esther; however, as the snow imagery suggests, this “pure” Esther only serves as a fragile façade for a new double, which will emerge in the same inevitable fashion as the melting of snow and arrival of spring.

*Queer Sustenance*

This doubling situates Esther in an androgynous structural position reflective of her desire for non-procreative sex. Though the Publisher’s Note in Plath’s *Unabridged Journals* cryptically asserts that the word *queer* does not refer to the sexual meaning of the term, the *Oxford English Dictionary*—as well as the context of her excised passage—suggests otherwise:

> I could never be a nurse. The idea of being noble service to the sick and the injured and the crippled and the malformed and the queer aborted monsters hidden deeply away in public or private brick buildings as [sic] always appealed to me, but when it comes to the test I turn my back. I want to kill them. They disgust me so profoundly I lose my humanity. I want to stamp them out, extinguish them under my feet like cockroaches or poisonous rats. They make me feel I am looking into a warped diabolical mirror that shows the reality behind the mask, and what I see is nothing but myself. (Fig. 1)

According to the Publisher’s Note, “These journals contain Sylvia Plath’s opinions and not those of the publisher. Readers should keep in mind the colloquial meanings of words appropriate to the time period of the journals. For example, Plath used the word ‘queer’ to denote an eccentric or
suspicious person, according to her annotated dictionary, and not a homosexual.” But the excised passage suggests otherwise, orienting Esther’s position alongside rhetoric of non-procreative sex.

One of the definitions of *queer* in the *OED* is, of course, “*colloq. (orig. U.S.*) Of a person: homosexual (frequently derogatory and offensive). In later use: denoting or relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms” (“Queer,” adj. 1). In contrast to what the Publisher’s Note suggests, the *OED* indicates that the sexual meaning of the term emerged in 1914, including in the entry several instances and examples of this context through the twentieth century. For Plath, the exact meaning of *queer* is impossible to pin down, an affirmation of the term’s nonlinearity, its precise queerness. *Queer* is both prevalent and ambiguous in her journal; while it often connotes fulfillment, freedom, and the foreign, it also refers to purity, order, and Plath’s desire for a baby.¹¹

The inherent obscurity of this term is reinforced by Esther’s mingled fear and attraction to motherhood, as she asserts to Doctor Nolan that “What I hate is the thought of being under a man’s thumb…A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line” (221). This imagery links the phallus with the responsibility of a baby, which Plath frames as if it is a penal threat. Doctor Nolan writes out a prescription for a diaphragm, and then, during the fitting, Esther ruminates: “How easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why was I so unmaternal and apart?” She finally tells herself that “If I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go mad” (221). Moreover, the book’s obsession with both fetuses (as in when Buddy takes her to view the fetuses on display at his medical school) and literal birthing scenes (not only the nuanced death-and-rebirth scenes) emphasizes the vitriol this expectation surfaces in Esther. The rhetoric throughout the excised passage demonstrates Esther’s driving anger

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¹¹ Please see pages 358 (the foreign); 332, 338 & 402 (fulfillment); 582 (“queer pure white duck”); 602 (highly-ordered society”); 411 (desire to have a baby) of *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. 

48
at the expectation of motherhood, one of the repressed forces that haunts Esther in the form of the double.

_The Bell Jar’s_ use of Freud’s evil eye further critiques his disavowal of gender in “The Uncanny.” As he argues, envy

betrays itself by a look even though it is not put into words; and when a man is prominent owing to noticeable, and particularly owing to unattractive, attributes, other people are ready to believe that his envy is rising to a more than usual degree of intensity and that this intensity will convert it into effective action. What is feared is thus a secret intention of doing harm, and certain signs are taken to mean that the intention has the necessary power at its command. (“The Uncanny” 240)

When Plath meets Constantin, a simultaneous UN interpreter, she vows to try to lose her virginity to him. The ambivalence she experiences as a result of his position, which is characterized by his ability to have sex without facing the consequences, corresponds with the depiction of the evil eye, after they sleep alongside each other.

As Esther meets Constantin in his apartment, she recalls an article her mother sent to her about female chastity:

The main point of the article was that a man’s world is different from a woman’s world and a man’s emotions are different from a woman’s emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds and the two different sets of emotions together properly. My mother said this was something a girl didn’t know about till it was too late, so she had to take the advice of people who were already experts, like a married woman. (81)
Esther explains that the married female lawyer who wrote the article—which is aptly titled “In Defense of Chastity”—asserts that

the best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren’t pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex. Of course they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men and they would end up by making her life miserable. (81)

And, in alignment with Esther’s ambivalence about sex (the desire for it, the envy that men can engage in it with no risk to their livelihood), the article, in Esther’s words, finished “by saying better be safe than sorry and besides, there was no sure way of not getting stuck with a baby and then you’d really be in a pickle” (81). Esther’s feeling about Constantin’s freedom in comparison to hers is emphasized by his job as a simultaneous interpreter at the UN. Like an interpreter bridging difference to provide protection to disparate sides, marriage melds man and woman together, providing woman with security and a minimized version of sexual freedom, one within the confines of the institution, usually based, however, on the expectation to procreate.

Plath’s use of landscape, which is haunted with uncanny ghosts—it is subterranean, foggy, and populated with floating faces—reflects the forces at work in Esther’s episode with Constantin, expressing the queerness of the scene. Esther explains that “To reach this restaurant we had to climb down seven dimly lit steps into a sort of cellar.” Then, in the restaurant,
Travel posters plastered the smoke-dark walls, like so many picture windows overlooking Swiss lakes and Japanese mountains and African velds, and thick, dusty bottle-candles, that seemed for centuries to have wept their colored waxes red over blue over green in a fine, three-dimensional lace, cast a circle of light round each table where the faces floated, flushed and flamelike themselves. (78)

The “smoke-dark walls” and subterranean nature of the restaurant structure it as an uncanny, queer, liminal space, illustrating the non-procreative sex Esther desires with Constantin, a third position emphasized by the “dusty bottle-candles” from earlier centuries that signal a concealed past that is finally overflowing into a “three-dimensional lace,” converting these repressed pasts into a new, melted form. For once, this form not only embodies duality, instead proposing a new “three-dimensional” material and position, literalized in the “third interval” Esther inhabits when she wakes up during the Elly scene. The “floated, flushed and flamelike” faces also gesture toward the past, the ghostly forces haunting the restaurant; that these faces are “flamelike” reflects the infernal nature of the restaurant, illustrating it as the hearth of repressed demons. Here, in the darkened underground, Esther can be queer.

Queerness is associated with hell, but it is something Esther desires. For example, Esther’s homosexual double Joan is presented in contrast to the heterosexual double Betsy. While Betsy is straight and pure and desirable to others, Joan is presented as evil, with her “starey pebble-colored eyes” and “gleaming tombstone teeth” (59). But Esther is drawn to her, lying down on her bed one day and listening to Joan encourage her to preserve the newspaper clippings depicting Esther’s suicide attempt Joan saved for her in a scrapbook. That Joan successfully commits suicide provides an outlet for imagining Esther’s fantasy of living in androgyny; Joan dies just as Esther’s double retreats further into herself. Joan does not survive as queer, and Esther, in modifying her portrait so
that she appears as pure and straight as possible, represses her queer desires, survives, and lives to
tell her story.

Moreover, throughout the novel, Plath describes sexual nonlinearity as “queer,” aligning
Constantin’s cultural assets with the complicated and ironic androgynous space for which Esther’s
marriage to him would allow, one reliant on her participation in marriage. For example, just before
the description of the restaurant, Esther ruminates on her possible futures, comparing them to figs
in a branching tree. One of these figs is becoming a mother, one is becoming an editor, one is
becoming a poet, one is becoming a professor, and “another fig was Constantin and Socrates and
Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions” (77). Here, queerness is
associated with multiple sex partners and forging a nonlinear career path, a sentiment echoed earlier
in the book, in another sentence that employs the words queer and offbeat again, associating both
words with non-Western territories. As Esther explains, “for a while I toyed with the idea of being a
botanist and studying the wild grasses in Africa or the South American rain forests, because you can
win big grants to study offbeat things like that in queer areas much more easily than winning grants to
study art in Italy or English in England; there’s not so much competition” (34, italics mine). Plath
renders queerness as both wild—echoing the polygamous sex Esther desires and describes in the
passage before—and a path that threatens to verge off the straight one set out for her.

In using these words, Esther figures a fulfilling method for dropping “clean out of the race,”
creating a space that literalizes the queer diversion from the straight rat-race trajectory, the
temptation with which she grapples throughout the novel that ultimately consummates in her suicide
attempt (29). But the position Esther imagines herself occupying in the tree also emphasizes the
liminality of her position, which is associated with death: “I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this
fig tree, 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” (7). Because Esther is unable to successfully occupy multiple positions at one time—because liminality is deadly—her future is rendered futile, her hunger indicating her emptiness.

However, once Esther is able to ingest the food of Constantin’s restaurant, she feels strong again. As she recalls, “I don’t know what I ate, but I felt immensely better after the first mouthful. It occurred to me that my vision of the fig tree and all the fat figs that withered and fell to earth might well have arisen from the profound void of an empty stomach” (77). Although queerness is associated with a fear of death, when Esther accepts forces she is unable to understand—ones that are amalgamations of materials such as the “herbs and spices and sour cream” that compose the smell of Constantin’s restaurant—she begins to feel herself again. As Esther explains, “Constantin kept refilling our glasses with a sweet Greek wine that tasted of pine bark, and I found myself telling him how I was going to learn German and go to Europe and be a war correspondent like Maggie Higgins” (78). Moreover, in line with the American association with superficial purity that pervades the novel, his restaurant is distinctly un-American: “All the time I had been in New York I had never found such a restaurant. I only found those Heavenly Ham burger places, where they serve giant hamburgers and soup-of-the-day and four kinds of fancy cake at a very clean counter facing a long glarey mirror” (77-78). Here, America is composed of clean lines and organized flavors of cake and soup-of-the-day—Burger Heaven’s inherent piety, sterility, and linear organization wards off the dark fear of death—whereas Constantin’s foreign restaurant reflects his queer state in the novel, as well as the androgyny Esther personifies when she is with him. His restaurant and position is indiscernible, foggy, filled with the past, and fortifying for Esther to both occupy and consume as she imagines the opportunities androgyny could grant her.
But this imagining turns into envy. Like Esther’s last name, Greenwood—which, in its reference to the Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, binds new, verdant life with death—the evil eye literalizes Esther’s envious underbelly, as she realizes that the pine bark she ingests only allows her to visualize absconding the country to become a female war correspondent (a similar position to Constantin’s, one that relies on translation between differing forces), as opposed to endowing her with the ability to follow through with this dream.

Plath depicts the evil eye once Esther is back at Constantin’s apartment, a lucid indication of Esther’s jealousy at male duality. According to Freud, “One of the most uncanny and wide-spread forms of superstition is the dread of the evil eye…There never seems to have been any doubt about the source of this dread. Whoever possesses something that is at once valuable and fragile is afraid of other people’s envy, in so far as he projects on to them the envy he would have felt in their place” (“The Uncanny” 240). Esther explains that her solution to this dilemma is to mimic what she wants, and then use her position to threaten the person she envies: “Finally I decided that if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn’t pure either. Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well” (81-82). She explains that she thinks “a spectacular change would come over me the day I decided to cross the boundary line,” if she has sex with Constantin, comparing this prediction to “the way I’d feel if I ever visited Europe,” a gesture toward her earlier fantasy of leaving the country to become a female war correspondent. But she then sees an uncanny Constantin in her eye: “I’d come home, and if I looked closely into the mirror I’d be able to make out a little white Alp at the back of my eye. Now I thought that if I looked into the mirror tomorrow I’d see a doll-size Constantin sitting in my eye and smiling out at me” (82).
Doll imagery populates *The Bell Jar*—Constantin, Esther, and patients at the sanitarium are related to dolls—and they are also significant to “The Uncanny,” as they inhabit the liminality between life and death. As Freud asserts, “dolls are of course rather closely connected with childhood life. We remember that in their early games children do not distinguish at all sharply between living and inanimate objects, and that they are especially fond of treating their dolls like live people” (“The Uncanny” 233). The anxiety from which this stems is the “[doubt] whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate.” The effect of dolls is compared to the “impression made by wax-work figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata,” along with “the uncanny effect of epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity, because these excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity” (“The Uncanny” 226). Later in this scene, Plath mimics the effect of the doll-like Constantin in describing a seizure, as Constantin pulls a comb through Esther’s hair and “A little electric shock flared through me and I sat quite still. Ever since I was small I loved feeling somebody comb my hair. It made me go all sleepy and peaceful” (86). Such rhetoric, in echoing uncanny seizures, unites the outcome of Esther’s fantasy of queer non-procreative sex with Constantin—orgasm then tranquility—with her successful electroshock treatment later in the novel.

While it is possible to assume that Esther does not lose her virginity because of later events of the novel (she bleeds after sleeping with a mathematics professor), Plath does not describe the scene in bed with Constantin, instead rendering it erotic, constructing the description with uncanny themes. Esther wakes to “pitch dark,” deciphering “the faint outlines of an unfamiliar window. Every so often a beam of light appeared out of thin air, traversed the wall like a ghostly, exploratory finger, and slid off into nothing again.” She hears someone breathing, and initially thinks it is herself. But then Plath uses Freud’s uncanny evil eye as she depicts Esther projecting her envy onto
Constantin: “A green eye glowed on the bed beside me.” Next, Plath describes Constantin as if he is a dead man, raising the possibility that Esther fulfilled her envy and killed him: “I reached out slowly and dosed my hand on it. I lifted it up. With it came an arm, heavy as a dead man’s, but warm with sleep” (84). Freud asserts that dismembered limbs are uncanny because they “[spring] from [their] proximity to the castration-complex” (“The Uncanny” 244). But Freud’s thought also matches Esther’s perception of Constantin with Esther’s impending suicide attempt, when she attempts to bury herself alive under her mother’s house. Freud claims that “To some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all.” This anxiety is merely “a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness—the phantasy, I mean, of intra-uterine existence” (“The Uncanny” 244). This scene with Constantin is laced with uncanny influences in order to presage and frame Esther’s later suicide attempt as the crux of the novel’s anxieties, illustrating the desire to move back to the womb, her original home.

Freud’s intra-uterine existence pervades the death-and-rebirth scenes composing the novel, and, to illustrate this, I wish to examine the most prominent one: Esther’s suicide attempt. Freud asserts that the root of *unheimlich* stems from its relationship to the desire to return to the womb:

It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking saying that ‘Love is home-sickness’ and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: ‘this place is familiar to me, I’ve been here before’, we may interpret the place as being his mother's
genitals or her body. In this case too, then, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix ‘un’ ['un-'] is the token of repression. ("The Uncanny" 245)

At the climax of the novel, Plath frames Esther’s suicide attempt as a return to the womb and rebirth, locating the mingled anxieties about death as the crux of the novel.

One of the symptoms of this ambivalence is the fear of blindness, which, while pervasive throughout the novel, reaches its height during Esther’s suicide attempt, when she imagines a chisel cracking down on her eye, and as a result, is under the impression she has gone blind. For Freud, “the fear of damaging or losing one’s eyes is a terrible one in children,” and thus “Many adults retain their apprehensiveness in this respect, and no physical injury is so much dreaded by them as an injury to the eye.” Moreover, “A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one’s eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated. The self-blinding of the mythical criminal, Oedipus, was simply a mitigated form of the punishment of castration” ("The Uncanny" 231). That Esther enacts castration and that her suicide is deeply intertwined with her mother both spring from the uncanny, reflected in both the location of her suicide attempt and her methods of envisioning it.

Plath depicts Esther’s retreat into the cellar of her childhood home as if Esther is burying herself in her mother’s womb. Like the damaged eye slits through which Esther sees when she wakes up, “A dim, undersea light filtered through the slits of the cellar windows,” framing Esther’s exit from a darkened womb into the bright world, and like a grave, the cellar is a “secret, earth-bottomed crevice,” and like a uterus, “the dark felt thick as velvet,” and like a fetus, Esther crawls “carefully, on my knees, with bent head” to the deepest section of the hole, “the farthest wall.” Esther’s ambivalence toward fetuses frames this description, exhibiting Esther’s inability to separate newly-formed life from its inevitable end. Then, Plath gestures toward Golyadkin’s desire to hide in
the dark—and its link to his death wish—as Esther “[wraps] my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow,” beginning to take her mother's sleeping pills. There is another signal forward to the scene on the beach that succeeds this scene—and a Sand-Man allusion—as Esther recalls her death as if she is being swept away from shore: “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” (169). The uncanny forces that Plath writes about in her thesis finally coalesce at the novel’s pinnacle, locating Esther’s desire for suicide as an uncanny death wish to return to the stillness of her mother’s womb.

Next, Esther wakes up, and her tomb is presented as if she is in a uterus, emphasizing the deathly liminal position she inhabits. Esther is pushed out through the tunnel, as if she is a newborn, its head emerging from the mother: “I felt the darkness, but nothing else, and my head rose, feeling it, like the head of a worm.” She next imagines castration, as a “a great, hard weight smashed against my cheek like a stone wall,” and she returns to the intrauterine fluid, as “The silence surged back, smoothing itself as black water smooths to its old surface calm over a dropped stone” (170). She is the “dropped stone,” embodying the silence and stillness of the death wish. Next, Esther is reborn, traveling down a vaginal canal into a chattering, chaotic hospital room: “A cool wind rushed by. I was being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel into the earth. Then the wind stopped. There was a rumbling, as of many voices, protesting and disagreeing in the distance.” Esther feels as if she is blinded a second time, again reinforcing Freud’s castration theory: “A chisel cracked down on my eye, and a slit of light opened, like a mouth or a wound, till the darkness clamped shut on it again” (171). And then Plath depicts Esther as if she is being wrapped in a blanket after birth, mummy imagery that both echoes Esther’s other scenes of rebirth—when Esther wraps herself tightly like a baby in a white towel after her baptismal bath—and literalizes the inextricability between the fear of castration, blindness, and death: “I tried to roll away from the direction of the
light, but hands wrapped round my limbs like mummy hands, and I couldn’t move” (170). She acknowledges that she is in the world, in a hospital, as “I began to think I must be in an underground chamber, lit by blinding lights, and that the chamber was full of people who for some reason were holding me down,” an indication of the inevitable repression Esther will once again face (170). Esther believes herself blinded a third time, before light permeates through the “thick, warm, furry dark” uterus. And then, the novel’s crowning word, the root of all of its concerns, when a disembodied voice that articulates Esther’s uncanny delusions “[cries] ‘Mother!’” (171).

Esther’s nightmare comes true as she wakes up in a real hospital. “I felt the shape of a room around me, a big room with open windows. A pillow molded itself under my head, and my body floated, without pressure, between thin sheets” (171). The comfort Esther experiences in the bed chimes with her contentment in liminal, androgynous positions throughout the novel, even though they are persistently rendered impossible to inhabit for long. As though she is a newborn, she feels “warmth, like a hand on my face. I must be lying in the sun. If I opened my eyes, I would see colors and shapes bending in upon me like nurses.” Like a baby resting next to her mother, she “hears breathing beside me.” When she says that she cannot see, the disembodied voice says, “‘There are lots of blind people in the world. You’ll marry a nice blind man someday’” (171). And then Esther explains that “the man with the chisel had come back,” but instead of blinding her, he removes the bandages, and a “ragged gap of light appeared, like the hole in a wall,” indicating that the castration anxiety was mere fantasy. “A man’s hand peered round the edge of it,” as if he is her father. Moreover, Esther’s mother is described as if she has just given birth, exhausted but pleased in a hospital gown: she “came smiling round the foot of the bed. She was wearing a dress with purple cartwheels on it and she looked awful” (172). Plath’s rhetoric frames Esther’s suicide as a scene of rebirth, situating the source of the novel’s climax as an uncanny desire to float weightless, in the
queer space between life and death, to return home to the place of stillness, comfort, and integrity: the mother’s womb.

_Sylvia, Esther, Frieda_

True to Freud’s thought, Plath seeks to distance herself from her double, as if Esther becomes a threat to both the private and public life of her author. In _The Bell Jar_, Esther sits down to write her novel and recounts “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” (179). Not coincidentally, Plath’s first name has six letters as well. The anxiety over the number of letters in her protagonist’s name was one Plath struggled with through revisions (Fig. 3). Plath also associates herself with her double in Esther’s last name, which is the same as her grandmother’s. Aurelia Grunwald, Plath’s maternal grandmother, immigrated as a teenager to the United States, where her last name was changed to Greenwood (Fournier 21). This choice associates Esther with both Plath and her mother, Aurelia.

Plath extended this maternal lineage in early drafts of the novel: one of Esther’s original names was Frieda, another six-letter first name and also the name of Plath’s daughter. At one point, Plath’s protagonist is bestowed the name Victoria Lucas, Plath’s pseudonym in the UK (Fig. 4). As time went on, however, the index between author and double increased, due to both libel issues (Fig. 5) and Plath’s anxiety about her mother reading the novel. In a letter to her friend Ann Davidow-Goodman, Plath writes of the pseudonym conflict, “I’ll have to publish it under a pseudonym, if I ever get it accepted, because it’s so chock-full of real people I’d be sued to death and all my mother’s friends wouldn’t speak to her because they are taken off” (Smith College Archives). Such distance is true to the comfort Esther finds when distancing herself from Elly: “After that I felt safer. 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). And, as Freud writes, a classic symptom of the uncanny “is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations (234). Even with these similarities, just as in *The Bell Jar*, Plath separates herself from Esther by keeping her name distinct from her protagonist’s, because, as Freud writes, “if one knows the name of a man or of a spirit, one has obtained a certain amount of power over the owner of that name” (81).

Indeed, Plath’s thesis, when viewed alongside *The Bell Jar*, coalesces to give a literary interpretation of Plath’s suicide, indicating the import of this self-constitution index. In the thesis she writes that

> the double symbolizes the evil or repressed elements in man’s nature, the apparition of the Double ‘becomes a *persecution by it*, the repressed material returns in the form of that which represses.’ Man’s instinct to avoid or ignore the unpleasant aspects of his character turns into an active terror when he is faced by his Double, which *resurrects those very parts of his personality which he sought to escape*. The confrontation of the Double in these instances usually results in a duel *which ends in insanity or death for the original hero.* (“The Magic Mirror” 3, my italics)

Quite literally, this is what happens with Esther Greenwood and Sylvia Plath: just as Esther is born, Plath. I do not find it a coincidence that Plath committed suicide on the day she was to meet her editor for the first time in person, a month after the UK publication of the novel (Fig. 5). Her double lives on, replacing its original author. The anxieties Plath communicates throughout *The Bell Jar*, and in her journal (Fig. 6), came true.
In October 2015, shortly after the release of her documentary film *No Home Movie* at the Locarno Film Festival, Chantal Akerman committed suicide. Retrospectives, reviews, and obituaries have since looked back her work, particularly in regard to Akerman’s identity as a child of Holocaust survivors and its attendant trauma, which is foregrounded in *No Home Movie*. The documentary follows Natalia during the final days of her life, depicting the trauma’s presence in her relationship with Chantal. Natalia Akerman is significant in Akerman’s oeuvre. After Natalia died in 2015, shortly before committing suicide, Akerman said, “I realized that my mother was at the center of my work. Because now that my mother is no longer there, there’s nobody left” (Donadio). Using Akerman’s suicide as a point of departure, this chapter will use three early films that she directed and in which she stars—*Saute ma ville* (1968), *La chambre* (1972), and *Je tu il elle* (1974)—to establish that while the suicide Akerman performs in *Saute ma ville* is a declaration of agency that works to shed uncanny desire in a life-preserving manner, it is also confined by repressed matrilineal trauma.

By way of circular consumption and suicide, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s transgenerational phantom is salient in the self-constituted identities Akerman constructs for the screen. In Akerman’s case, this self-constitution occurs through her body, in deciding to star in her films. What I will argue in this chapter is that the meaningless language and non-nutritional consumption that pervade these films point toward the crypt of repressed trauma that Akerman’s characters possess. In *Saute ma ville* Akerman’s character seeks to destroy the lineage of undigested trauma in committing suicide and exploding the crypt.

12 Please see “Chantal Akerman: Images Between the Images”; Richard Brody’s “To Life”; and Rachel Donadio and Cara Buckley’s “Chantal Akerman, Whose Films Examined Women’s Inner Lives, Dies at 65.”
Suicide erupts like a symptom in Akerman’s early films. Her first film, *Saute ma ville* (*Blow up My Town*), depicts eighteen-year-old Akerman performing slightly disrupted domestic practices in a kitchen before turning on the gas stove, resting her head on top of it, and blowing up her “town,” and inevitably herself as well. Akerman described the film, “You saw an adolescent girl, 18 years old, go into a kitchen, do ordinary things but in a way that is off-kilter, and finally, commit suicide…it was rage and death” (Foster 103). Of another film she made that was ultimately lost called *New York, New York bis* (1984), she explained, “I made that film for myself. I arrive in New York, I go to see a friend, I arrive at her apartment, she says, ‘Wait, I’m a bit busy,’ then I kill myself” (Foster 104). But this rage is also directed outward: the film she proposed to the Belgian Ministry of Culture for funding after making *Saute ma ville* (it was denied) was, in Akerman’s words, about “a little girl, eight years old, who poisons her parents and is happy about it” (Foster 103). *Jeanne Dielman 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, a portrait of a single mother who performs sex work to sustain herself and her son, ends with the main character murdering a client. These works demonstrate a concern with suicide and parricide early in Akerman’s oeuvre.

A queer reading of suicide asserts that it is an act of agency that disrupts the linearity of a straight life in which death is predetermined and outside of the subject’s control. The hazards, however, of such an analysis are described by Jeffrey J. Cohen and Todd R. Ramlow in “Pink Vectors of Deleuze: Queer Theory and Inhumanism.” “To invoke mortality in a discussion of the queer is, we realize, to risk the pernicious linking of the queer to the fatal,” they argue. “This heteronormative conjoining of queer sexuality to morbidity (especially post-AIDS) conceptualizes death as an individualized, judicial event.” They instead seek to “dismantle the notion of identity that buttresses such a conception” through the concept of Deleuzian inhumanism (Cohen and Ramlow).

Deleuzian inhumanism refers to Deleuze’s “philosophical opus” where “assemblages proliferate by means of which the human disaggregates, scattered across a molecular field of animals,
objects, intensities in ceaseless movement.” Ultimately Cohen and Ramlow find that even at death, “Deleuze refused the weary categories of the merely human and sought some path that might lead away from the sedimentation(s) of decline, sickness, redemption.” Furthermore, “as the philosopher of middles,” he “rejected determinative endings, especially when they were used to fix in place and thereby devalue what had been a vagrant and affirmative life” (Cohen and Ramlow). Deleuze’s suicide thus reflected an existence of agency, visually illustrated by its nonlinearity.

In Cohen and Ramlow’s view, suicide is a teleological rejection of predetermined endings. In a world where “death is not supposed to be gazed at for long,” they argue, “suicide is especially problematic, because it potentially brings will into play against an event that is supposed to be unwilled.” They instead propose thinking of death “in terms that do not arrive pre-judged and already dismissed,” and with the mentality that it “can be rendered an affirmative event, igniting a becoming” (Cohen and Ramlow). Because of its prevalence in her work, Akerman’s films demand a meditation on suicide. Through examining this theme as expressed by Akerman’s corporeal self-constitution, I hope to illuminate the varying implications of her performative suicide for both queer and psychoanalytic theory. From now on, I will refer to the characters Akerman plays in Saute ma ville and La chambre, both of whom are unnamed, as Chantal to separate Akerman’s character from Akerman herself.

Chantal’s identity has been studied through various psychoanalytic approaches, but its fluidity reveals the shortcomings of such analyses. As Ivone Margulies asks in Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday, “It is in fact quite difficult to find an account of Je tu il elle that does not at some point slip into a psychoanalytic diagnosis of [Akerman’s character]. What is this irresolvable crux provoked by Akerman’s representation?” (Margulies 124). Such examinations are exemplified by Judith Mayne’s Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women’s Cinema. Mayne proposes that the repetition Julie, Akerman’s character, exhibits in Je tu il elle leads to these analyses:
Throughout the film, an emphasis is placed on orality in a very literal sense, as a desire for food. Akerman’s obsessive ingestion of powdered sugar in the first section has all the contours of an eating disorder. During the second section the hunger disappears—Akerman gives food from her plate to the trucker—and only thirst remains, although the way in which she drinks evokes little of the compulsive eating seen in the first section of the film. Only the last section of *Je tu il elle*, when Akerman has arrived at her lover’s apartment, does the hunger reappear, now appeased temporarily by the sandwich that her lover prepares for her and which Akerman devours, and the thirst as well, quenched when the lover brings her a bottle of wine. After asking for more food, Akerman pushes it away and reaches for her lover, stressing the obvious link between orality and sexuality. More specifically, the link created in the film between food and sex evokes clinical diagnoses of homosexuality as regressive, as arrested development, as the desire—for women—to fuse with the maternal object. (Mayne 113)

But Margulies asserts that these psychoanalytic “diagnoses are utterly essentialist and normative” because “they posit [Akerman’s character] as bearer of, or lacking in, motivation, as if she preexisted her filmic representation” (Margulies 125). They treat Chantal as a person instead of a character. Akerman’s self-constitution tends to author the viewer as a kind of psychoanalyst who digs into her autobiography to glean the significance of her characters’ obsessive gestures of consumption, and finally, their disruption. Instead Margulies argues that these traits must be viewed as constructing an “alternative representation of subjectivity” (Margulies 125). This uneasiness can be viewed as emphasizing disorder over order, figuring Chantal as a subject who belies precise psychoanalytic definition.
The interference that pervades *Saute ma ville*, *La chambre*, and *Je tu il elle* aids in the construction of subjectivity. Household chores are upset in *Saute ma ville* and are interspersed with Chantal eating. Chantal shines her shoes but ultimately coats her legs with polish as well, and she tries to wash the floor but makes it dirtier by dumping groceries on it along with the bucket of water. As she tapes up doors to gas the apartment, she loudly crunches on an apple, taking a bite each time she successfully applies a strand of tape. She cooks pasta for herself, and after taking a few manic bites places the meal unfinished on the floor. Signifiers are disrupted and jumbled together, subverting original definitions and uses: groceries are mixed with dirty water, shoe polish is used for both shoes and legs, and Chantal eats in preparation for her death. Such domestic disorder displays Chantal’s ability to reconstruct the roles of spaces, tools, and purposes, presaging the teleological agency she asserts at the end of the film in her suicide.

In *La chambre* the camera slowly rotates 360 degrees around a small apartment, catching sight of a wooden chair, a table of food, a kettle and a stove, Chantal in bed, and a desk. As the film continues, Chantal’s behavior becomes increasingly bizarre and changes each time the camera pans on her: she first stares at the camera, then she rocks back and forth on her side, then she rolls an apple around in her hands. But then the camera changes direction, and Chantal is depicted licking the apple, rolling it around in her mouth. And then the camera changes direction again, and Chantal performs biting into the apple, but the apple appears to not have any bites taken out. When it changes direction again and pans over Chantal she is voraciously devouring the apple, but with exaggerated gestures, and chunks of the apple are missing. When it changes a final time, Chantal is sitting up in bed, rubbing her eyes, and then she lies back down. Chantal’s erratic behavior mirrors the behavior of the camera: both portray disrupted circularity and flawed performance. The camera’s incohesive behavior de-reifies its role in constructing a singular reality.
Such disrupted circularity surfaces in *Je tu il elle* in the form of Julie’s cycle of consumption and production, which continues on and off for the first third of the film: she takes a bite of sugar, then she writes. The cycle continues until Julie spills the sugar, and then she sets up a new mechanical, repetitious gesture of spooning the sugar back into the bag, which she performs for almost a minute before giving up, lying down, and brushing the sugar off her mattress. Eating and writing compose a cycle in *Je tu il elle*, but then—analogous to every other cycle in the film—it is disrupted. A desire to construct an alternative subjectivity is also salient in Akerman’s choice to play Julie: “It was a matter of putting across a ‘malaise,’” she said of *Je tu il elle*. “I started to direct an actress and soon I noticed that her perfection went against the project. I also thought [it] more appropriate…to oppose the mise-en-scène’s rigidity with my own uneasiness” (Margulies 112). Inflexibility and linearity are faulty and in need of interruption in *Je tu il elle*, and Akerman’s self-constitution amplifies such “uneasiness.”

Furthermore, Julie’s repetitive rearranging of furniture—specifically the mattress (“After that I lifted it up…and stood it up against the window…and then against the wall”), which she uses to both lie on and as a curtain—further amplifies this uneasiness, subverting predetermined uses (*Je tu il elle*). Margulies claims, “As [Chantal] positions herself and the mattress in relation to the camera, she is recording herself in the process of constructing a mise-en-scène…Her single prop, the mattress, becomes a compositional element—she lies on it or sits in its shadow as it leans against the door” (Margulies 113). Because “we are given no clues about what the character does or where she comes from,” and “given the film’s condensation of author with performer, [Julie’s] self-inflicted seclusion can be seen as shaping a movement of subtraction. Minimalism here becomes a willed form of defining the self” (Margulies 113). Like the mattress, Akerman’s body is repurposed for use in her film, endowing it with new meaning. Though Julie presents the audience with varied arrangements of the self—and Akerman’s self-constitution in Julie only exacerbates such
subjectivity—a psychoanalytic analysis of the obsessive behavior that runs through *Je tu il elle*, *La chambre*, and *Saute ma ville* exhibits a concern with familial history and an alternative explanation for the circular motifs the films present.

*Performing Trauma*

Akerman situates herself in an artistic liminal space—between imagination and reality—to effectively perform and release repressed trauma. Contrary to the psychoanalytic focus on orality and sexuality, I would like to take a different approach in examining the repetitive consumption motifs that take place in *Saute ma ville*, *La chambre*, and *Je tu il elle*. I will keep the queer potential of Akerman’s work in mind, however, as I examine how her history manifests in the personalities of the characters she plays. In *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, Maureen Turim’s essay asserts that in Akerman’s body acting as “an uncertain sign that nevertheless reveals the autobiography in the physicality of self-portraiture,” it functions as “a display, an acting out, and a disguise.” She defines “acting out” “not only” by “the process of enactment by actors and actresses,” but also “in the psychoanalytical sense of the portrayal of unconscious wishes through actions.” The “repetitive gestures” in which Akerman engages, Turim argues, “return from a repressed past that is precisely not remembered.” However, in *Je tu il elle*, “the revelation of her character’s unconscious desires is shadowed by the hint of a revelation of an authorial, personal, autobiographical unconscious, as the space between fictive character and authorial voice is alternatively collapsed and expanded in the film’s unfolding” (10). While such self-constitution disrupts convention and proposes a new subjectivity, the creative activity depicted throughout the film—Julie’s writing—also gestures toward Akerman’s work of memory and of constructing narrative out of fragments.
Akerman had a complex relationship to her Jewish heritage. Though her mother spent time in Auschwitz, Akerman explained in many interviews that it was never discussed (Foster 97). Just as Akerman explained that oral tradition was disrupted because survivors wanted to “spare” their children, Chantal’s mattress reflects the shifting Akerman undertook in order to construct a familial history. The conventional linearity of oral tradition was thwarted and Akerman endeavored to rearrange the pieces she could find and use them for purposes other than the original ones assigned to them. Indeed, literature’s function in constructing memory is analogous to the mattress’s in *Je tu il elle*: both erect an alternative narrative or subjectivity, and both are continually repurposed in this process.

An approach to *Saute ma ville* that takes into consideration Akerman’s familial history also gleans psychoanalytic significance other than the sexual import so often discussed in regard to Akerman’s films. Janet Bergstrom views *Saute ma ville* “as an expression of need—or a demand for attention—from the child” (Foster 103). She claims that “It is characteristic of children of survivors of the Holocaust that they understand from the earliest age that they must not express aggression against their parent (or parents) because the survivor has already suffered too much” (Foster 103). In such a relationship, “the children are treated as if they are little adults who must protect their parents.” As she continues, “the child’s expressions of need must be suppressed and even punished, if not physically, then with blame and guilt. But because aggression is a basic component of any child’s psychological makeup, it must surface somewhere, in some form” (Foster 103). Such aggression is oftentimes directed toward the self, “but it can also be expressed in disguised acts of revenge against the parent, who has ignored or seemed to be indifferent to the child’s need for the expression of parental love” (Foster 103). Akerman’s films depict rage directed both inwards and outwards. In *Saute ma ville*, Chantal expresses rage directed inwards by placing her bead where the explosion is to occur—the center of the rage—but she also “blows up [her town],” revealing a desire
to express rage outwards; in *New York, New York bis*, the rage is also expressed toward the self; in the film that was to come after *Saute ma ville*, about “a little girl…who poisons her parents,” the main character directs rage toward her parents. The latter film is a prominent “disguised act of revenge against the parent”: it is disguised in its medium as a film, but it works to represent an act of revenge.

In Bergstrom’s view, *Saute ma ville* also depicts “psychic implosion.” Chantal sings “with the intrusiveness of a troubled child vying for attention,” Bergstrom writes, “especially as she becomes louder and more persistent. The way the actions get off-track is also disturbing, because every action looks like the externalisation of psychic implosion” (Foster 103). Such collapse manifests also in the repetitive behavior depicted in *Je tu il elle*. Examining Akerman’s corporeal self-constitution through Abraham and Torok’s psychoanalytic theory establishes the connection between the film’s cyclical nature—both structurally and in the behavior it depicts—and Akerman’s history as a child of Holocaust survivors.

**Repetition, Digestion, Words**

Jean Narboni claims in his review of *Je tu il elle* for *Cahiers du Cinéma* that the film works “cyclically,” as it begins with Julie’s statement, “and I left” (Narboni 11, my translation). Presumably this occurs after Chantal’s encounter with her ex-lover, who says to her, “You have to leave tomorrow.” The film ends with Chantal departing the next morning, and though a cycle is constructed, the film’s ending serves to disrupt it. *Je tu il elle*’s structure reflects the circular nature of Julie’s behavior as she eats sugar, writes, and paces around the apartment for the first third of the

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13 As Narboni writes, “le film fonctionne cycliquement. Car les premiers mots du commentaire sont : « ... et je suis partie » ” (11).
film. Abraham and Torok’s thought reveals the transgenerational phantom as the origin of such repetition.¹⁴

Torok, in “The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse,” uses Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” as a point of departure to illustrate the difference between incorporation and introjection in her theory. Such discussion establishes Natalia Akerman as Chantal Akerman’s love object. In Torok’s words, Freud claims “the trauma of objectal loss leads to a response: incorporation of the object within the ego,” and this incorporated object “makes it possible both to wait while readjusting the internal economy and to redistribute one’s investments” (Abraham and Torok 111). (In Freud’s thought, loss is not always due to the love object’s death, but could also stem from a disappointment caused by the love object, which the subject often employs defenses against to maintain the perception of the love object as an ego ideal.) Torok argues that the incorporation of the object into the ego occurs in “oral-cannibalistic” and “anal-evacuative” processes (Abraham and Torok 111). Though incorporation and introjection are “subsequently opposed,” she claims “there is an archaic level on which [they] could still be fused”: the early form of the ego is “made up of the oral libido’s introjection,” which “signals its meaning to itself by way of a fantasy or ingestion,” and employs “ingestion and its variants (salivation, hiccups, vomiting, etc.), in symbolic expressions, such as asking for or refusing food regardless of the actual state of hunger or, alternatively, fantasizing the consumption and refusal of food by means of the same mechanism but when the object is absent.” As she claims, “The latter corresponds quite precisely to what is usually

¹⁴ I will use three essays from The Shell and the Kernel for my analysis: Torok’s “The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse,” Abraham’s “Notes on the Phantom: A Compliment to Freud’s Metapsychology,” and Abraham and Torok’s “Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation.” I point this out because The Shell and the Kernel was not written to be a monograph; it is instead composed of various essays written by Abraham and Torok over two decades. According to Nicholas T. Rand’s introduction, the piece “presents not a doctrine but rather a cluster of insights open to further development and discovery on the part of readers” (1). I integrate a variety of terms from The Shell and the Kernel to illustrate the anxieties Akerman’s protagonist performs.
described as the mechanism of incorporation” (Abraham and Torok 114). Nevertheless, these actions—which constitute introjection but could disguise themselves as incorporation—engender the construction of an incorporation fantasy.

The peril of such fantasy is the hunger for food then masks the desire for introjection: food is seen as sating this psychic need, but it fails to satisfy. Such leads to an instance in which “‘eating’ (the feast) is paraded as the equivalent of an immediate but purely hallucinatory and illusory ‘introjection’” (Abraham and Torok 114-115). Though “manic persons announce with fanfare to their unconscious that they are ‘eating’ (an act signifying the process of introjection and satisfaction for the ego),” it means “nothing but empty words and no introjection.” Thus incorporation is “the disguised language of as yet unborn and unintrojected desires” (Abraham and Torok 115). The mouth is the site of introjection, and it attempts to fill its void—which should be filled with introjective speech—with objects.

In Abraham and Torok’s thought, the act of eating conceals the desire for trauma to be processed through speech. When the “empty mouth calls out in vain to be filled with introjective speech, it reverts to being the food-craving mouth it was prior to the acquisition of speech” (128). But ultimately such feeding fails to satiate the problem: “The desperate ploy of filling the mouth with illusory nourishment has the equally illusory effect of eradicating the idea of a void to be filled with words” (128). Thus “in the face of both the urgency and the impossibility of performing one type of mouth-work—speaking to someone about what we have lost—another type of mouth-work is utilized, one that is imaginary and equipped to deny the very existence of the entire problem” (129). Thus, non-nutritional food serves to conceal trauma and prevent it from being digested. The significance of Chantal’s repetitive consumption of sugar and alcohol lies in the matter of each: though she eats and drinks, powdered sugar and beer have no nutritional content and merely serve to mask hunger and thirst.
Empty content populates the second third of the film in the form of language. While the section is composed of performative consumption and sexual activity, the sounds of both activities are masked with meaningless jabber. After a truck driver picks up Julie on the side of the road, the two go to a restaurant and eat in silence. They appear to be watching a television as they eat, which is presumably near the camera—they gaze at the top right corner of the frame—and we hear cartoonish music, sound effects, and inexplicable words coming from the television. It is impossible to tell what Julie is eating, but she appears to be putting food in her mouth in unexaggerated gestures (unlike the first section of the film). Next, Julie and the truck driver go to a bar. Loud broken phrases from other patrons conceal any cohesive conversation taking place, and Julie is handed a beer, which she repetitively and quickly sips without the glass draining—it appears she is licking the glass in a way reminiscent of her apple licking in *La chambre*—before placing the full glass back down on the bar. Words are aligned with non-nutritive consumption and rendered fruitless.

We hear more futile language afterwards, when they get into the truck. They sit inside without speaking while the truck driver switches between radio stations masked by static. Next they go to another restaurant and Akerman compulsively tips her beer glass back and forth toward her mouth, tasting it, finally consuming about half of its contents. Again, Akerman licks her lips and the glass, but her focus appears to be more on performing consumption than actually consuming. In the background, incomprehensible cartoonish music plays again and they sit in silence. The next scene is composed of the truck driver putting Julie’s hand on his penis and instructing her as she gives him a hand-job. The conversation, representative of this section of the film (the second third), is one-sided: his vacuous words mask and distract from authentic exchange, digestion, and expulsion.

His nonstop speech lies in contrast to the final sex scene of the film with Julie’s ex-lover, which is so silent, so wordless, that the sounds of bodies rubbing against each other and moving on top of sheets is tactile. The consumption of the second third of the film is also presented in
opposition to the final third, in which Julie’s ex-lover makes her a sandwich and watches her in silence as she devours it and then asks for more. After her ex-girlfriend makes her another sandwich, Julie tells her that she is thirsty, and her ex-girlfriend retrieves a bottle of wine for her. Julie eats the second sandwich, but instead of drinking the wine, she reaches for her ex-girlfriend’s shirt, pulls it down, and the rest of the movie consists of a sex scene whose silence illuminates the vacuity of words composing the second third of the film. In Julie’s interaction with food in the scene, we see her “asking for” and then “refusing food regardless of the actual state of hunger” (Abraham and Torok 114). Furthermore, in the first two thirds of the film we see Julie announcing to herself that she is eating without actually eating: the repetition with which she performs consumption is a testament to its inability to fill her void. After the sex scene, Julie leaves and presumably wakes up the next morning in the beginning of the film, looping the process again, signifying its futility. Ultimately, food is “nothing but empty words and no introjection.”

Establishing the difference between introjection and incorporation is necessary for an analysis of the transgenerational phantom in Akerman’s work. If, however, the subject’s love object was not lost itself but instead holds a shameful secret, the subject may be visited by phantoms. The phantom, Abraham asserts in “Notes on the Phantom: A Compliment to Freud’s Metapsychology,” “is meant to objectify, even if under the guise of individual or collective hallucinations, the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object’s life.” Thus “the phantom is...also a metapsychological fact: what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (Abraham and Torok 171). The phantom is not related to the loss of the love object, but instead “the children’s or descendants’ lot to objectify these buried tombs through diverse species of ghosts. What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others. The phantoms of folklore merely objectify a metaphor active in the unconscious: the burial of an unspeakable fact within the love-object” (Abraham and Torok 171-172). The parent’s unconscious houses the phantom and passes it
to the child’s unconscious: in the child subject, the phantom’s “periodic and compulsive return lies
beyond the scope of symptom formation in the sense of a return of the repressed” (Abraham and
Torok 173, italics mine). The phantom also “[creates] the impression of surrealistic flights of fancy
or of oulipo-like verbal feats” in the subject (Abraham and Torok 173). The emergence and
disappearance of Akerman’s hunger, which belies any kind of pattern other than its presence, aligns
with the phantom’s “periodic” and “compulsive” return. Furthermore, the “oulipo-like verbal feats”
rationalize the arbitrary nature of speech in the film. While Julie rarely speaks to others, language as a
communication device is consistently rendered fruitless.

Though these “verbal feats” are empty of meaning they are significant in their presence.
“The phantom,” Abraham and Torok claim, “obstructs our perception of words as implicitly
referring to their unconscious portion…the words used by the phantom to carry out its return (and
which the child sensed in the parent) do not refer to a source of speech in the parent.” On the other
hand, the words signify “a gap” and “refer to the unspeakable.” The phantom surfaces “when it is
recognized that a gap was transmitted to the subject with the result of barring him or her from the
specific introjections he or she would seek at present,” and it “indicates the effects, on the
descendants, of something that had inflicted narcissistic injury or even catastrophe on the parents”
(Abraham and Torok 174). The phantom haunts Akerman’s characters throughout Saute ma ville, Je tu
il elle, and La chambre.

If one views Akerman’s mother as her love object and her mother’s ineffable history as a
Holocaust survivor as the phantom that haunts, the repetitive consumption in which Akerman’s
characters engage is charged with psychoanalytic significance. After Natalia Akerman’s death,
Chantal Akerman said, “Even if I have a home in Paris and sometimes in New York, whenever I
was saying I have to go home, it was going to my mother. And there is ‘no home’ anymore, because
she isn’t there, and when I came the last time, the home was empty” (Donadio). Furthermore,
Akerman described the process of making *No Home Movie* as “a passage into something else.” “I was not mourning when I was doing that,” she said. “It was the other way around: I was living, and not mourning” (Donadio). Although there is no artistic material to analyze between *No Home Movie*’s release and Akerman’s suicide, Akerman’s reaction to her mother’s death is a testament to her role as Akerman’s love object; moreover, Akerman’s characters’ engagement with phantoms illustrates her mother’s presence as a love object in her films.

Akerman’s characters carry the phantom in their behavior. In “Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation,” the “carrier of a crypt” refers to someone who carries their love object’s secret. Abraham and Torok claim that “Crypts are constructed only when the shameful secret is the love object’s doing and when that object also functions for the subject as an ego ideal. It is therefore the object’s secret that needs to be kept, his shame covered up. Yet the love object’s mourning does not proceed in the usual way with the help of words used figuratively” (Abraham and Torok 131). The crypt is filled with content—undigested import passed from the love object to the subject—but the crypt is empty in that it creates an inaccessible vacuous space in the subject.

We see in Akerman’s corporeal self-constitution the cryptophoric subject’s “introjection,” which takes the form of “inserting in the mouth, swallowing, eating.” However, we don’t see the “debased love object ‘fecalized’” or “rendered excremental” (Abraham and Torok 131). Though Akerman’s characters perform repetitive acts of consumption, they do not engage in necrophagia or cannibalistic behavior, and this is where Akerman’s work escapes psychoanalytic finality. At the same time, however, Akerman’s characters are not depicted engaging in “anal-evacuative” processes, suggesting that they are stuck in the process of mourning. As Margulies asserts, “the images in *Je tu il elle* don’t cancel representation; they reveal scene and character starkly. But referentiality is imploded, for though reality is entirely apparent, even naked, it is represented as simultaneously faltering and excessive, discontinuous and repetitive, circular and nontotalizing” (Margulies 118). Psychoanalysis
explains the symptoms of Akerman’s characters but fails to fully account for their behavior, demonstrating the limits of an examination that turns to the author’s biography for an explanation of fictional work.

Abraham and Torok’s theory endows the obsessive writing and sugar eating with psychoanalytic significance pertaining to personal history. Margulies points out that Julie’s writing and sugar consumption are part of a “cycle of solipsistic productivity” (Margulies 117). Chantal says in the voiceover during this cycle, “I lay down and wrote a letter”; then, “First it took three pages to express myself”; and finally, “Then I wrote the same thing in six pages” (Je tu il elle). In Margulies’ words, “Quantity—of eaten sugar, pages written, camera shots—is cleaved from significance; mounting numbers don’t mean progress. The accumulation of letter pages” is “vacuous” (Margulies 117). There is no connection between meaning and the accretion of words: instead the words signify both an effort to mask the desire for introjection and the presence of the phantom.

To conclude, I return to Akerman’s first film. In the opening of Saute ma ville, Chantal pulls letters out of a mailbox. We never read the letters, and it appears Chantal does not either; instead, she opens one and hangs it on the kitchen cabinet, ripping a hole in the middle so the letter can rest on the cabinet’s hinge. Akerman then eats an apple as she applies strands of tape to the door, making a gas chamber for herself. Linguistic and aesthetic self-referentiality follow Chantal through the film. The door of Chantal’s apartment has a handwritten sign saying, “C’est moi!” stuck to it; Chantal looks at herself in the mirror several times and angrily scribbles indecipherable letters on the mirror with lotion; and Chantal looks at the camera when she is eating, confronting Akerman the director. Moreover, the title of the film is missing a pronoun. The verb saute could come from the “I” or “he/she” pronoun, or it could be in the imperative form, commanding one to blow up “my” town. Sauter also has several meanings, complicating the title’s implications: it could mean “to blow up,” “to jump out,” “to skip,” or “to leap,” all actions that Chantal performs or threatens to
perform. At one point Chantal perches on the furnace below the apartment window as if she is contemplating jumping out, and she tosses the cat out the window. Chantal jumps around the apartment, climbing on the counter and leaping off; she dances and skips throughout the film; and finally she blows herself up.

Similarly, consumption permeates the short. Next to the “C’est moi!” sign is a poster depicting Schtroumpf Cuisinier (Chef Smurf) next to a cartoon bubble saying, “Go Home!” Chantal also makes pasta for herself, and after taking a few bites she places it on the floor next to a bowl filled with cat food. (We see the unfinished apple from earlier in the next shot, when Chantal returns to taping up the door.) Even though Chantal has just prepared food for her cat, once she sees the cat she tosses it out the window, presaging her death later on and signifying the futile nature of consumption in the film.

Before lighting the stove for the final time, Akerman moves the letter so it hangs above the stove. She also pulls out a pen, fingers it thoughtfully, and opens a newspaper; then she fingers the pen another time—again seeming lost in thought—and uses it to scribble all over the newspaper. As she scribbles, her repressed hums—it sounds as if her mouth is closed in the voiceover—become louder and more frustrated. Before Chantal turns on the gas, she sets the letter that now hangs above the stove on fire.

The suppressed nature of Chantal’s hums exacerbates the blocked communication she depicts, and the words in the letter—which Chantal will never read—represent the masked content that characterizes the phantom’s presence. The fire spreads from the letter to the gas, and then the explosion occurs. The letters signify the crypt within Chantal, and both are destroyed in the fire. Akerman’s character chooses to die by gas, and here, the phantom is not only present and haunting, but it kills Chantal. In dying by gas, Akerman’s character subjects herself to trauma echoing that

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15 Many thanks to Danny Atherton, a fellow Georgetown master’s student, for this observation.
experienced by a Holocaust victim, but in the explosion she also destroys the crypt inside herself and thereby serves as a martyr. The title could historically refer to the Allied plans to bomb Auschwitz in the late stages of World War II, where ma ville becomes the place of Akerman’s grandparents’ deaths and Natalia Akerman’s lost childhood.\(^{16}\) Though both Chantal’s fictive death and Deleuze’s real one can be viewed as instances of queer performative suicide, they differ in that Chantal’s agency in the matter is constrained and haunted by the phantom, or memory.

Akerman’s films portray consumption, production, and repetition in order to reveal objective linearity as a fragile mask demanding rupture. Though Je tu il elle appears at first viewing to follow a linear plot, a second viewing indicates a piece permanent in its circuitry, the end a minor interruption, just as the rotating camera stops and changes direction in La chambre. Chantal’s apples in Saute ma ville and La chambre, which she consumes by taking bites around the core as it spins in her hand, and the production-consumption cycle in Je tu il elle, literalize this structure and extend its import to the film’s obsessive focus on eating, identifying its futility. In first devouring, and then leaving these apples unfinished, Chantal enacts a reclamation of Eve’s fall, one that commences with Chantal’s interest in sinful knowledge, experience, and agency, and ends with a lapse into ultimate satisfaction and indifference once she has nourished herself. Chantal’s performance is a corporeal signification of the inevitable—but self-chosen—leap into death after a life fulfilled.

These circular motifs ultimately expose the vacuity of linearity and locate rupture as inevitable but unproductive nonetheless. Like the disturbed camera in La chambre or the mattress that relentlessly shifts and defies definition in Je tu il elle, the characters Akerman performs belie Abraham and Torok’s framework, manifesting symptoms, like their consumption, that are erratic, repetitive, and significant, but not conclusive. In illustrating these symptoms, Akerman—like Plath—revises psychoanalysis, rendering herself an organizer of meaning who is aware of her

\(^{16}\) Many thanks to Chris Huebner, a fellow Georgetown master’s student, for this insight.
authorial subject position as a director. Rather than situating her characters as mere objects of psychoanalysis, Akerman collapses the boundary between herself as director and her characters, who are subject to Akerman’s import. Thus these doubles are analogous to her death: they disrupt predetermination and classification—they break through the mask of words—and in their visual representation they propose an alternative agency. Like a volcanic explosion, Akerman’s performance redeems the labor of reconstructing memory, a violent but stunning release of repression into an arid, darkened landscape.
CODA

Toward a Queer Center Space

Uncanny queerness in Akerman’s and Plath’s work could take many directions in future scholarship. As the uncanny arises from a repressed desire to return to the womb, one could comparatively examine motherhood more acutely in both of these authors’ works. As mentioned earlier, several studies have focused on Esther’s mother’s involvement in her suicide, and Akerman’s work grapples with a similar concern. The correspondence between both Akerman and Plath and their mothers is well documented, and analyses could shed light on the maternal and narcissistic tensions pervading their work.

A study focused solely on uncanny elements in The Bell Jar would be fruitful, as this thesis glossed over only three of them: mirrors, concealment, and doubling. But these and others construct the novel. For example, one could analyze eye and doll imagery alongside the novel’s obsessive fascination with dismembered bodies. In a similar regard, I expect a study of the relationship between liminal beach imagery, fog, and persecution (for example, in the temporal connection between Esther attempting to visit a jail after visiting the beach) would be fertile. An examination of each one of Esther’s doubles in The Bell Jar—Doreen (the impolite, straight, lustful, double), Betsy (the polite, straight, chaste, feminine double), Buddy (the male double), and Joan (the queer, suicidal, socially unacceptable double), Esther’s mother (the future double), Jay Cee and Philomena Guinea (the professional doubles)—would indicate Esther’s imagined futures depending on her chosen orientation to femininity and gender roles of 1950s America. I also anticipate an analysis of animal imagery and tropical motifs would demonstrate the novel’s ambivalence toward animism and primitivism. Another avenue would be to interrogate the various name repetitions in the novel to
discern what each number signifies; for example, some names are repeated twice, whereas Plath tends to repeat variations of Esther’s name three times.

Finally, if we view doubling as a channel for the anxiety of death that characterizes human life, regardless of culture or historical context, examining the nature of that channel reveals anxieties of the environment in which the piece was created. An analysis of these kinds of repressed doubles throughout literary history—Dante, in *Dante’s Inferno*; Marcel, in *In Search of Lost Time*—could illustrate the specific anxieties of these works’ temporal and cultural contexts. For example, explicitly racist motifs pervade *The Bell Jar*: non-Western races are recurrently associated with Esther’s primitive double, reflecting the concerns of mid-twentieth century America.17 A historical or genre-based examination of the rhetoric used to double—for example, in the Gothic genre, or in Victorian imperial fiction, or in twentieth-century films of displaced peoples, or in American television shows of the 1990s—would illustrate the cultural fears that the primitive double siphons and expels.

Although the autobiographical trajectories of Plath and Akerman are strikingly similar, Akerman’s death repeatedly illustrates that no suicide is identical to another, in motivation or consequence. Akerman lived twice as long as Plath. She was single by choice and financially independent, and she accumulated the resources necessary for a prolific and sustainable career. From my standpoint, Akerman had more agency over when to end her life than Plath, whose poor health, financial instability, abandonment by her husband, and maternal responsibilities at the time of her death hint at a bleaker portrait, one in which Plath—though still an agent of her death—was cornered into suicide.

The ambivalent peace that, for me, accompanies Akerman’s agency—her self-chosen trajectory—lies in stark contrast to the nebulous wonder that arrives when I allow myself to consider

17 See, for example, “Then my ears went funny, and I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used up I looked” (18).
what could have come of Plath if mental-health services and a greater acceptance of the queer were at her time what they are today. But Plath, in a sense, gave birth to Akerman. Akerman’s films persistently indicate an awareness of their indebtedness to Plath’s work, and Plath was eighteen years older than Akerman; she could have been her mother. Unlike Plath’s protagonist, whose lust for non-procreative sex drives *The Bell Jar*, Akerman’s *Je tu il elle*—which premiered when Akerman was twenty-four years old, in comparison to Plath’s age of thirty-two at the time of her novel’s publication—depicts Akerman acting in a non-procreative sex scene with her girlfriend at the time,¹⁸ a scene that fulfills Plath’s desire for sex without the anxiety of pregnancy. This lineage could provide comfort for other Plath scholars, as it has for me.

But the autobiographies of these artists are, for this examination, not as relevant as the agency and queerness that they imagined, articulated, and performed in their fiction. For them, the queer embodies living for today, shedding like snakeskin the depression that comes when stuck in the past and the futile anxiety that accompanies the desire to inhabit or predict the future. Their work allows the audience to envision sex without procreation, creativity for the pleasure and release it gives in the moment of writing, performance for the nourishment it bestows upon the self, and finally, a life lived for simply the experience of life itself, a reclamation—and reminder—of liminality’s inherent beauty.

A third and final return to *The Bell Jar’s* excised passage—this thesis’s opening—honors the looping structural integrity of Plath’s and Akerman’s work. As Plath wrote, disfigured, and then finally erased,

> I could never be a nurse. The idea of being noble service to the sick and the injured and the crippled and the malformed and the queer aborted monsters hidden deeply away in public or

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¹⁸ Please see Victoria Brownworth’s “Lesbian Filmmaker Commits Suicide.”
private brick buildings as [sic] always appealed to me, but when it comes to the test I turn my back. I want to kill them. *They disgust me so profoundly I lose my humanity.* I want to stamp them out, extinguish them under my feet like cockroaches or poisonous rats. They make me feel I am looking into a warped diabolical mirror that shows the reality behind the mask, and what I see is nothing but myself. (Fig. 1, italics mine)

Both artists illustrate again and again that what we hate in others is often what we hate, fear, and want to murder in ourselves. And in these performances, Akerman and Plath express an urgent message: When androgyny—nuance and liminality and shades of grey—is not permitted, when one is unable to occupy a queer center space, the repressed double will inevitably come back to bedevil and, in many cases, kill. For them, confronting that message was worth any cost. It is my hope that their stories will inspire a recognition of queer complexities, in each other and in ourselves.
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FIGURE 1

Chapter 4

Mr. Willard and I waited in the reception room for the end of the afternoon rest.

The color scheme of the whole sanatorium seemed to be based on a dull liver of dark reddish brown woodwork, silver-colored leather chairs, yellow-green walls that MIGHT once have been white, but had succumbed to a spreading mildew of mild or damp, I thought. A dull little basin of calm linoleum, a small fountain in the center of the room. The fountain was fed from a length of iron pipe and dribbled into a basin of water. The basin was covered with white hexagonal tiles that one finds in public laboratories.

A buzzer sounded. Doors opened and shut in the distance.

Then Buddy came in. "Hello, dad."

He hugged his father and looked with a dreadful brightness, came over to me and held out his hand. "I don't know what I should do. I'm so Enrollment." "I know, I'm so Enrollment."

Mr. Willard and I sat on a leather couch opposite up in a slippery armchair. He kept smiling as if the corners of his mouth were strung up on invisible wires.

I could never be a nurse. The idea of being noble service to the sick and the injured and the crippled and the malformed and the maimed monsters hidden away in public or private brick buildings always appealed to me, but when it comes to the test, I turn my back.

I disgust me so profoundly I lose my humanity. I want to stamp them under my feet like cockroaches or rats. They make me feel I am looking into a warped, diabolical mirror that shows the reality behind the mask, and what I see is nothing but myself.
Buddy again; as I did not want to give my children a hypocrite for a father.

I stuck the letter back in the envelope, scotch-taped it together, and readressed it to Buddy, without putting on a new stamp. I thought the message was worth a good three cents.

Then I decided I would spend the summer writing a novel.

That would fix a lot of people.

I strolled into the kitchen, dropped a raw egg into a teacup of raw hamburg, mixed it up and ate it. Then I set up the card table on the screened breezeway between the house and the garage.

A great wallowing bush of mock orange shut off the view of the street in front, the house wall and the garage wall took care of either side, and a clump of birches and a box hedge protected me from Mrs. Acker at the back.

I counted out three hundred and fifty sheets of corrusable bond from my mother's stock in the hall closet, secreted away under a pile of old felt hats and clothes brushes and woollen scarves.

Back on the breezeway, I fed the first, virgin sheet into my old portable and rolled it up.

From another, distanced mind, I saw myself sitting on the breezeway, surrounded by two white clapboard walls, a mock orange bush and a clump of birches and a box hedge, small as a doll in a doll's house.

A feeling of tenderness filled my heart. My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Virginia. Virginia. I counted the letters on my fingers. Eight. There were eight letters in Victoria, too. It seemed a lucky thing.
Chapter 5

At seven the next morning the telephone rang.

Slowly I swam up from the bottom of a black sleep. I already had a telegram from Jay Cee stuck in my mirror, telling me not to bother to come into work but to rest for a day and get completely well and how sorry she was about the bad crabmeat, so I couldn't imagine who would be calling.

I reached out and hitched the receiver onto my pillow so the mouthpiece rested on my collarbone and the earpiece lay on my shoulder.

"Hello?"

A man's voice said, "Is that Miss Victoria Innes?" I thought I detected a slight foreign accent.

"It certainly is," I said.

"This is Constantin Something-or-Other."

I couldn't make out the last name, but it was full of S's and K's. I didn't know any Constantin, but I hadn't the heart to say so.

Then I remembered Mrs. Willard and her simultaneous interpreter.

"Of course, of course!" I cried, sitting up and clutching the phone to me with both hands.

I'd never have given Mrs. Willard credit for introducing me to a man named Constantin.
Dear James,

No, I’ve not forgotten about the libel issue. In fact, I’ve thought about little else. I’ve gone through the book with great care and have prepared a list of links of fiction to fact, and a list of minor corrections which should alter most specific factual references.

Of course you’re right about the name of author and heroine needing to be different. I’ve decided to call the heroine Esther Greenwood, so all references to her and her family should be altered accordingly (pp. 22, 35, 41, 53, 59, 60, 61, 72, 77, 79, 127, 128, 145, 157, 188, 190, 195, 197, 203, 205, 212, 216, 221, 225, 229, 230, 232, 235, 237, 244, 250, 253, 257, 298, 261, 264).

The whole first half of the book is based on the Mademoiselle College Board Program for Guest Editors. I have changed the number of girls from 20 to 12, and the girls (Doreen, Betsy, Hilda et. al.) are all fictitious. I honestly don’t see that I say anything nasty or defamatory about the magazine (unnamed in the book). The poisoning incident takes place at another magazine, fictitious, called Ladiest Bay, a made-up name. The editor Jay Cee (there are dozens of editors on this magazine) is fictitious & the only unfavorable thing about her is that Doreen calls her “ugly as sin”. Surely no present editor who is not beautiful could sue me for this? The opportunities for suing authors as mentioned under libel in my writer’s handbooks seem infinite. For example, I am aware of no “Doctor Gordon” practicing as a psychiatrist on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, but how is one ever to find out if there is a Doctor Gordon, as the name is common? Presumably any old Doctor Gordon could sue me for saying he gave a bad shock treatment. Do reassure me on this point!

Next, the “big eastern women’s college” the girl attends is based on Smith, but could be any of half a dozen—Holyoke, Vassar, Bennington, etc. I don’t think I say anything defamatory about the college anyway.

Doctor Gordon (p. 137 and following) is fictitious. His Nanzi (p. 36) is fictitious. Irwin (p. 244) is fictitious. These are the only people I can think about who I say unflattering things about. My mother is based on my mother, but what do I say to defend her? She is a dutiful, hard-working woman whose beastly daughter is ungrateful to her. Even if she were a “suicid” mother, which she is of course not, I don’t see what she could sue here. If there is anything, let me know.

Buddy Willard is based on a boy —but I think I have made him indistinguishable from all the blond, blue-eyed boys who have ever gone to Yale. There are millions, and hundreds who become doctors. And who have affairs with people.
2.

The Deer Island Prison (pp. 161-2) is a real place by its real name. I think I am very nice about it.

The "city hospital" in Boston could be one of several. I don't think I deface it anyway. The private hospital in the counter (p. 202 and following) is based on the mental hospital in Robert Lowell's Life Studies ("This is the way day breaks at Bowditch at McLean's), but as I don't name it and as there are lots of other hospitals like it sprinkled over Massachusetts, I think it is unidentifiable. All I say about it is datory anyhow.

Jane (I'm changing her name to Joan) is fictitious, and so is her suicide—I mean it isn't based on a real one. The women at the hospital are all fictitious.

Oh yes, the Amazon hotel in New York (p. 4) is based on a hotel called the Barbizon. But aren't I nice about it?

I do hope there are no grave grounds for libel in any of this. There are so few people or institutions that I can be said to "deface" in any way, and the few I criticize I certainly don't think are recognizable. Do tell me what the lawyer says. I don't want to get paranoid & think I can't ever say anything nasty and foul about Mrs. Gleek, for fear thousands of Mrs. Gleeks I don't know and never knew will rise up and drive me and my babes into the woods.

Here are the minor corrections I want to make:

p. 33: Omit "literary" in "literary editor".
pp. 41 & 82: Change "Vee Ell" to "Be Gee, the famous editor".
pp. 42: Omit "dried-up".
pp. 54 & 82: Change "Plato" to "Socrates".
pp. 62, 63, 212 & f: Change "Jane" to "Joan" throughout.
p. 90: Change "Latin and mathematics teacher" to "private school teacher".
p. 166: Omit "Harvard" from "Harvard Medical School".
p. 94: Change "important history lecture" to "important economics lecture".
p. 125: Change "Radcliffe" to "Barnard", and "Harvard" to "Columbia".
p. 102: Change "Virginia" to "Elaine", "eight" to "six", "Victoria" to "Eather".
p. 130: Change "Virginia" to "Elaine".
p. 146, 149, 150: Change "Carling" to "Walton".
p. 161: Change "Point Shirley" to "The Point".
p. 191: Change "the city hospital" to "a city hospital".
p. 226: Change "when there was another Jane in the room" to "when she knew what my name was perfectly well".

One last, & for me very important point: after much waiting I have at last received this American grant for the novel, which will come in 4 installments, the last, I imagine, arriving about next August. Thus it is imperative that nobody knows I've done this till then—I'll let you know when the last installment arrives. I'll have to acknowledge the grant on the book jacket, too. This will give me time to write in peace & eat complete meals, a blessing all round, so I rely on you to maintain a large lunge round the book.

Best wishes.
12th February, 1963

Miss Sylvia Plath,
23 Fitzroy Road,
London, N.W. 1

Dear Miss Plath,

Did something go wrong about our lunch date yesterday or or did I put down the wrong day? Don't worry, but I just want to make sure that I haven't make a mistake so that you don't come here and wait for me one day when I am out. I do hope we can arrange a meeting some time soon.

Yours sincerely,

David Machin
APPENDIX 12

Letter

1 October 1957

Tuesday, October 1

Letter to a demon:
Last night I felt the sensation I have been reading about to no avail in James: the sick, soul-annihilating flux of fear in my blood switching its current to defiant fight. I could not sleep, although tired, and lay feeling my nerves shaved to pain & the groaning inner voice: oh, you can't teach, can't do anything. Can't write, can't think. And I lay under the negative icy flood of denial, thinking that voice was all my own, a part of me, and it must somehow conquer me & leave me with my worst visions: having had the chance to battle it & win day by day, and having failed.

I cannot ignore this murderous self: it is there. I smell it and feel it, but I will not give it my name. I shall shame it. When it says: you shall not sleep, you cannot teach, I shall go on anyway, knocking its nose in. It's biggest weapon is and has been the image of myself as a perfect success: in writing, teaching and living. As soon as I sniff non-success in the form of rejections, puzzled faces in class when I'm blurring a point, or a cold horror in personal relationships, I accuse myself of being a hypocrite, posing as better than I am, and being, at bottom lousy.

I am middling good. And I can live being middling good. I do not have advanced degrees, I do not have books published, I do not have teaching experience. I have a job teaching. I cannot rightly ask myself to be a better teacher than any of those teaching around me with degrees, books published and experience. I can only, from day to day, fight to be a better teacher than I was the day before. If, at the end of a year of hard work, partial failure,
LETTER I OCTOBER 1957

partial dogged communication of a poem or a story, I can say I am easier, more confident & a better teacher than I was the first day, I have done enough. I must face this image of myself as good for myself, and not freeze myself into a quivering jelly because I am not Mr. Fisher or Miss Dunn or any of the others.

I have a good self, that loves skies, hills, ideas, tasty meals, bright colors. My demon would murder this self by demanding it be a paragon, and saying it should run away if it is being anything less. I shall doggedly do my best and know it for that, no matter what other people say. I can learn to be a better teacher. But only by painful trial and error. Life is painful trial and error. I instinctively gave myself this job because I knew I needed the confidence it would give me as I needed food: it would be my first active facing of life & responsibility: something thousands of people face every day, with groans, maybe, or with dogged determination, or with joy. But they face it. I have this demon who wants me to run away screaming if I am going to be flawed, fallible. It wants me to think I'm so good I must be perfect. Or nothing. I am, on the contrary, something: a being who gets tired, has shyness to fight, has more trouble than most facing people easily. If I get through this year, kicking my demon down when it comes up, realising I'll be tired after a day's work, and tired after correcting papers, and it's natural tiredness, not something to be ranted about in horror, I'll be able, piece by piece, to face the field of life, instead of running from it the minute it hurts.

The demon would humiliate me: throw me on my knees before the college president, my department chairman, everyone, crying: look at me, miserable, I can't do it. Talking about my fears to others feeds it. I shall show a calm front & fight it in the precincts of my own self, but never give it the social dignity of a public appearance, me running from it, and giving in to it. I'll work in my office roughly from 9 to 5 until I find myself doing better in class. In any case, I'll do something relaxing, different reading, etc. in the evenings. I'll keep myself intact, outside this job, this work. They can't ask more of me than my best, & only I know really where the limits on my best are. I have a choice: to flee from life and ruin myself forever because I can't be perfect right away, without pain & failure, and to face life on my own terms & “make the best of the job.”

each day I shall record a dogged step ahead or a marking time in place. The material of reading is something I love. I must learn, slowly, how to best
APPENDIX 12

present it, managing class discussion: I must reject the grovelling image of the fearful beast in myself, which is an elaborate escape image, and face, force, days into line. I have an inner fight that won’t be conquered by a motto or one night’s resolution. My demon of negation will tempt me day by day, and I’ll fight it, as something other than my essential self, which I am fighting to save: each day will have something to recommend it: whether the honest delight at watching the quick furred body of a squirrel, or sensing, deeply, the weather and color, or reading and thinking of something in a different light: a good explanation or 5 minutes in class to redeem a bad 45. Minute by minute to fight upward. Out from under that black cloud which would annihilate my whole being with its demand for perfection and measure, not of what I am, but of what I am not. I am what I am, and have written, lived and travelled: I have been worth what I have won, but must work to be worth more. I shall not be more by wishful thinking.

So: a stoic face. A position of irony, of double-vision. My job is serious, important, but nothing is more important than my life and my life in its fullest realized potential: jealousy, envy, desperate wishes to be someone else, someone already successful at teaching, is naive: Mr. Fisher, for all his student-love, has been left by his wife & children; Miss Williams, for all her experience & knowledge, is irrevocably dull. Every one of these people, the divorced Schendler, the unmarried Johnson, has some flaw, some crack, and to be one of them would be to be flawed & cracked in another fashion. I’ll shoulder my own crack, work on my James today, Hawthorne for next week & take life with gradual ease, dogged at first, but with more & more joy. My first victory was accepting this job, the second, coming up & plunging into it before my demon could say no, I wasn’t good enough, the third, going to class after a night of no sleep & desperation, the fourth, facing my demon last night with Ted & spitting in its eye. I’ll work hard on my planning, but work just as hard to build up a rich home life: to get writing again, to get my mind fertilized outside my job.

I shall not, carrion comfort, despair . . . etc.

No more knuckling under, groaning, moaning: one gets used to pain. This hurts. Not being perfect hurts. Having to bother about work in order to eat & have a house hurts. So what. It’s about time. This is the month which ends a quarter of a century for me, lived under the shadow of fear: fear that I would fall short of some abstract perfection: I have often fought, fought &
LETTER I October 1957

won, not perfection, but an acceptance of myself as having a right to live on my own human, fallible terms.

Attitude is everything. No whining or fainting will get me out of this job & I'd not like to think what would happen to my integral self if it did. I've accepted my first check: I've signed on, and no little girl tactics are going to get me off, nor should they.

To the library. Finish James book, memorize my topics, maybe the squirrel story. Have fun. If I have fun, the class will have fun.

Come home tonight: read lawrence, or write, if possible. That will come too.

Vive le roi, le roi est mort, vive le roi.