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The Bell Jar: Gender Role's Effect on Identity

While gender roles and their effect on double consciousness inhibit Esther's ability to form a cohesive identity, Dr. Nolan's unconventional role enables Esther to ultimately reconcile her consciousnesses.

Jay Cee and Dodo Conway's contrasting lifestyles highlight Esther's inability to commit to a single gender role. Following Doreen's criticism of Jay Cee as she attempts to coerce Esther into attending a party, Esther defensively praises her boss. She claims that, "Jay Cee had brains so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter. She read a couple languages and knew all the writers in the businesses. I tried to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit and luncheon-duty hat and in bed with her fat husband, but I just couldn't do it" (Plath 6). Plath's use of terms such as "brain", "writers" and "strict office suit" serve to underline the unalterable business context in which Jay Cee resides, her whole person unsuited for any other societal construct. Similarly, the use of imagery in Dodo Conway's introduction, in which Esther describes her as, "a woman... wheeling an old black baby carriage down the street..." with "...two or three small children of various sizes... in the shadow of her skirts", accentuates the tedium not only present in her own actions but of those pertaining to a similar role, that of the caring mother (Plath 116). Through the juxtaposition of these two, separate and seemingly exclusive gender stereotypes, Plath illustrates patriarchy's facility to ultimately trap women into certain functions. Influenced by such social strictures, Esther views her future as a series of entirely divergent paths, each disparate and unobtainable. While conforming to a singular and specific role comes easy for many of the young girls with whom Esther associates, Esther's indecisiveness prevents her from fully

committing to either lifestyle. Furthermore, though societal expectations and norms drive Esther towards the 'family life', such as the one that Dodo lives, Esther's innate ambition propels her towards greater career aspirations.

Unable to conform to a single gender role, Esther in turn creates multiple consciousnesses in order to cope. As she sits by Constantin, questioning her capabilities as a woman, Esther imagines her future as a fig tree, "From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children... and another fig was Ee Gee the amazing editor... I wanted each and every one of them..." (Plath 77). Unknown to Esther, the fig tree symbolizes her multiple consciousnesses. Like Esther's self, the tree divides among each 'beckoning' future, a consequence of Esther's inability to conform to a singular role. Such inability necessitates the division of Esther's psychological-social self into a series of consciousnesses, each consciousness serving as a specific outlet through which Esther perceives herself and those around her. Through these varying perceptions, Esther, only within the boundaries of her own mind, may seemingly grasp each and every fig, a mentality which allows her to cope with the necessity of choosing a select future. However, in reality, by remaining motionless, attached to the fig tree trunk and unable to actualize a sole role, Esther fails to realize she is only perpetuating her internal conflict.

As a consequence of her multiple consciousnesses, Esther is unable to form a single identity. Following her attempted suicide, Esther asks an unwilling nurse for a mirror. However, upon receiving the mirror, Esther expresses her puzzlement, "At first I didn't see what the trouble was. It wasn't a mirror at all but a picture. You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or woman..." (Plath 174-175). Esther's reaction to the mirror illustrates her incapacity to handle multiple

consciousnesses. In Esther's inability to recognize herself, Plath depicts the disparity not only between the filters through which Esther experiences the world, but also the polar differences between her perceptions of herself and the image which she outwardly projects. As though Esther continues to descend into madness, societal conventions require her to assume the image of a "normal girl", creating two independent and irreconcilable facets of herself. Such divergence is further revealed at the end of the chapter as Esther sits on the hospital bed, admiring the ball of mercury she holds in her hands, "I... smiled at the silver globe cupped in my palms, If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself..." (Plath 175). The mercury emblemizes Esther's shattered whole. Lost amid her separate and completely irreconcilable consciousnesses, Esther struggles to gain a single sense of self. However, unable to physiologically identify herself, Esther remains impotent in forming an identity.

Dr. Nolan's disparate gender role allows for the reconciliation of Esther's consciousnesses and consequent termination of her identity crisis. Upon her arrival at the psychiatric ward, Esther is surprised to find she has a woman psychiatrist, "I didn't think they had woman psychiatrists. This woman was a cross between Myrna Loy and my mother" (Plath 186). With maternal characteristics, the features of an actress and a prominent career, Dr. Nolan offers hope to Esther as her unique situation proves that escape from the confinements of gender roles is possible. As Dr. Nolan guides Esther through her mental recovery, Esther comes to the realization that her future as a mother and a writer are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, in the final scene as Esther steps into the threshold of the conference room, "guiding myself by them, as if by a magical thread...", she ultimately walks out from underneath the bell jar (Plath 244). Developed through her interactions with Dr. Nolan, Esther's newfound role acts as the "magical thread", enabling her release from the preconceived notions of gender roles. Such change in mindset consequently allows Esther to reconcile her consciousnesses, an action performed primarily

through confronting the different aspects of herself. By attending Joan's funeral and meeting Buddy Willard, Esther essentially buries her consciousnesses under the snowy setting in which the book ends, a final setting which further emphasizes Esther's newly purified identity and altered perceptions of the world.