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THE ARCHITECTURE OF A THREE-DIMENSIONAL FEMALE CHARACTER IN
SYLVIA PLATH'S "THE BELL JAR" AND ITS IMPACT ON FEMALE
CHARACTERS IN THE HOLLYWOOD FILM INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath is remembered in literary history for her complex and dimensional creation of characters through both her prose and poetry. Plath's own personal experiences with emotionally challenging life events informed her collective works, and from these experiences she drew forth her seminal novel *The Bell Jar*, a semiautobiographical account of a young girl named Esther who moves to New York City for a new job and uncovers her own vast emotional depth and potential for instability in the process. Esther's journey into the recesses of her own mind broke ground in that Plath exposed an emotional depth to a female character that had yet to be so explicitly explored outside of the confines of a male literary counterpart. Esther is a female character that stands on her own, and her three-dimensional emotionality constructed the blueprint for how we see modern females in literature and art. Following suit, the Hollywood film industry has produced countless films starring female protagonists with emotional issues, using these issues as a means to create depth in a character where depth does not truly exist. The recent coinage of the term "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" has been used to describe female film characters that do not fit traditional mold of a Hollywood dream girl due to their unique interests or experiences. However, these unique qualities of female characters in film are masquerading for emotional range and fail to create believable, realistic human females on screen as Plath created in her literature. In borrowing from Plath's blueprint but failing to execute it properly, Hollywood has propagated the further mistreatment of women in film by merely using them as plot-drivers to further the journey of male protagonists. In this paper, I will argue that this Hollywood misappropriation of Plath's ideals is detrimental to the future of female representation in cinema and stifles the effective portrayal of women in film.

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Chapter 1

Sylvia Plath as the Architect

“If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days.”

-Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

It is not without great suffering that great art can be born, and the most revered artistic contributions in modern history are no exception to this rule. Mental illness, emotional instability and bouts of utter unhingement have been the catalysts for the artwork, literature and film that young students are made to study in their bare-bones humanities education as examples of the pinnacle of human artistic ability.

Perhaps in many ways there is method to the madness, as William Shakespeare wrote. However, as the linear progression of time is apt to encourage, we can see modern artists, authors and creators adapt the art of those who came before them, making it new and contributing new ideas to a world that seems to be precariously approaching a cultural saturation point.

For 30 short years, an artist walked the earth who could form and shape words to create deep and meaningful language that resonated in the hearts and minds of many. Plagued by mental illness and the sensibilities of a true visionary, Sylvia Plath generated hundreds of poems about her struggles with self-love, her family, and her future. In a way that women had never been represented in modern literature, Plath strung together sentences that captured her own emotional depth and ability to feel on a spectacularly comprehensive spectrum. Culminating in her semi-

autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath's lifelong battle with depression and feelings of inadequacy fueled her ability to create a dynamic female character who was new and unprecedented in modern literature. Esther, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar* created in Plath's own likeness, possesses emotional range and an ability to feel a host of feelings that, in literature and art, were previously ignored.

Immersion into the neurotic mind of Sylvia Plath is a task undertaken by many, but truly appreciated by very few. A life of internal conflict ending in tragic suicide seems to be the popular culture legacy of Plath outside of the literary world, her death interpreted as the climax of her incredibly complex body of work. The deeply personal nature of Plath's writing, both in her poetry and her prose, draws forth a strikingly intricate look into the mind of a wife, mother, daughter, author and human – all roles that Plath and her literary characters struggle to reconcile. Plath's unique ability to create vast emotional depth in her characters, specifically Esther in *The Bell Jar*, is unparalleled. Separating herself from other authors, Plath's confrontation of male oppression and extrication of intimate female emotion set the stage for a revolution in what female characters in literature could feel. Crucial to this change is the ability Plath imbues into her writing subjects.

In her article "The Radical Imaginary of *The Bell Jar*," scholar Kate A. Baldwin refers to Plath's crafting of *The Bell Jar*'s protagonist as "the seductiveness of Esther's solipsism" (23). This is perhaps the crux of Esther Greenwood's success as a female protagonist: she is incredibly invested in herself and her own inner mind. This should not be confused with selfishness, but rather understood as Plath's creation of a character whose introspective tendencies are, as Baldwin puts it, nothing short of seductive. A female character of this nature is a rarity – the male-dominated literary landscape operates as a gateway to entry for many authors writing female protagonists. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese refers to this separation between the normalcy of male-dominated literature and the alternative to that normalcy – female-dominated literature – as

the “female literary culture” in her article “The New Female Literary Culture” (193). Fox-Genovese argues that, “If the cultural perspective remains male, as it largely has, then female writers must either conform to it, accept a separate and secondary sphere, or, worst of all, become shrill and demanding in their protests” (194).

Herein lies the greatness of *The Bell Jar* – it does not comfortably fit into Fox-Genovese’s three options. Plath does not conform to a male-dominated cultural perspective with Esther, nor does she accept a secondary sphere or become “shrill and demanding.” Esther is no different than any other self-interested male protagonist in literary history – the only difference is her biological gender. In many ways, *The Bell Jar* is an exercise in introspection as Esther delves deep into the unstable parts of her psyche while pursuing her own career aspirations to become a writer. Her actions are not driven by the male characters in the book, but by her own self.

Fox-Genovese goes on to point out that in many cases, “It has become commonplace to recognize female literary culture as hedged in domesticity,” a notion that Esther rejects by choosing to move to New York City and pursue a job at *Ladies’ Day* magazine, rather than try to meet a nice husband as her mom wishes she would (194). The trajectory of this female protagonist is not aiming for a domestic life, but considers domesticity and marriage as one option among many, and this feature sets Plath’s novel apart from other works that boast a female lead character. Perhaps, in a way, this does not mean *The Bell Jar* is not hedged in domesticity, because if it is rebelling against domesticity it is still making a commentary on a woman’s role in the domestic home, even if it is contrary to other modern literary works. However, the sections of *The Bell Jar* that address the potential for a domestic lifestyle are more than counterbalanced with the other real-life trials that Esther faces herself.

Plath introduces Buddy Willard as a male love interest for Esther, though “love” is not something that characterizes their interactions with one another. Buddy is a young medical student whom Esther has been seeing for a time, and Esther jokingly refers to him as her de facto

fiancé in her narration. Buddy is a typified All-American boy, but Esther seems to hold contempt for him, even though she only makes this known in her narration and thoughts rather than in her actions toward Buddy. Hedged in her relationship with Buddy is Esther's perception of Buddy's mom, Mrs. Willard. Esther recounts:

Once when I visited Buddy I found Mrs. Willard braiding a rug out of strips of wool from Mr. Willard's old suits. She spent weeks on that rug, and I had admired the tweedy browns and greens and blues patterning the braid, but after Mrs. Willard was through, instead of hanging the rug on the wall the way I would have done, she put it down in place of her kitchen mat, and in a few days it was soiled and dull and indistinguishable from any mat you could buy for under a dollar in the five and ten. And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat. (Plath 84-85)

The weaving of the tweed rug is a clear parallel for the intersection of so many of Esther's concerns. Mrs. Willard is not only a picture of domestic life, but the vehicle for the kind of unconcern and disregard that Esther fears will take hold in her own life. Mrs. Willard is not merely weaving a rug – she is taking pieces of her husband, via his clothing, and pieces of herself, via her handiwork, and using them to create an object that Esther admires for its multi-facets and intricacy. She sees Mrs. Willard put weeks of effort into creating this one-of-a-kind work of art, transforming one object that has outgrown its practical use and creating something else beautiful from it. When weeks of work are complete and Mrs. Willard has a hand-woven rug to display, she does not choose to display it prominently, but lays it on the floor to replace her old kitchen mat.

This passage about Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat is a microcosm of Esther's perception of marriage and married life. When it begins, it is a unique work of art that is created from intimate parts of two people, but as time goes on, it becomes merely an object of utility and convenience, and the artistry that was once required to create such an object is no longer remembered. To be married is to settle to be trampled on, in Esther's mind. Mrs. Willard is not merely the creator of a

kitchen mat, but a kitchen mat herself, and this sort of future is one by which Esther cannot imagine herself abiding, remarking, “This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s” (Plath 84). Again the reader is seduced by Esther’s seductive solipsism; her self-praise indicates her grasp of her own potential. Unlike the girls who work for *Ladies’ Day*, Esther doesn’t see a lifetime of kitchen mats before her, as she knows that she is worth more – though she can’t completely shake the thought of love permanently from her mind.

With domesticity only one option among many, it is important to consider how prominently Plath features the burden of choice that Esther Greenwood feels in her life. This idea of choosing a path in life is of utmost importance in understanding how Sylvia Plath set the stage for the modern female character. The central theme of choice is most prominently displayed in a passage of from *The Bell Jar* detailing Esther’s thoughts:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. 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 with children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantine and Socrates and Atilla and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn’t quite make out. 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. (Plath 77)

Choice is not regarded as a weapon for one to wield in their own favor, but a source of great anguish for Esther as she cannot decide, and in not deciding loses all of the options that were once hers from which to choose. Plath’s formation of this passage can be read as a comment on domesticity, as well. The very first fig on Esther’s tree of choices is a husband and a happy home, with each subsequent fig that she names getting further away from a domestic goal, eventually ending on a female Olympic athlete and beyond into all of the choices she can’t even

consider because of their sheer number. This dilemma of choosing is framed squarely in Esther's own favor, as she considers options that would benefit her directly, like becoming a scholar or an athlete. Her primary concern is not to live her life in the service of others but in the service – or disservice, as some of her personal life choices reflect – of herself. This type of self-concern is very unique in a female character, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese made note of in her article. Plath's novel is not centered on a male's journey to self-discovery, but a female's journey, and uniquely that journey does not lead down a direct path to marriage and motherhood like the stories of many other female literary characters does.

In envisioning her life as a fig tree ripe with endless fruits of her own talent and capability, Esther cannot see a joyous future in any of them. If she cannot have all of them, she cannot bring herself to commit to one, and in dragging her feet she loses all of the choices she once had. In this intricate passage, Plath creates an anxiety in Esther brought on by her freedom of choice. This anxiety is palpable, from the very form of the sentences. Plath rambles through each of Esther's choices, barely stopping to catch a breath and continuing in a jumbled stream of consciousness from one fulfilling life to the next. Within each choice is a lifetime of intrigue, but Plath skims so quickly through each one that the whiplash of reading the paragraph is breathless, leaving the reader in as much a state of worry and anxiety as the protagonist herself. This is not only an effective backdrop in the anxiety Esther experiences in the face of choice, but in her own descent into a struggle with mental illness that is characterized with an ordered chaos not unlike her rambling inner monologue from the crotch of the fig tree.

The repetitive theme of choice – as well as the stress it can bring – is not only present in Esther's own mind, but in her conversations with other characters in the novel, specifically her mother. After suffering from growing depression and instability after her time in New York City, Esther returns home and is eventually brought to psychiatrist Dr. Gordon for examination. Esther's experience with Dr. Gordon is wholly less than positive, as she is subjected to

electroshock therapy several times, and even makes an attempt to run away from Boston to Chicago prior to the start of the treatments. Esther's mother, referred to as Mrs. Greenwood, looks after Esther while she undergoes this treatment at the hands of Dr. Gordon, and upon hearing Esther no longer wants to receive treatment, replies, "I knew my baby wasn't like that...Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at the hospital. I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (Plath 146).

The presence of Mrs. Greenwood is not particularly prominent throughout the whole of the plot, but her small interventions like this serve to bolster the trials Esther faces on her journey through mental illness. Consider that when Mrs. Greenwood makes this remark to Esther, her daughter has just suffered brutal shock therapy in the name of her own health. From her mother's perspective, these shocks have really only been the catalyst to persuade Esther to a choice: the choice not to become like the other "awful" mentally ill patients in the treatment facility. Simply deciding to no longer receive treatment is enough evidence of a choice to get better for Mrs. Greenwood. So similarly to all other chances to make a choice in the outcome of her life, Esther's choices are framed by fear and worry. In this case, it is her mother's worry and desire not to have a daughter who is mentally ill that support Esther's choice to end treatment – Mrs. Greenwood looks at Esther's mental instability almost as a magazine subscription that she has now opted out of, and that things will only get better because Esther has chosen for them to be better.

Mrs. Greenwood is, in many ways, an albatross for the trouble of choice. Recalling the many religions of her mother, Esther recounts:

I had been a Methodist for the first nine years of my life, before my father died and we moved and turned Unitarian. My mother had been a Catholic before she turned Methodist. My grandmother and grandfather and Aunt Libby were all still Catholics. My Aunt Libby had broken away from the Catholic Church at the same time my mother did, but she'd fallen in love with an Italian Catholic, so she'd gone back again. Lately I had considered going into the Catholic Church myself. I knew that Catholics thought killing yourself was an awful sin. But perhaps, if this were so, they might have a good way to persuade me out of it. (Plath 164)

Two elements of this passage, much like the passage in the crotch of the fig tree, are of great importance when examining the uniqueness of the character Esther Greenwood and how Sylvia Plath broke the literary mold in her creation. Through these lines, Esther reveals to us that her mother has adopted three different religions at different stages of her life, and that Esther herself is considering a change. For Mrs. Greenwood, changing her religious affiliation has impacted Esther's perception of change, and making the choice to change religions is always coupled with shifts in other areas of life – a marriage, a death, and even a potential death. Esther doesn't question the abnormality of such changes and choices, but seems to accept them as normal or even as essential. She goes on to say that though she holds no beliefs in the practices of Catholicism, she hopes that choosing to align herself with Catholic teachings will be enough to stamp out her increasingly suicidal thoughts.

This passage also offers a helpful foil to the other female characters with whom Esther interacts in the context of the plot, namely the girls she works with in New York City while at *Ladies' Day*. The marvel of Plath's Esther Greenwood is her capacity for selfishly introspective deep thought, and in that vein Plath serves the reader a bevy of superficial female characters that highlight Esther's otherness both in the context of the novel and in literary history as a whole. The two girls Esther discusses most outwardly are Doreen and Betsy, two very different girls with whom Esther spends much of her time in New York City. Doreen is a sexual and spunky foil to Esther, while Betsy is a demure and saintly "Pollyanna Cowgirl," as she is so nicknamed by Doreen. The two girls talk of inane gossip, with Doreen remarking on the ugliness of her boss at the magazine and Betsy projecting a motherly vibe over both Doreen and Esther (Plath 5-6). Esther's otherness from the girls she lives and works with – not just Doreen and Betsy – is best described in her own words as she remarks that they "make her sick" due to their obsession with

appearance and boredom with all the excitement in their lives – excitement that Esther craves with intense jealousy (Plath 4).

Reflecting on the passage in which Esther considers choice of religion, it's apparent that Esther does not seek a religion to absolve her for salvation from a faceless god, but that she seeks inner salvation at her own hands. The characters of Doreen and Betsy, whom Kate Baldwin likens to the proverbial devil and angel on either of Esther's shoulders, never delve into thoughts or conversations of this magnitude. They so rarely consider the idea of choice, and in the case of the girls whom Esther hates for their exciting lifestyles, those girls don't see the need to ever make choices. Esther observes them whiling away their time sunbathing, complaining of mindless and meaningless things, and she feels very different from them because of this absence of a drive to choose.

“What the text tells us is that Esther's character is grounded in her relationship to choice. This is her whole problem in a nutshell: she wants it all, but purportedly can't have it. She is the American girl spoiled by choice. However, the text makes explicit here the parameters of that choice, and who is implicated,” argues Kate Baldwin, summing Esther's thoughts on choice as, “either you choose a million selves or one whole self” (34-35). Essential to the creation of Esther is the idea of the splitting of the self, and the splintering of desire and ambition into innumerable life choices that cannot all be attained.

Marjorie Perloff argues that the choices Esther laments are an extension of her own false self-projection. In her article “A Ritual for Being Born Twice: Sylvia Plath's ‘The Bell Jar,’” Perloff points out, “The Esther others see is, from the very first page of the novel, an elaborate contrivance, an empty shell: the fashionable Smith girl with her patent leather bag and matching pumps, the poised guest editor, brainy but no bookworm, equally at home on the dance floor or behind the typewriter. The novel's flashbacks make clear that Esther has always played those roles others have wanted her to play. For her mother, she has been the perfect good girl, “trained

at a very early age and ... no trouble whatsoever"... and the more the false-self responds in this contrived and artificial way, the more Esther's inner self nurtures a hatred..." (510).

If we are to accept Perloff's postulate that Esther's narration is seemingly unreliable because she only operates in false-selves, why, then, does Plath write her this way? Perloff continues, "If we take the division of Esther's self as the motive or starting point of the novel's plot, the central action of *The Bell Jar* may be described as the attempt to heal the fracture between inner self and false-self system so that a real and viable identity can come into existence... Esther's experience differs from that of so-called "normal" girls in degree rather than in kind. It is simply a stylized or heightened version of the young American girl's quest to forge her own identity, to be herself rather than what others expect her to be" (509). What Perloff misses when arguing that Esther is different from other girls "in degree, rather than in kind" is that Esther is very much different in kind from both the other novel characters and other female characters in the literature of Plath's contemporaries. Her experiences are fated to be different from other normal girls as her mental illness worsens and she is hospitalized and treated on more than one occasion. Perhaps in the beginning of the novel her experiences are different in degree from her compatriots, but they are inarguably different in kind by the time *The Bell Jar* comes to a close.

Perloff's characterization of *The Bell Jar* as a "stylized or heightened version of the young American girl's quest to forge her own identity, to be herself rather than what others expect her to be" does a disservice to the ground that Sylvia Plath has broken in this novel. Inarguably this novel is set to a backdrop of a young American girl looking to find her way in life, but at its core is a deep analysis into the mind and thoughts of this particular American girl. To relegate *The Bell Jar* to the position of a mere coming of age novel is to overlook its unabashed stare into the eye of the storm within the mind of a brilliant young girl. Doreen and Betsy are characters in a coming of age tale – Esther is the protagonist in a study of the true

capacity for depth of the female mind. Plath uses Esther to lay everything out on the table, from the brilliance of her wit to her crushing self-doubt. She creates a character who is hopelessly vulnerable in the hands of a mental illness treatment facility, but simultaneously strong and deeply attuned to her own inner self, listening to the beat of her own heart affirm, “I am I am I am” (Plath 243).

Chapter 2

Film as the Medium for Female Mistreatment – Rise of the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl”

“And perhaps those of us in the industry who are still foolishly clinging to the idea that female films with women at the center are niche experiences: they are not. Audiences want to see them and, in fact, they earn money. The world is round, people.”

-Cate Blanchett, Academy Award-Winning Actress

From one medium to the next, the male role in art is overwhelmingly one of dominance. Sylvia Plath’s ability to create a deep and strong female character is so striking, in part, because of the abject dearth of female characters that fit that description. In the rise of Hollywood cinema and the golden era of filmmaking, the precedent of male-dominated motion pictures took very little time to take hold, and to this day films like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Citizen Kane* are referred to as the masterpieces of the cinematic industry – films that are unequivocally male-centric.

Like the literature that came before its inception, the film industry consistently produces stories that are focused on the journey of male protagonists. As secondary leads, and often even mere background characters, women in film are relegated to supporting role status, and have been since the widespread distribution of feature length motion pictures. In modern cinema, the world has seen more female directors, producers and actors step forth, but these advances are miniscule when viewed on the spectrum of male to female film industry professionals. According to nonprofit activist organization Women in Film, only 16 percent of Oscar nominees in history have been women – this includes nominations for acting, directing, producing, cinematography and all other relevant categories. This means that an overwhelming 84 percent of Academy

Award-nominated film professionals are men, and men therefore call the shots when it comes to big-budget movie making.

The New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd interviewed Martha Lauzen, a communications professor at the University of San Diego and the director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film who conducts research on the gender disparity in the film industry, in a piece called “Frozen in a Niche?” In this column published in March 2014 for The New York Times, Lauzen tells Dowd, “There’s a great deal of gender inertia going on in Hollywood, both off-screen and on. . . . If you have all white males working behind the scenes in the film industry, you’re going to get a whole lot of white males up on screen.” Yet Lauzen goes on to point out that in films where females make up the dominant cast, such as the 2011 hit *Bridesmaids*, the success of these female-driven films is “considered a fluke, a one-off. Women comprise 52 percent of all moviegoers. Yet there’s still an assumption that men will not go to see a woman’s movie, but that women will go to see anything” (Lauzen qtd. in Dowd).

How, then, are women integrated into modern film if it’s true that men will not go see female-centric films? Enter the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. As film reviewer Nathan Rabin described when coining the term in an article on the film *Elizabethtown*, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.” Henceforth referred to as the MPDG, Rabin is arguing that the intriguing female characters that populate modern films are an illusion of depth – the MPDG appears on the surface to be full of wonder and life, but is truly a plot device to further the objective of the male protagonist. This way, the film is still centered on a male character, but a female is given a visible role in the male’s story under the guise that she is central to the unfolding narrative.

The MPDG trope, though not new, has only been coined as such in the last several years. Through its invention, the female characters that fit this description are robbed of true agency. As

Rabin points out in his film review of *Elizabethtown*, actress Natalie Portman also plays a MPDG named Sam in the 2004 film *Garden State* – a character who serves as an excellent case study in the far-reaching effects of this trope. Sam is a young, beautiful girl who is a pathological liar, suffers from epilepsy and comes from a non-traditional family. She meets the protagonist of the film, a depressed young man named Andrew, and her peculiarity intrigues him. Throughout the film, it is Sam's strange habits and mannerisms and ways of speaking that show Andrew that there is more to life than the crushing depression he feels, and he is opened up to a new way of thinking. At the film's conclusion we see Andrew and Sam embracing, Andrew with a new outlook on life and Sam right next to him.

Author Niamh O’Ryan describes why an eccentric character like Sam in *Garden State* is not equivalent to a female heroine in her article “8 Quirky Females to Challenge the Manic Pixie Dream Girl: Transcending the Trope.” O’Ryan posits, “It was the [inaccurate portrayal of women by] the ‘manic pixie dream girl’ that really enraged female and male moviegoers alike because it turned out that the beloved individualistic, eccentric female characters of popular cinema were actually just one-dimensional constructs, dreamt up by, and for men.” This idea of single-dimension is the true affront to women in film: the MPDG is given such eccentricities to create the illusion of emotion, depth, thought, and feeling. She is constantly making choices on a whim, vacillating between one life event to the next with incomparable spontaneity. She is made to seem mysterious, different, and “other” to the male character, who is usually in some form of a life-rut. Though real-life women are as diverse in temperament, likes, and passions as their male counterparts, these actual human emotions and depths are absent when translated onto the screen, replaced instead by a façade.

What this character then teaches is that a male character can only realize his full potential with the help of a female character, and that a female character is only useful for helping the male realize his full potential. “The end of the MPDG would be good news for men, too,” argues Hugo

Schwzyer in an article for *The Atlantic*. “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl may serve as a catalyst for male transformation, but in both her real and fictional manifestations, she sends the message that a bright and sensitive young man can only learn to embrace life by falling in love with a woman who sees the dazzling colors and rich complexities he can't. Just as the all-too familiar "Magical Negro" character uses mystical intuitive powers to help white folks tap their God-given potential, the MPDG reminds men that they need (and, more precisely, are entitled to) a woman's inspiration and encouragement to reach their own true destiny” (Schwzyer). The inclusion of the word “entitlement” is key in Schwzyer’s point – because the film industry is dominated by males, writers and directors feel a sense of entitlement to create MPDG characters to transform the males. In the case of *Garden State*, the viewer can like Sam and relate to her, but only on the most superficial of levels. On the other hand, the viewer is much more apt to relate to Andrew, as the story chronicles his journey with depression and his own self-discovery – something we root for from the beginning.

However, the film industry has a storied history and plenty of films to show for itself. Why has it taken the coining of a particularly obfuscating term like the MPDG to warrant a further look into the role women have played in film history? Schwzyer points out, “Rabin defined the Manic Pixie Dream Girl as a muse whose primary role is to teach and transform a young man. As contemporary a trope as it feels, it's as old as Dante with his vision of being guided through paradise by his saintly Beatrice.” A cursory glance through the annals of classic Golden Age cinema will reveal more MPDGs that have, until recently, gone relatively unnoticed.

The 1938 Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant classic *Bringing Up Baby* has been pegged by countless bloggers as one of the older examples of a MPDG on screen. In the article “Wild Things: 16 films featuring Manic Pixie Dream Girls,” MPDG-term-coiner Nathan Rabin and his colleagues write, “Hepburn let gravity go, playing a giggly, scatterbrained heiress who torments stuffy scientist Cary Grant with her crazy demands and pet leopard. By the end of the film,

Hepburn has turned Grant as nutty as she is, and as they hang from a crumbling dinosaur skeleton, he confesses that following her manic whims has led to the best day of his life” (Rabin et al.). However, understanding the MPDG’s role in film history is but one part of the puzzle. Though she may have been present for decades prior to Rabin’s term, what damage has this trope done for the representation of women in film? Arguably, Hepburn is the star of the film, unlike so many of the secondary MPDG characters – what, then, does this shift from female film stars to female secondary characters tell us?

Maria DiBattista, examines the role of female lead characters in classic screwball comedies in her book *Fast-Talking Dames*. Referring to actresses like Katharine Hepburn, DiBattista writes, “It was spirited and witty American womanhood that they distinctly and exuberantly but, alas, not enduringly defined” (DiBattista x). The key word in DiBattista’s assessment is “witty” – the “fast-talking dames” of classic Hollywood cinema were sharp and smart, and their full-embodiment as a character made their wit all the more alluring because it indicated a person of character and depth. Looking to the MPDG of modern cinema, her wit is dissimilar to that of the fast-talking dame in that it comes in waves of circumstance – she may deliver a smart joke here and there enough to entice her male counterpart, but it does not indicate any further depth of character. The MPDG is often not witty because of her wit, but simply because she is written to sound witty – the fast-talking dame is written not to sound witty, but is truly witty.

Examining films that are noted for their presence of a MPDG, such as *Garden State*, *(500) Days of Summer*, or *Elizabethtown*, the recurring theme of the female lead as a plot device becomes most apparent at the end of the film. In the case of *Garden State* and *Elizabethtown*, the MPDG character is reunited with the male protagonist at the film’s conclusion, fulfilling his journey to love and happiness and framing the rest of the couple’s life together through the lens of the male’s eyes. Even more egregiously, in *(500) Days of Summer*, the female character and

MPDG Summer simply disappears from the male character's life after serving her purpose of transforming him. The male protagonist ends the film by meeting a new girl, aptly named Autumn, indicating that a new season has dawned for the male and he can again endure the process of having his life transformed by another MPDG.

“Men grow up expecting to be the hero of their own story. Women grow up expecting to be the supporting actress in somebody else's. As a kid growing up with books and films and stories instead of friends, that was always the narrative injustice that upset me more than anything else,” writes columnist Laurie Penny in her article “I Was a Manic Pixie Dream Girl.” As eloquently as Penny puts it, young girls see their Hollywood icons playing the supporting roles in the stories of men, and they grow into those roles as they get older. Penny argues, “Manic Pixies, like other female archetypes, crop up in real life partly because fiction creates real life, particularly for those of us who grow up immersed in it. Women behave in ways that they find sanctioned in stories written by men who know better, and men and women seek out friends and partners who remind them of a girl they met in a book one day when they were young and longing.”

Penny, a self-proclaimed former real-life MPDG, sums up the trope in a handful of lines:

And yes, I'm a bit strange and sensitive and daydreamy, and retain a somewhat embarrassing belief in the ultimate decency of humanity and the transformative brilliance of music, although I'm ambivalent on the Shins. I love to dance, I play the guitar badly, and I also - since we're in confession mode, dear reader, please hear and forgive - I also play the fucking ukelele. Truly. Part of the reason I'm writing this is that the MPDG trope isn't properly explored, in any of the genres I read and watch and enjoy. She's never a point-of-view character, and she isn't understood from the inside. She's one of those female tropes who is permitted precisely no interiority. Instead of a personality, she has eccentricities, a vaguely-offbeat favourite band, a funky fringe.

In writing the stories for the screen that force female characters into neatly-packaged plot drivers, it is teaching viewers that this is how real life should be, as well. There is an excellent reason why the MPDG is coined as such – she is a dream. She doesn't represent a real person, because

women in the real world do not exist in a sole dimension. Their depth is not the result of a smoke-and-mirrors display of quirks and otherness, but in the human capacity to feel on a complex plane of emotions just like their male counterparts.

The situation of the dearth of strong female characters in film is, perhaps, more dire than one would imagine. Martha Lauzen recently published a study that shows, “women made up only 15 percent of protagonists and 30 percent of speaking characters in the top 100 grossing domestic films of 2013” (Lauzen 1). With numbers so dismally low, even in the last year’s crop of films, the importance of the Bechdel Test is beginning to take center stage. The Bechdel Test, so named after a comic strip written by Alison Bechdel, is an assessment given to a film to determine how prominently women factor into the narrative. A film will pass the Bechdel Test if “there are two or more women in this movie and they talk to each other about something other than a man” (BechdelTest.com). Not so surprisingly, many films do not pass the test. In films with female characters, they often do not converse with one another or, if they do, only converse about a man, according to the extensive list of tested films on the Bechdel Test website.

Mark Harris’ article “I Am Woman! Hear Me...Please?” points out the importance of the Bechdel Test, even when Hollywood studios continue to insist that their current formula works:

The wonderful and tragic thing about the Bechdel Test is not, as you've doubtless already guessed, that so few Hollywood films manage to pass, but that the standard it creates is so pathetically minimal – the equivalent of those first 200 points we're all told we got on the SATs just for filling out our names. Yet as the test has proved time and again, when it comes to the depiction of women in studio movies, no matter how low you set the bar, dozens of films will still trip over it and then insist with aggrieved self-righteousness that the bar never should have been there in the first place and that surely you're not talking about quotas.

The fact that such a test is even necessary to evaluate a woman’s role in a film is something worth discussing. Why are women – our mothers, sisters, and friends –so difficult to write about for the screen? When Harris mentions quotas, he points out that that is how we’ve reduced the female presence in film – to the mere importance of numbers, rather than the importance of substance

and point of view that females offer. A MPDG character in any number of films is not shown to have deep female friendships or strong goals for her life – her beauty is in her transience, which is why films like *(500) Days of Summer* fail to pass the Bechdel Test, even when the name of the female character is in the title of the film.

A passing grade on the Bechdel Test does not automatically guarantee a film that utilizes real female characters. The 2003 film *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (and its sequel *Kill Bill Vol. 2*) includes female protagonist Beatrix Kiddo – master of martial arts who is on a quest to avenge the man who attempted to take her life and the life of her child. This epic story reveals Kiddo is a trained assassin, skilled and strong both psychically and mentally, and she travels around the world facing unimaginable obstacles in the name of revenge. However, the *Kill Bill* movies certainly pass the Bechdel Test as they include several named female characters who discuss things that are not related to men – but it is important to consider that the vengeance Kiddo seeks is driven by a male who is her former lover and the father to the unborn child she believes was lost when he shot her. Furthermore, though Kiddo is undeniably a strong female character, her strength is largely displayed through a very masculine lens. Like a male action hero, she wields a katana blade, slicing her enemies and shedding blood at every turn. Most prominently, she is portrayed as strong because of her physical strength, and her objective is driven by the male in the story. The emotional depth she possesses and her motherly instincts that later take center stage in the film should not be overlooked when examining the Kiddo character, but surely her most notable feature is that she is as deadly as her “Black Mamba” nickname suggests.

Returning to the work of Martha Lauzen, who recently conducted a study called “It’s a Man’s (Celluloid) World: On-Screen Representations of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2013,” we see what little progress has been made for women in Hollywood. Looking at the numbers she’s found, only 30% of speaking characters in the top films of 2013 were female. Lauzen also found that, “Male characters were much more likely to have work-related goals than

personal life-related goals (75% vs. 25%). In contrast, the goals of female characters were split more evenly between work-related and personal life-related goals (48% vs. 52%)” (Lauzen 3). Though Lauzen never once mentions the term Manic Pixie Dream Girl, she doesn’t have to in order to communicate the disparity between all female characters – including the MPDG – and the males with whom they share the screen. When female characters are shown on screen to pursue more personal goals while males pursue work-related goals, the inequality standard between genders is not only reinforced but sanctioned by Hollywood. When the very industry that is making these films is also incredibly lacking in female film professionals – only one female in the history of the Academy Awards has ever been awarded an Oscar for Best Director – we see art imitating life in a truly nauseating way (Pomerantz).

Chapter 3

Hollywood and the stripping of Plathian Ideals

“I think that to lump together all individual, original, quirky women under that [Manic Pixie Dream Girl] rubric is to erase all difference.”

-Zoe Kazan, writer and star of *Ruby Sparks*

The systematic avoidance of female portrayal in film is very closely tied with the blueprint that Sylvia Plath created for the dynamic female protagonist. The rise of social awareness in the 21st century, especially the prevalence of third wave feminism, has brought forth a demand from society for more female-centric films. Casting a character on an emotional journey – and making that character a female – has become desirable as more women have pointed out the absence of females in film over the last several decades. However, Hollywood has rarely delivered on this demand. Instead of creating the kinds of films that do female characters justice in their goals and aspirations, we’ve been served films that fail benchmarks like the Bechdel Test and instead deliver MPDG characters in place of the deep female protagonist viewers deserve to see.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood struggles to find a way to reconcile her many desires in life, from her desire for love, to a desire for a career, to a desire for scholarly pursuit. Esther’s tragic predicament is what she calls neurosis, saying to her boyfriend Buddy Willard, “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days” (Plath 94). Like Esther Greenwood, the MPDG trope is also characterized by an inability to choose or a heightened sense of flightiness when it comes to making a choice – herein lies her

spontaneity, her mystery, and her unpredictability, which are all features essential to her creation. Esther Greenwood is most certainly not a MPDG, yet many of the qualities found in MPDGs on screen mirror the qualities found in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* protagonist.

In using a literary blueprint that Sylvia Plath helped to pioneer, Hollywood filmmakers have attempted to meet a demand for deep and thoughtful female characters through the implementation of tropes like the MPDG. In a warped, misappropriated translation of a female character like Esther Greenwood, we have seen Plath's blueprint watered down to the very basics, sanitized of its true value and shelled to surface qualities present in Esther. By using a watered-down version of the Plathian creation of a three-dimensional female character, Hollywood films strike a precarious balance between appeasing women who can somewhat relate to the elements of the MPDG without upsetting the norm for men who are used to seeing women as secondary characters.

Esther's struggle to make life choices and her subsequent uncertainty about the choices she's made is a quality essential in the realization of the MPDG. The 2003 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the main female lead is a woman named Clementine Kruczynski, played by actress Kate Winslet opposite male lead Joel Barish, played by Jim Carrey. Though there is significant debate whether Clementine can be considered a true MPDG, it is very reasonable to suggest that her role in the film is secondary to that of Joel's, and that her actions and effect on Joel's life offer a profound change in him by the end of the film – all criteria present in a MPDG. Niamh O'Ryan writes, "Considering her constantly changing hair colour, spontaneity and choice of needy men, you could be forgiven for considering Kate Winslet's fiery role to be a classic example of a MPDG," acknowledging that there is more than one way to view such a character.

From a MPDG angle, Clementine's struggle with making choices is an effective parallel to that same quality in Esther Greenwood. Clementine jumps quickly from desire to desire, begging her boyfriend to take her to Massachusetts on a spur of the moment trip, only to demand

they return home immediately after arriving. At a pivotal point in the film's plot, Clementine screams, "I don't know! I don't know! I'm lost! I'm scared! I feel like I'm disappearing! My skin's coming off! I'm getting old! Nothing makes any sense to me! Nothing makes any sense," much to the bewilderment of her companion. The truth is that Clementine rarely ever feels certain of anything throughout the film, and is never given a goal or aspiration that drives the character forward. Carrey's character Joel is motivated by Clementine, and spends the film trying to get to know her and start a relationship with her, but Clementine is nothing if not ambivalent toward Joel for much of the movie.

It is here we begin to see the separation between strong female character and MPDG – the Plathian concept of a female protagonist with a fear of commitment is unique in that the fear is not commitment itself, but in choosing which path to commit. Esther Greenwood's worry about making big choices that will determine the path of her life are rooted in her own personal goals: she wants to see and accomplish everything she is capable of, and worries that if she takes one direction, all of her other talents will never be utilized to their highest ability. Her examination of herself reveals that she has a plethora of professional and personal goals, but this is not the case in many female characters on film. With a character like Clementine, her volleying between choices and difficulty with commitment is not rooted in any personal aspirations or life goals – she is simply flighty, and we are expected to accept that. This is a stripping of a Plathian blueprint for a deep female character to its very basic surface qualities, and does a huge injustice to the telling of a story by robbing the female protagonist of true human capacity and frame of mind.

In addition to trademark flightiness, the MPDG trope also borrows another key element from Plath's blueprint in *Esther*: an aversion toward domesticity. As mentioned, the key use of the MPDG is her transience – her presence at the end of the story is not essential, because the story is not about her. To give MPDGs aspirations of getting married and starting a family is to give them a goal or long-term plan, and it is the absence of such a plan that makes this trope what

it truly is. As we see in Esther, she finds many troubling things about the typical domestic life expected of most girls her age, but she is not wholly averse to it. In fact, she often imagines herself as a mother or wife, though in a much different context than the mothers and wives she knows in real life. Though it is possible to argue that a move away from domestic roles for women in film is a general trend in the modern era, the MPDG is very intentionally never a wife or a mother, and rarely (if ever) makes mention of wanting to become one. I argue that this is for a very simple reason: the MPDG is infantilized. Imbued with child-like wonder, spontaneity, and wide variety of interests, we cannot see the MPDG as a domestic figure because she is, in many ways, a child herself.

I do not mean to argue that all women in film or literature with aversions to domesticity are that way because they lack the emotional maturity – this is certainly not the case. Consider that the MPDG is child-like by design, and intentionally robbed of domestic qualities so as to preserve her brand of forever-young magic that is transformative to the opposite male character. In a scene from “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,” a fight between Clementine and Joel unfolds in public:

Clementine : I want to have a baby.
Joel : Let's talk about it later.
Clementine : No. I want to have a baby.
Joel : I don't think we're ready.
Clementine : You're not ready.
Joel : Clem, do you really think you could take care of a kid?
Clementine : What?
Joel : I don't want to talk about it here.
Clementine : I can't hear you. I can never the fuck understand what you're saying!
Joel : I said I don't want to talk about this!
Clementine : Fucking ventriloquist. We're fucking gonna talk about it! You can't just say something like that and say you don't want to talk about it!
Joel : I don't want to talk about this! I'm sorry. Clem. I'm sorry.
Clementine : I'd make a fucking good mother! I love children.
Joel : OK. Alright.
Clementine : I'm creative and I'm smart! And I'm gonna make a fucking great mother.
Joel : Oh God, Clem.
Clementine : It's you, Joel. It's you who can't commit to anything.

In a brief moment when a MPDG expresses her desire for a child – one of the only examples I could find – she is immediately met with, “Do you really think you could take care of a kid?” It matters not what the answer is, but the fact that the idea is not even entertained by her male counterpart. In the context of the film, Clementine is made to seem crazy as she causes this scene in public, lodging her final insult at Joel by saying, “It’s you who can’t commit to anything.” However, such an insult hardly sticks – Clementine and her desire for a baby is never brought up again in the film, making it look as though this desire for domestic life is just a passing fancy and that Joel was right. To give a character like Clementine an actual goal of having a child would upset the balance and reason for why Joel was attracted to her in the first place: because she is different and exciting, and not like other people – other people who want the run-of-the-mill things like a family and to settle down.

Recall Esther Greenwood’s thoughts on Mrs. Willard and her kitchen mat – the mat is a metaphor for marriage and in many ways, Mrs. Willard is the mat herself. By borrowing these thoughts and applying them to the MPDG, it strips away the nuances that Plath includes in Esther’s consideration of family life. She is not wholly opposed to it as many MPDGs may seem to be, but works through several ideas of marriage without ever settling on one that she feels suits her. The MPDG only scratches the surface when characterizing a female lead as disinterested in marriage and commitment, and fails to consider all of the nuances that we see in Plath’s *The Bell Jar* that cause Esther to question marriage. In taking away the deeper considerations behind a rejection of typical domestic life, we are offered no peek into the real thoughts and feelings of the MPDG – in fact, we are not even made to believe she has any.

Given some historical context, Hollywood has always known that motherhood robs female characters of their magic. Even classic films like *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *Brief Encounter* (1945) which center on the idea of motherhood never allow their heroines to have children as well as a loving romance – they must choose one or the other. Consider the 1967 Audrey Hepburn film

Two For The Road, in which two young lovers meet and enjoy endless adventures until the female becomes pregnant and has to raise a baby. The film's plot centers on the disintegration of their marriage as parenthood takes its toll, and all whimsy and magic are removed from Hepburn's character as she assumes the role of motherhood. However, unlike in the case of the MPDG, it is clear that Audrey Hepburn is the star of *Two For The Road*, just as Barbara Stanwyck is the star of *Stella Dallas*, Celia Johnson is the star of *Brief Encounter*, and Katharine Hepburn is the star of *Bringing Up Baby*.

The same cannot be said for films like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and its contemporaries that feature the MPDG – in fact, for much of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Joel is attempting to erase Clementine from his memories altogether, watching her disintegrate before his very eyes. Historically, motherhood in film has been treated with disdain, but its absence in so many modern movies altogether represents an ideal that in characters like the MPDG, motherhood is not desirable because it represents a lifelong commitment to raising another human – often a sign of maturity – and the immaturity of the MPDG is essential to her place in the male character's life. Obviously, this is not true to real-world women, as the creation of a family and a happy marriage are not mythical circumstances as films would have audiences believe.

Though Esther Greenwood looks upon marriage with relative disdain, as well, she does not see it as mutually exclusive of a happy relationship or having children. Perhaps the key here is that Esther Greenwood is written in the image of a female writer, Sylvia Plath. This is the crux of the split between Plathian ideals of female depth and the way these ideals have been stolen for the screen – Esther was written by a woman. MPDG characters like Clementine Kruczynski, Sam in *Garden State* and Summer in *(500) Days of Summer* were all written by male writers. As a result of the systematic production of MPDGs, some filmmakers have taken aim at the trope and seek to

correct the separation between female characters on screen and the true human depth of women in a real-life context.

Zoe Kazan wrote and starred in the 2012 film *Ruby Sparks* – a film that calls into question the idea of the MPDG – about a young male writer Calvin who, upon writing a story about the girl of his dreams, finds that she has come to life before his very eyes. The girl, named Ruby Sparks, is completely controlled by Calvin, and though he tries to allow her to be her own person, he can't help but continue to write and influence her life based on his own attitudes and moods. Referring to her attempt to call attention to the dangers of reductive female characters in modern filmmaking, Kazan has said, “What bothers me about it is I think that women get described [as Manic Pixie Dream Girls], but it's really reflective of the man who is looking at them, and the way that they think about that girl. Not about who that girl really is or what her personality actually is” (Greco). In the scene in which Calvin reveals to Ruby that he is in control of every aspect of her – from her happiness to her sadness – she remains unconvinced, so as she stands in front of him he writes more and more humiliating and impossible actions for Ruby that she is forced to perform so that she sees she is merely a puppet to Calvin's puppet master.

The failure of the MPDG is that her realism is not real – she is the product of a male writer behind a keyboard, and she is controlled and shaped in the ways that a male writer wants to see her realized. She lacks emotional depth because a male writer cannot possibly embody the mind of a woman to know how her experiences feel; he can only write them as he imagines them. The lack of female friendships on screen is likely due to the fact that a male writer knows nothing about the inner nuances of female friendship. Clementine Ford writes refers to this as the idea of being a “girl's girl,” arguing:

There are the relationships [women] have with each other, which exist in flux and are invariably more complicated than most narratives would have you believe. There are the relationships we have with our chosen partners, and how they shape the evolution of ourselves. And there is the relationship we women experience

with ourselves, that long and ongoing negotiation between our self-loathing and our self-belief.

What Ford has written is a summation of all that Plath embodies in her writing of Esther, and all that is ultimately missing from the MPDGs on screen. While I disagree with her larger argument that women should “don their party dresses” in order to become their own heroes, she captures the essence of what gets lost in translation from print to screen – the relationship that women have with themselves and other women both like and unlike them. These relationships are vital in understanding a female character as a person, and yet remain largely missing in female film leads.

Consider then that Plath writes Esther as she interacts with several other women, some of whom she forms bonds of friendship. Plath imbues Esther with the capacity to feel on an emotional spectrum that is not male-induced joy to male-induced sadness, but all of the shades in between and beyond those markers. In a particularly introspective passage, Esther sits down to write a semi-autobiographical novel, not unlike Plath herself with *The Bell Jar*. Esther thinks, “A feeling of tenderness filled my heart. 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” (Plath 120). Even these few simple lines give Esther the gentle characterization of self-pride and appreciation, feeling happy and accomplished on her own without the presence of a male counterpart with which to interact.

When considering the similarities between Esther Greenwood and the MPDGs seen on screens today, it is easy to spot the overlaps in personality characteristics or general demeanor. However, when it comes down to true substance, Plath’s creation of Esther Greenwood far surpasses innumerable examples of female film characters in her emotional range and capacity to feel authentically human. Manic Pixie Dream Girls are but a dream, and it is for that reason that they so often lack dreams or aspirations of their own. The MPDG was created by male writers and operates in a fantasy embodiment of what a dynamic female character should be – her wit

and charm are only surface qualities, and she ultimately can never be the star of the film because there is no substance behind her for support. She has not been developed enough to stand on her own.

Esther is not this way – she is the model for the way female characters should be written. “My heroine would be myself,” Esther determines, quietly refusing to be the supporting role in another’s story. Hugo Schwyzer posits that male screenwriters should take the lead in creating a revolution of “real” female leads, writing, “Here's the challenge for men in general, filmmakers and writers in particular. We need women who are lead characters, but that's only part of the equation: we deserve to see men who love these women for the complicated, messy, decidedly non-ethereal people they are.” Perhaps this is not a challenge for only male writers, but for all writers in general. As male writers dominate the industry, we must look to female writers to be a part of the change to craft dynamic female characters that are more true to Sylvia Plath’s blueprint of truly deep female emotion and feeling.

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