“No pain, just tricky to manipulate”: Sylvia Plath across genres

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In 1953, Sylvia Plath broke her leg while skiing. This event permeated her writing across genres, retold at least eight times, each with a unique perspective based on the genre and her intended audience. While she told the story non-fictionally in her journals, she also adapted the story for letters to her mother and friends and fictionalized the event in short stories and *The Bell Jar*. This thesis will examine 8 versions of the same event – critically examining how the culture and gender expectations of the 1950s and 1960s influenced her writing depending on her audience. This examination of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction will work to help eliminate the assumption in certain current scholarship that all events in Plath's fiction can be used to examine and explain her suicide. The chapters will be divided by genre of writing, with a conclusion on the implications for future Plath studies.

DEDICATION

For my mom, who first convinced me that stories matter, and then that I held infinite ones inside me.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In December of 1953, Sylvia Plath was 20 years old and a junior at Smith College in Massachusetts. She was on Christmas holiday and decided to spend part of her break from school visiting her occasional boyfriend Dick Norton at Ray Brook Sanatorium in New York. Dick was there recovering from a bout of tuberculosis. While there, Sylvia and Dick spent a day skiing on Mount Pisgah, and Sylvia crashed as she skied down the slopes, resulting in a fractured fibula and a plaster cast that she wore to heal her leg over the next several months. These are the biographical "facts" of the seemingly banal event that Plath would write and re-write, recounting the breaking of the leg and its aftermath in journal entries, letters, short stories, a poem, and *The Bell Jar*.

Since Plath's death in 1963, the scholarship on her writing has been incredibly narrow in scope and in perspective. The works that are typically analyzed are her poems and *The Bell Jar* (*TBJ)*, which is often marketed or referred to as a semi-autobiographical novel (or wholly autobiographical, depending on the critic). Whole swaths of Plath's work are virtually left untouched by academics, including her journals, her letters, most archival materials held in three colleges in the United States, and many of her short stories.[1] Across the scholarship, critics tend to conflate Plath with what they presume are her fictional narrators or fictional alter egos,

[1] These colleges are Emory University in Atlanta GA, Indiana University in Bloomington, IN, and Smith College in Northampton, MA.

frequently interchanging Plath's identity with the characters in her stories. Often, scholarship on Plath tends to fall into one of three camps: psychologists and psychoanalytic critics who attempt to diagnose Plath post-mortem, scholars who analyze Plath's work to pass a judgement on Plath through her characters, and scholars who clearly define the line between fiction, non-fiction, and the separation between author and character.[2] For example, in a psychology article on Plath, Ernest Shulman writes that, "By general consensus, Sylvia is believed to have revealed herself accurately in all her writing. Therefore, her literary protagonists will be taken as self-representations for present purposes" (599). Shulman's logic in this passage is severely flawed: a general consensus is neither a scholarly measurement nor cited in this piece. It is unclear if this consensus is one in the psychology community or in literary criticism. While this is a glaring issue, his second error marks a key concern for my project: that Plath, who wrote both fiction and non-fiction, short stories for *Mademoiselle* magazine and *Christian Science Monitor*, villanelles and dark poetry, letters to her mother and letters to her boyfriends, could not and did not, reveal herself accurately in all of her writing. While parts of her identity were certainly revealed in her writing, Plath was not the same girl writing to her mother as "Sivvy" by the time she had become the fiery and angry woman who told the world she "ate men like air" in "Ariel." These were different Sylvias, scattered pieces of the whole, surely, but different and crafted versions built for the stage on which she was performing. As a real person, Plath adapted and changed in a way her characters could not. To accept the false premise that all literary

[2] In Marianne Egeland's book *Claiming Sylvia Plath*, she dedicates each chapter to a different type of commentary on Plath. These chapters cover critics, biographers, feminists, psychologists and friends. For this thesis, the most important of these are critics and psychologists – as biographers and friends fall beyond the relevant scope of a literary close reading of Plath's works.

protagonists across short stories and *TBJ* are self-representations, spanning decades of her life, is to reduce Plath to a two-dimensional rendering.

Likewise, in literary criticism scholars often draw no boundary lines between Plath and the protagonist of *TBJ,* Esther Greenwood. Scholars tend to write about author and character as if they are one and the same. In Caroline Smith's "The Feeding of Young Women," she highlights the struggles between Esther and expected domesticity, specifically in regard to kitchens and eating in *TBJ*. While Smith makes a convincing and compelling argument in regard to Esther, she ends her article with an anecdote about Plath's death, writing that before Plath died, she left out breakfast for her children and then killed herself in the kitchen. Smith draws a link to Plath's own push and pull with domesticity, not Esther's, inexplicably melding the two experiences as one. At the end of her article titled "The Pen Is Mightier than the Dominant Discourse: Writing as Agency and Healing in Plath, Gordon, Frame, Marmon Silko, and Hogan," Annette Krizanich boldly asserts that perhaps if Esther had not given in to the dominant discourse or found a way to subvert that discourse in *TBJ,* Plath would not have killed herself 10 years later. While it makes sense that one would look at events that impacted the making of *TBJ* – Plath's internship in New York City, her attempted suicide upon returning home, and her stay in a mental institution – it seems a stretch to look at Plath's suicide in relation to *TBJ* in reverse. While one analyzes a text through influences, the other analyzes text through a future event, making judgments on *TBJ* and Plath's suicide that we can never confirm as true or false. These articles, while doing actual important and necessary analytical work on Plath's writings, are also chasing the mythic Plath– why she died, what contributed to her death, if the culture was to blame, or if her husband was to blame. However, I believe this myth has no place within literary analysis of *TBJ*, or indeed of much of Plath's writing. I believe a distinction should be made between Plath and Esther, as well

as Plath and Isobel, Sheila and Ellen. Any connections that could be drawn between *TBJ* and her suicide are mere speculation, and in my experience reading these articles, results in desensitization of Plath's death with such close association to a work of fiction. Everything Plath wrote was in some ways a fiction, as she invented certain characters, merged storylines, and deleted whole events. No literary work can ever be truly non-fiction, as there is an element of performance in every narrative creation.

The title chosen for this project is part of a line from Plath's telegram sent to her mother, Aurelia, right after she broke her leg on the ski slope. In the telegram, Sylvia assures her mother that there is "no pain" and the leg is "just tricky to manipulate" (*The Letters of Sylvia Plath* 538). "Manipulate" is indeed a strange word to choose when talking about learning how to walk with a broken leg; perhaps maneuver may have made more sense here, or even guide or control. The OED has several definitions for "manipulate", among them: "To handle, esp. with skill or dexterity; to turn, reposition, reshape, etc., manually or by means of a tool or machine" or "to alter or transform." Handling with skill would certainly apply to the use of Plath's leg, but manipulate also seems to imply the second meaning, that perhaps it is tricky to alter or transform. That Plath refers to manipulation here is perhaps indicative of the entire event on the slopes, and indeed, how Plath viewed most events. In a 1962 interview, Plath spoke about her work and about the meaning of her writing in general, stating in an interview:

> I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. I think personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant to the larger things. (Orr 169-170)

Here, Plath uses the word "manipulate" again, only this time referring to how she spun or controlled experiences to turn them into stories. This seems to be the second meaning of the OED definition, linking a manipulation of experience for the page to Plath's own broken leg. Perhaps Plath's telegram had a double meaning: just as she would need to manipulate the movement of her leg to walk, she would similarly desire to manipulate the story on the page. Indeed, as we see across her works, Plath does manipulate the event and experience of breaking her leg on the ski slope, just as she manipulates her leg physically.

While the nature of this project could have allowed for any number of stories to be chosen, I settled on the Mount Pisgah ski slope incident. While Plath retells multiple stories across her writing, the ski slope is perfect for this line of inquiry for several reasons. Not only is this story told and retold, but the genre often switches with each version: Plath writes this story in journal entries, a telegram, letters to her mother, letters to her current love interest Myron Lotz, two short stories (one published and one not), at least one poem, and in her novel, *TBJ*. Secondly, I chose this story because it encapsulates key themes in Plath's body of work. In letters with her mother and in the argument with Dick, Plath struggles with domesticity and prescribed gender roles. Her independence and struggle with conformity present in letters to Myron Lotz as well as in the protagonist's feelings in "In the Mountains." Questions of disability appear in almost every telling of this story, especially prevalent in the journals and in her poem "In Plaster," as Plath grappled with the tension between physical disability and invisible illness. Death, hospitals, and suicide are frequent themes, though this story happened months before her first recorded suicide attempt.

The primary texts examined in this thesis are presented primarily in chronological order. The journal entries in chapter two are analyzed in chronological order, beginning in January

1954 and concluding in February 1954. The letters in chapter three begin in December 1953 and conclude in February 1954, first dealing with letters to Aurelia, and then to Myron Lotz. Chapter four presents three texts: the first, "In the Mountains," written and published in 1954; the second is chapter eight of *TBJ,* written in 1961; followed by "In Plaster," also written in 1961.

Each of the primary works in this project is not typically discussed in Plath studies. Plath scholarship tends to focus largely on Plath's last poetic body of work, *Ariel,* even gravitating towards specific poems within that collection: "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" typically feature prominently. For this reason, "In Plaster," written at the same time as the *Ariel* poems but not published with them, has not received much critical attention. Likewise, *The Bell Jar* also receives its share of criticism, although scholars tend to focus on either the beginning of the novel – Esther's internship in New York City – or the end of the novel – Esther's hospitalization after her suicide attempt. Often scholars ignore the middle of *TBJ*, which encompasses Esther's brief time at home and includes flashbacks to before the New York summer. For this reason, chapter eight is often only mentioned in passing in scholarship as one or two sentences devoted to summary. Also largely neglected in Plath studies are Plath's journals, letters, and short stories. These feature prominently in this thesis because, although they receive less attention than *TBJ* and her later poetry, these types of writing were Plath's most prolific.

Ultimately, I believe this event on the ski slope was also a pivotal point in Plath's life, even though it does not get the same analysis or attention as some of her other experiences or writing. This is an event that took place the winter before "The Bell Jar Summer" and has its own dedicated chapter in *TBJ*. It is an event that Plath returned to over and over again, rewriting its ending and rewriting herself as a character for decades. She rewrote this story from the day after it happened until only months before her death, showing that she never stopped analyzing

the moments on the slope, seeing it through different lenses, and attributing altered meanings to each piece.

In chapter four of this project, I define Plath's published works as "autofiction," but I believe this term is also helpful for understanding all of Plath's works and for defining her role as a performer in each narrative. In effect, the concept of autofiction offers a genre separate from autobiography or fictionalized autobiography. As discussed later in this project, it allows for fictional elements to accompany "realistic" ones without the author feeling a responsibility to stick to the truth and without the readers feeling manipulated. As Plath shifts the versions she tells of the ski slope, she does so specifically with her audience in mind. She mixes truth with fiction, weaving them together in order to fit the medium of the work and the audience she has in mind. In this way, I view Plath's writing as what I am terming "autofictional performance". As Plath decides which elements she will keep from the true incident and which she will fabricate, she creates different performances of the moment on the ski slope and of herself. She sets the stage of each differently, casting different characters, and characterizing herself as very different people.

Plath's fragmented identity and autofictional performance manifests in different ways across each genre represented in this project. In chapter two of this project, I analyze journal entries in which Plath recorded the aftermath of Mount Pisgah in order to determine how Plath performed for herself as author, character, and intended audience. In chapter three, I outline correspondence regarding the broken leg: the telegram and letters sent to her mother and the letter sent to her boyfriend. I argue that these letters embody Plath's performances aimed at a singular other individual. These performances widely differ due to the recipient of the letters: to her mother, Plath caters her content to a domestic ideal of the 1950s, and to her boyfriend the

content is more literary and more sexual. In chapter four I analyze works intended for publications: “In the Mountains,” a short story, chapter eight of *The Bell Jar*, and “In Plaster,” a poem. These works were written for a wider audience, and thus the way Plath portrays each piece reveals her broadly aimed performances. I directly compare the works that Plath intended for publication to analyze why certain elements remained the same and others diverged. Disability studies is featured prominently in each chapter due to the nature of the event; Plath’s broken leg lends itself to commentary not only on Plath’s physical state but on how she viewed her body and mind in relation to the expectations of gender norms within the patriarchal structure of the 1950s. Disability studies is important for understanding how Plath viewed her temporary disability and how she assumed others viewed her. By combining disability studies and analysis of performance of each text across genre, I critique the notion that Plath either accurately represented herself in all of her writing or that she was synonymous with all her protagonists. This notion of Plath’s body of works is ultimately reductive and disregards the nuance and complexities alive in performance of identity across each one. Therefore, the aim of this project is not to determine which story was “real” and which Plath was the true Plath, but to give them all the same analysis and weight, treating each as separate and yet intricately connected works that speak to one another.

CHAPTER II

PERFORMANCE AND GENRE IN THE JOURNALS

While Sylvia Plath is most well known for her poetry and her single surviving novel, *The Bell Jar*, her most prolific writing was her many journals.[3] To understand the many retellings of the ski slope incident, it makes the most sense to start at the most solitary format: her journal entries. Plath's journals are not an objective representation of her experience. There is arguably just as much performance in her journals as in her letters and publications. Unlike her publications, Plath's intended audience is only herself, and thus the performative aspects of the journals would be targeted at herself. The journals reveal more about how Plath constructed a persona through journaling as a present writer and likely desired to view herself in the future as a reader, rather than an accurate and objective depiction of who she truly was.

In 1982, Plath's widower, Ted Hughes, released a heavily abridged version of Plath's journals, omitting many of the entries. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* was so heavily edited by Hughes that most of the entries are not even dated and consist simply of pages of copy and pasted material, often with footnotes or introductions to explain her intent. In this edition of her journals, Hughes claimed that this was "her autobiography"; however, the problems with this are manifold. Not only did Hughes omit large swaths of what he claims is her autobiography, but the OED confirms that the assumption for the term "autobiography" is the intent to publish. As far as

[3] Plath also wrote 130 pages of an unfinished sequel to *The Bell Jar* titled *Double Exposure*, but this novel disappeared around 1970 (T. Hughes, "Introduction").

we can know, Plath never intended her journals for publication or mass consumption. Eighteen years later, in 2000, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* was published, consisting of letters written by Plath from 1950-1962, containing two-thirds more of Plath's journals than in Hughes's version. Plath's *Journals* spans her early adulthood and ends with an appendix of her 1962 writings, penned only months before her death in 1963. For the sake of this critical work, I focus on several entries written relatively early in her journals in the beginning months of 1953.

The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath is composed of 23 separate journals, excluding two journals: one that Ted Hughes claimed "disappeared", and her last-kept journal which Hughes intentionally destroyed (*Unabridged Journals* ix).[4] While there is some debate in the literary community over the term "diary" versus "journal," both terms seem to apply to Plath's entries.[5] Likely the term "journal" was chosen as the publicized term because of the collective nature of the works – though most of the journals are daily entries, there are also character sketches, fragments from other writings, doodles, and drawings. The physical format of the journal is perhaps the most distinguishing feature from Plath's other types of writing. Journals as a genre consist of a physical form of cobbled-together entries strung together in chronological order. This is different from *TBJ*, which follows a non-linear narrative. The "narrative" in her journals, if there is one, is therefore one constructed from timestamps. Marlene Schiwy points out that this creates the interesting paradox of journals as a fragmented whole (237). Though some of the entries are repetitive, some characters enter and exit with little or no fanfare, and a

[4] In Ted Hughes's forward to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, he claimed that he destroyed this journal because "I did not want her children to have to read it" (xii).

[5] In *How to Read a Diary,* Desiree Henderson notes that there is virtually no consensus about the terms in the literary community. She suggests that it would benefit diary studies if "diary" was the default term, as journals have multiple meanings, especially in literary studies (2). For this project, I primarily use the term "journal" because this is the term used in the title of the *Unabridged Journals.*

significant space is dedicated to reflection, the entries can be composed linearly and can be read logically. In this way, journals operate in standard temporal progression of narrative: authors are able to look back on past events, but they are incapable of either prolepsis or foreshadowing within the text. In many ways, these aspects of the journal are much like autobiography, diverging only in the absence of a consistent message, theme, revelation, or moral which autobiographies typically include. While novels feature a clear ending to the action and conflict, the structure of diaries leaves endings as much more fluid.

Although diaries and journals are analyzed frequently through historical frameworks, most have not been given a spot within the literary canon. With a few exceptions, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, typically these personal items are not analyzed for their prose. *The Unabridged Journals* has very little, and indeed almost no, scholarship devoted to it. Marsha Bryant writes that the journals essentially "fall under the confessional mode of the mundane (and private) diary rather than the more literary (and public) autobiography. Because these genres have been gendered female and male, respectively, the former has accrued negative associations of nonliterariness, banality, redundancy, and narcissism" (251). Throughout the scholarship on Plath, the adjective "narcissistic" is frequently used to describe her. In several psychology articles, Plath, as a person and as an author, is seemingly examined post-mortem to diagnose her with mental conditions. Gordon Lamayer, a friend and once-boyfriend of Plath's, writes that "according to modern psychoanalytic theory, it is the narcissist's failure to fulfill love needs in childhood that causes the personality to split, projecting onto another the deepest guilts and destructive forces within the self" (58) and then notes Plath's "incipient schizophrenia" (63), a diagnosis never made while she was alive. Similarly, David Lester diagnosed Plath in 1998, thirty-two years after her death, with bipolar affective disorder (659). In a study on Plath's

vulnerability factors for suicidal behavior, Ernest Shulman argues that Plath's suicide was solely her own fault because she was self-destructive. He ends his article with the following statement: "Thus, the major precipitating factor was under her own control…Sylvia's narcissism was ultimately her undoing" (611). While each of these articles rests uneasily with me, I am not, for the purpose of this study, interested in why each of these men felt the need to attribute a mental health condition to a woman forty years after her death without ever examining her. I am similarly not arguing whether Plath was a narcissist or had narcissistic tendencies. Instead, my interests lie in the emphasis each article places on Plath's supposed narcissism.

My argument has more to do with narcissism as it applies to the genre of the journal or diary. Desiree Henderson writes that the "I focus" of the diary "contributes to the popular perception that the genre is narcissistic" (67). William Matthews points out that one of the chief inspirations for diaries "seems to be egotism: the diarist takes a simple pleasure in writing about himself and what he has done" (295). Historically, this perception makes sense. Margo Culley writes extensively about the history of the diary, explaining its shift from a male-centered genre, which produced public documents and writings meant for publication, to a private and more female-dominated genre. She writes that "women continued to turn to the diary as one place where they were indeed encouraged, to indulge full "self-centeredness" (16). Similarly, Valerie Raoul explains that adolescent girls often kept diaries, but once they were married, this practice normally ceased because "writing about themselves was perceived as an unjustifiable self-indulgence, a theft of time which should be more profitably spent (on others)" (58). In general, regarding the genre of the journal as a narcissistic medium is logical. A journal consists of entries which focus on one's own life for one's own enjoyment and future pleasure and thus can feel very egocentric as a result. It may also feel as though the author is acknowledging that she

feels her life is remarkable or interesting enough to record but perhaps not interesting enough (or she does not have the means necessary) for publication. Another potential source of narcissistic readings of these texts originates in the grammar of the journal itself. Raoul explores the grammatical breakdown of diary entries, indicating that they perform a "triple self-projection" (60), as the diarist—in this case Plath—is simultaneously the author, character, and reader of the entries. Indeed, throughout her journals Plath crafts herself as a character on the page, likely with the understanding and intention that she would be the only person to ever view that character.

For this study, the journals are useful as a tool for examination and comparison with Plath's other publicized works. If Plath is narcissistic in her journals, a large part of this is likely due to the nature of the genre of the private diary. Narcissism has a deeply negative connotation, and truly the critics above have used Plath's perceived narcissism as a justification to blame her solely for her own suicide. However, I posit that this "narcissism" (used figuratively here, not as a diagnosis) is exceedingly useful in determining Plath's self-creation. The genre of the journal creates a space to view Plath as she viewed herself, as a direct result of the egotism the genre allowed. The performance for herself - who she wanted to be, who she thought she was, who she wanted to remember herself as – is best exemplified in the journal format with no outside relationships or influences to read or comment on her writing or experiences. Thus, if we want to know who Plath thought she was – not the "real" Sylvia Plath, but perhaps the Sylvia Plath she "made up inside [her] head"[6]– the journals are the ideal genre to begin in ("Mad Girl's Love Song"). Though we cannot count on them to relay or recount the "true" and objective events of

[6] This is a reference to Plath's poem "Mad Girl's Love Song", which was also published in 1953 in *Mademoiselle* magazine and was likely written about Myron Lotz. This poem was left out of *Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes. The book touted a complete set of Plath's poetry prior to 1956, but several substantial poems were left out of the publication. This poem is cited instead from a biographical note, written by Lois Ames, at the back of the 50th anniversary publication of *The Bell Jar*.

her life, the "narcissism" in them is actually far more useful than critics have recognized. Schiwy writes that journal writing allows for self- creation: "as we create ourselves in the very process of writing about ourselves and our lives… [we] deconstruct our assigned roles as women in a patriarchal society and the numerous discourses that fill our eyes and ears from every direction" (234). Similarly, Henderson writes that the "diarist's 'I' covers a range of identities and may serve to create or imagine new ones" (67). In writing herself as a character, Plath engages in self-creation, fictionalizing her own experiences, life, and identity.

In a rather meta moment in the journal, Plath addresses the performative aspects of her journal directly on January 25, 1953. She writes, "As for minute joys: I think this book ricochets between the feminine burbling I hate and the posed cynicism I would shun. One thing, I try to be honest. And what is revealed is often rather hideously unflattering… but please, don't ask me who I am" (165). In these lines, Plath acknowledges that her journal is a mirror of a "passionate, fragmentary girl" (165). The mirror also invokes the myth of Narcissus, an interesting play on her own supposed self-absorption. She acknowledges here that her 'hideously unflattering' reflection is displayed, an uncomfortable mirroring.[7] She writes that she tries to be honest, but also that sometimes her writing consists of "posed" cynicism – a performative aspect of her journal. She also pleads at the end of the line for no one to ask her who she is. She seems either not to know who she is or is unsettled at what her journal often reveals about her. Though this line is a rare instance in which Plath consciously addresses the performative aspects of the

[7] Mirroring is a consistent theme of Plath's. Not only does she engage with doubles often – see Chapter 4 for an analysis of "In Plaster – but she also frequently uses mirrors to comment on time and identity. One of her most famous poems, "Mirror" (written the same year as "In Plaster" - 1961) personifies a mirror on a wall and a lake which reflects a young woman's passing age: "A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is. / Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon. / I see her back, and reflect it faithfully" (*Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems* 154).

journal, it gives Plath too much credit to assume she was always aware of this performance. Often, her performances within entries seem unconscious, as would be the case for any other writer of a journal. These unconscious performances are perhaps more interesting than even this moment of acknowledgement from Plath.

The line "don't ask me who I am" seems almost to preempt the dozens of critics, relatives, book publishers and teachers whose primary goal is to discover the "true" Sylvia Plath. Marianne Egeland writes that Edward Cohen, an old friend of Plath, "argued for the necessity of 'Seeking the One True Plath', in his case, uncovering an image of Plath as he had known her, underneath the extensive cult focus and misconceptions advanced by the literary industry" (1). This obsession – to find and understand the "real" Plath – has infiltrated the scholarship on Plath through the years. No longer is the primary focus on her works[8] but on attempting to understand her and to understand why she committed suicide. Even Ted Hughes vacillated between referring to Sylvia Plath either as deliberately posing (Whelan 141) or as her "authentic self" (Kendall 51). In Hughes's forward to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath,* he declares: "Her real self…would now speak for itself and would throw off all those lesser and artificial selves that had monopolized the words up to that point, it was as if a dumb person suddenly spoke" (iix). Hughes focuses on the "real self" while simultaneously invalidating much of Plath's work as false ramblings. Tim Kendall writes that "the temptation to uncover Plath's true self in one text, at the expense of another, makes problematic assumptions about a multi-faceted personality" (51). Susan Bassnett similarly argues that if we pin Plath down to a singular "real" personality, not only does that

[8] Marianne Egeland writes that before Plath committed suicide, critics' "reviews were 'brief, reserved, entirely conventional'" (30) and "emphasize[d] her complex syntax, excellent control, and technical accomplishment" (31).

person not exist, but we sacrifice much more interesting contradictory readings (5). Ultimately, attempting to identify the "true" Plath is an incredibly limiting goal. In this approach the desperation to find and identify a certain image of her expands to her works. She is flattened, and by extension her works are constrained to a single reading, stripping away the intricate contradictions that make her work interesting and worth analyzing. In contrast, my focus is on the different and fragmented pieces of Sylvia Plath — it is on the changes in each retelling of the same story. I am not interested in asking Plath "who she was" because this is not a biographical project. This project instead focuses on how she represented the ski slope in 1953 across genres, how she changed the texture of the story, and the alternate language and the meanings she used throughout each telling. Like fragments of a shattered mirror, Plath represents the ski slope incident in pieces that reveal different aspects of herself over time.

In 1953 Plath was enrolled at Smith College in Massachusetts and was a junior set to graduate the following year. Attention to Plath's life and work usually focuses on two years: 1963 (the year she committed suicide) and 1953 (the year she spent a summer in New York interning at *Mademoiselle*, attempted suicide, and spent several months in a mental hospital). The events of 1953 correspond loosely to events which later appeared in *The Bell Jar*. While the events of the summer and fall of 1953 have been studied in great detail, my study is focused on the events that occurred just before this tumultuous time in her life: in the winter and spring of 1953 on a ski slope in Mount Pisgah in New York.

Throughout the early 1950s, Sylvia was in an on-again, off-again relationship with Richard ("Dick") Norton. Dick was a childhood friend and the obvious pick of both of their families for her potential husband. Dick was a medical student at Yale, very athletic, and situated solidly in the middle class. However, neither Sylvia nor Dick could fully commit to each other.

The summer between her freshman year and sophomore year, Dick had a summer fling with a waitress which precipitated the breakdown of their relationship. Sylvia, attuned to the expectations of the 1950s for women, had maintained her virginity for marriage while Dick had not afforded her the same consideration. Anne Stevenson notes that Dick had "bested her in their competition for sexual supremacy" foreshadowing Plath's journal entries later complaining about Dick's competitive nature (28). In 1952 Dick contracted tuberculosis and spent several months recovering (or "curing") in the Ray Brook Sanatorium in New York. In December of 1953, Sylvia Plath spent several days visiting him at the sanatorium, and the two of them decided to go skiing on Mount Pisgah. While on the mountain, Sylvia broke her leg coming down the ski slope; as a result, she spent the rest of the winter in a plaster cast as it healed.

This event—while seemingly small in the grand scheme of Plath's internship, mental breakdown, hospitalization in a mental institution, shock treatments, and suicide attempts—clearly impacted Plath deeply and permanently. She writes about the ski slope and the breaking of her leg over and over again across genres, fictionalizing the incident and reworking the event on paper. In order to understand how she altered the event in future works, I will analyze certain journal entries to show how Plath processed the incident immediately after it occurred, how she portrayed it in her journals where she was both the creator and the sole audience member, and how the genre of journals and diaries influenced this initial telling of the incident.

Because the ski slope incident results in the temporary disabling of Plath's physical body, disability studies, as it intersects with gender studies, serves as a constructive framework for analysis. As a woman who was temporarily disabled — relegated to a cast and crutches — Plath entered a state of "double jeopardy." She was doubly discriminated against as a woman who did not possess a normatively abled body. This discrimination — or simply fear of discrimination

that could potentially occur — corresponds to a theme across the journals and letters: Plath's ever-present worries about her femininity. Disability rendered her more submissive and passive than ever before, which was a struggle for her regarding the tension between her independence and strength and her desire to conform to societal expectations.

Female embodiment and embodied writing are two related concepts that are useful for understanding the challenges Plath faced as a woman and understanding the themes she explores in her journals. In their book entitled *Woman's Embodied Self: Feminist Perspectives on Identity and Image,* J. C. Chrisler and I. Johnston-Robledo discuss embodiment as it pertains specifically to women. They explain that embodiment of the self is more complicated than it might initially seem:

> Thus, people can misunderstand the self in dramatic ways, such as by recognizing aspects that are not actually part of their bodies (e.g., a rubber hand, a phantom limb) or by not recognizing aspects that are part of their bodies (e.g., neglect of the left or right arm and leg). Other clinical examples of misunderstanding of the body or disruption in body–self unity might include a person with anorexia nervosa who perceives her ultra-thin body as fat, or state-induced self-objectification, which causes a woman to shift from a first- to a third-person perspective of her body. (4)

This quote reflects Plath's struggles throughout the portrayals of the ski slope: she recognizes her cast as an extension of her body and often ignores her actual leg, disassociating from it with language. Plath also struggles with fat phobia in entries and letters, concerned with how her injured leg will impede exercise. All of these external factors compound with Plath's status as a woman living in the 1950s who attempted to conform to beauty standards of the period. The messages that were constantly pushed onto Plath by her mother, consumer culture, magazine

agencies, boys she was interested in, and society writ large were unending and constantly contradicting one another: “their bodies should be feminine, beautiful (but not look like they tried too hard to achieve their beauty), sexy (but not slutty), pure (but not prudish), slender (but curvy in the right places), youthful (if they are adults), mature (if they are adolescents), fashionably dressed, controlled (in their posture, bearing, and appetites), healthy, fit, and able-bodied” (Chrisler 11). All of these messages — both implicit and explicit in Plath’s life and writings — were at war with one another, and Plath struggled to deal with most of these as a result of the ski slope.

Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo also explore the concepts of mental corseting and physical corseting. Mental corseting, as they write, can be defined as concerning “the impact of sociocultural expectations on embodied experience, such as stereotypes of different types of girls (e.g., girly-girl vs. tomboy, bitch vs. sweetie, prude vs. slut) and worries about the discrepancy between one’s own body and the beauty ideal” (9). Plath’s very presence on the ski slope indicates “mental corseting” as she is pressured to perform athleticism to prove her worthiness as a potential mate for marriage. On the other hand, the aftermath of the ski slope results in “physical corseting” which is defined as “the experience of being forced into an uncomfortable mode of being and doing” (9). Plath’s broken leg and cast confine her uncomfortably to her room, limiting her freedom both as an able-bodied person and as a previously independent woman.

This female embodiment, present across each telling of the ski slope, is compounded in the journals as embodied writing. Embodied writing works to “‘presence’ the experience in the writer while writing and in the reader while reading” (Anderson 3). Embodied writing reminds the reader that bodies exist and that every interaction involves a body that is not dissociated with

the world but instead fully engages with it. As previously discussed, journaling as a medium presents itself in fragmented pieces. Like Plath's fractured leg, the story of the ski slope appears in fractured pieces across her journal entries and letters. There is not one cohesive telling of the entire event from beginning to end in the journals, and the closest rendering of the event occurs in a letter to Myron Lotz (and even that omits details). Thus, Plath's female embodiment of her fractured leg is relayed directly onto the fractured body of her work.

In the *Unabridged Journals*, there is a jump in entries from November 18, 1952, to January 10, 1953, skipping December 1952, the month Plath broke her leg. Not only do the entries skip almost two months entirely, but the tone of the entries noticeably shifts between the two entries. The November entry is one paragraph long and Plath addresses herself as "you." She writes lines such as "You are crucified by your own limitations… You have had chances, you have not taken them…You cannot love, even if you knew how to begin to love" (154). She then goes on to reference a blind alley and choices that she would make differently if she could. Henderson writes that addressing oneself in second person allows for the diarist to engage in self-creation. She writes that this character can "assume many forms: an idealized self, a judgmental self, and so forth" (69). Henderson also mentions that second-person pronouns anticipate a return to the text, a future moment in which the diarist returns to the diary. In Plath's case her second-person pronouns take on the form of the judgmental self. The lines above read like an admonishment and a critic's eye turned upon herself and seem full of despair and disappointment in herself and her life. The entire entry is a harsher version of the famous fig tree metaphor in *The Bell Jar* in which Esther envisions a fig tree full of the choices of her life but cannot pick between them. As she watches, immobilized with fear at picking the wrong fig, the figs die and fall to her feet (77). The November entry in her journals suggests a similar fear, but

in speaking directly to herself as "you" and given the harshness of her language, the sentiment is much darker, and much more ominous. Plath becomes a berating parent and a cynical voice. In stark contrast, the January 10 entry appears relatively standard. It switches from deep reflection to a listing of events that happened to her over Christmas break. Read next to each other, these two entries are jarring in their differences, an indication that something significant must have happened in the gap.

The tonal and temporal jump between November and January is something that Plath acknowledges in her January entry. Of the tonal shift from the harsh language in the November entry to the more typical relaying of daily events that occurs in the January 10 entry, Plath writes, "It is a chalk mask with dead dry poison behind it, like the death angel. It is what I was this fall, and what I never want to be again" (155). She writes that her friend Edward Cohen implored her to get psychiatric help, but she simply states that she needs sleep, a good attitude and "a little good luck" (155). Of the temporal jump, she writes, "So unbelievably much has happened since I last wrote in here" (155). A lapse in time of two months is abnormal enough for Plath to acknowledge it, as she typically wrote at least a couple of times a week – especially leading up to November and after January.

After Plath admits that much has happened in the lapse, she explains the events that occurred over her break from school:

> Thanksgiving I met a man I could want to see again and again. I spent three days with him up here at house dance. I got a sinus infection for a week. I saw Dick, went to Saranac with him, and broke my leg skiing. I decided again that I could never live with him ever. Now midyears approach. I have exams to work for,

> papers to write. There is snow and ice and I have a broken leg to drag around for two hellish months. (155)

In the span of five or so lines, Plath manages to sum up her new love interest, Myron Lotz, her health, seeing Dick, breaking her leg, deciding she and Dick would never work romantically, and her return to school. In the line about seeing Dick and breaking her leg, the events seem intertwined and almost inseparable. Surely, in some sense, the events are linked—if Plath had not gone to see Dick, then gone to the mountain with him, she would not have broken her leg—but in Plath's sentence the three events are not only linked but occur in rapid succession. The emotion rendered from this sentence is the sheer immediacy and almost inevitability of the resulting broken leg. In this passage, Plath seems to be more reflective on the fact that their relationship is clearly and definitively over rather than being upset about her broken leg. Plath acknowledges that she now knows she could not live with Dick, though whether the last straw was meeting Myron Lotz at Thanksgiving or her injury on Mount Pisgah is unclear.

In the January 10 journal entry Plath also focuses on the constant battle between her and Dick for dominance in their relationship. She manifests this larger anxiety about control in Dick's superior athletic ability and her desire to prove that she could keep up with him: "looking back on our relationship together I see now clearly the pattern of my conditional desperate striving to measure up to what I thought were his standards of athletic ability, etc. Always I panted after him on a bicycle" (155). That Plath regards her worth in terms of athletic ability is unlikely to be coincidental. More likely, on the top of the mountain Sylvia felt in some way less than Dick's equal. This anxiety of independence and equality, while implicit here in only a few lines of a single journal entry, becomes more fleshed out in the ski slope scene in *The Bell Jar*. Indeed, Plath fleshes out many of these smaller ideas more fully elsewhere in her writing.

Interestingly, Plath writes very little in her journals about what actually occurred on the ski slope. Her letters and her fiction show a much more developed version of the incident, but the journals reflect more of the aftermath for Sylvia – the anxiety over paralysis and what this means for her future.

On January 12, two days after Plath's initial telling of the ski slope incident, she focuses on the paralysis and constriction she feels as a result of the plaster cast. She writes, "Again, I can not [sic] help muse upon the imprisonment of the individual in the cell of her own limitations" and even more directly: "I am obsessed by my cast as a concrete symbol of my limitations and separation from others" (157). The broken leg, which is the physical barrier between her and her life previous to December—a life of proms, dates with boys and long walks on Smith's campus—is not what Plath views as the thing that constrains her. To her, the symbol of her limitations is the plaster cast, an idea which is later fleshed out in her poem, "In Plaster."[9] In Sylvia's case, the physical deformity that people see is not actually her leg, but the plaster cast that envelops it. This symbolism of the cast corresponds with what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder term "narrative prosthesis." In their book of the same name, they discuss representations of disability across literary narratives, arriving at the argument that disability is often used as a narrative prosthesis. They write that "disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (49). Disability is therefore more of a symbol or metaphor of some greater theme or anxiety. For Plath, the cast is her narrative prosthesis for these entries: the cast becomes a symbol of the confinement, immobility and othering because of her broken leg.[10] The cast is a

[9] See Chapter 4 for more on "In Plaster."

[10] David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder also offer the argument that literary representations of disability often do not represent realistic struggles regarding disability in lieu of the materiality of metaphor (56). This can be seen in

tangible and heavy item which compresses her and which she must always drag around with her. It is a physical impediment that represents her anxieties about not measuring up to expectations. In some ways, the plaster cast is similar to the anxieties about the bell jar that descends on Esther in *TBJ*: both items create a barrier between her and the world; both items are impossible to move and create deep fear about the inability to move freely and independently.

Plath was convinced that her broken leg was a great literary symbol, and the most telling evidence is that she chose to keep this aspect the same in every rendition of the story. Plath did not break an arm or another limb on the slope, and thus that is not how she portrays it in her journals and her letters. However, even when presented with the opportunity through the genre of fiction—in *TBJ* or her short stories—to change which limb is broken, she chooses not to. Other aspects are altered: who was there, her name, verb tense, pronouns, and how it is described. But one of the only static components through each retelling is that it is her leg that is broken. The symbolism of the leg is important: it is the legs that allow mobility, freedom, and independence. For Plath, likely no other broken limb would have been quite so debilitating, since breaking her leg meant that she lost her freedom to move about independently and to walk wherever and as easily as she pleased. In this way, the cast is a physical manifestation of her social limits: Plath's ability to walk freely, go on dates, and dance at the prom are all hindered by the existence of the plaster cast.

Furthermore, Plath's infatuation with the theme of immobility indicates that there is a way in which Dick, via her leg, is still preventing her from being what she calls "feminine." At the end of the January 12 entry, Plath makes a list of all the good things she has to look forward

Plath's journal entries and letters as well – while she does sometimes talk about the hardships of being confined to her room, often these sentiments are couched in a greater themes or anxieties and drift away from realism.

to. These items appear as though she is writing them into existence or convincing herself of their inevitable existence. She states that her cast will be off in a month, exams will be over, and "perhaps the man will want to see me again," referring here to Myron. She then expresses her hope for her leg to be healed so she can pedal a bike "into the green, unfolding future" (158). Here Plath equates the opportunity for sexual freedom with physical freedom. While her leg is broken and she is in a cast, there seems to be no opportunity for seeing or having a future with Myron Lotz. However, when the cast comes off, the world opens up before her. Whether or not Plath blames Dick for her broken leg is irrelevant; what matters is that Plath felt emotionally constrained by Dick, and as a result of her visit with him, broke her leg which further physically constrained her. Because of Plath's broken leg, she could not make the clean break in their relationship that she desired. Even as Plath felt a sense of freedom in deciding to no longer be with Dick, his presence on the ski slope still rendered her immobile. It is because of him and the ski slope that she is unable to move forward in her relationship with Myron Lotz. It is still Dick and patriarchal expectations that prevent her from her independence.

Several times over the course of her broken leg stint, Plath lists the reasons that she could never be with Dick in her journal entries. Among her reasons – competitiveness, lack of virginity, physically short, etc. – is that she never felt "feminine" around him. She writes that feeling feminine implied "a certain physical fragility – a boy could masterfully pick up his girl and carry her for instance" (155). Similarly, she writes that "carrying = symbolic of my tender femininity" (173). What she desired from Dick was not so much that he was strong, but that he would make her feel fragile and delicate. In Plath's new status as an injured girl, fragility is forced upon her. No longer is feeling feminine and fragile something she must work for, but it is implied in her physical weakness regarding her disabled body. In this way disability intersects

with Plath's idea of femininity as her broken leg contributes to a more fragile image of her. Indeed, this is affirmed in Plath's descriptions of Myron Lotz following the accident. She seems certain that breaking her leg has ruined her chances of going to the Yale Junior Prom or even going out on dates with him, but the opposite holds true in her journal entries. When Lotz calls her on the phone, he asks, "how's the invalid" (159), which delights Plath. Perhaps it delights her because he addresses her status as weakened and dependent on others – granting her the fragility she sought in her relationship with Dick. Later, on February 2, he fulfills the desires that the Sylvia of January 10 expressed. When they go out to coffee, Plath notes "He also carries me places in his arms, and I feel so feminine and light, even with my cast" (171). If these journals were a standard narrative taking place in a novel, the line about Dick not being able to carry her would foreshadow Lotz's ability three weeks later. Since that is not the case, it seems like an eerie coincidence that so soon after Plath expressed a desire in feeling fragile via being carried that this would come to pass.

While being carried is very "feminine" to Plath, there is also something quite liberating and independent about it. On one hand, being carried implies a confirmation of gender roles—the woman is weak and dependent on a man, and the man is strong and in control of the woman and the situation. On the other hand, it also subverts these roles. Plath was constantly walking the thin line between conforming to society and pushing back against the dominant discourse. While physical carrying does indicate that the man is strong and the woman is weak, it also pushes back on gender roles with the idea of service and domesticity. In the ideals of the 1950s, women were essentially servants to their husbands. They cooked, cleaned, kept the house and submitted to their husbands' dominating will. They lived to serve – or at least that is what society expected of them, and it punished them if they rebelled. However, in Plath's fantasy world where a man

carries her, the man is in service to her. She dreams up a world where men are at women's beck and call, reversing the societal gender roles of service. There is a newfound freedom for her in directing Lotz to where she wishes to go, a freedom that she is otherwise not allowed because of her cast. If Plath believes that Dick will not carry her around, perhaps it is because she perceives him to be unflinchingly reliant on the traditional gender roles of the 1950s, not that she is submissive to those roles.

Later Myron Lotz does take Sylvia Plath out for dates, but they have to sit most of the time, which Plath laments is not in Lotz's character. Myron and Plath went to a local coffee shop, and Plath wrote on February 2 that "He hates sitting: likes to talk walking" (171). Similarly, on January 19 Lotz asks Plath to the Yale Junior Prom by not-so-subtly inquiring when her cast will come off. It is implied that if Sylvia cannot dance by the time the prom is held in March that Myron will not ask her to go with him. Here again, Plath's physical handicap is linked to her sexual and romantic freedoms. If her leg does not heal, she will not be able to partake in independently living her life. Plath even addresses this explicitly in her January 22 entry (though she does not mention her leg directly), writing that "I have been deprived of sexual activity for long, unnatural months now" (162). Therefore, based on her complaints about sex, the immobilization of her leg rendered Plath—as an independent female—immobile.

In the January 12 entry, Plath also does something remarkable and incredibly interesting. She considers fictionalizing the event on the ski slope in her journal for the first time. She writes:

> I would like to write a symbolic allegory about a person who would not assert her will and communicate with others, but who always believed she was unaccepted, apart. Desperately, in an effort to be part of a certain group she breaks her leg skiing and has a

> morbid fear her leg will not mend properly. When the cast is taken off, her leg has withered, and she shrivels up into dust, or something. (157)

In the second entry Plath writes after the incident, she is already beginning to envision the stories that could take shape out of it. Valerie Raoul writes that one aspect of the journal genre "resembles an inventory, a sort of memory bank in which one makes deposits, ensuring that nothing is lost, and creating a reserve which may be drawn on later, with interest" (61). This was a concept that was definitely true for Plath. Across her journals Plath constantly was trying out new styles of prose or new ideas for stories. Tracy Brain compares her journals to writer's notebooks in which Plath was auditioning pieces in different costumes (11). However, this is a unique and rare spot where Plath outlines an idea for a story, and even more interestingly, a story she never wrote (or, at the very least, she never published). There are certainly parts of this idea that Plath adapts and uses in later published pieces – specifically the purposefulness with which the main character breaks her leg - but the plan for the main character's leg to wither and for her to shrivel into dust never materializes. Whether or not Plath ever pursued this exact story, this entry in her journal is evidence that she seemingly always viewed her broken leg as fodder for her stories and viewed the entire event as meaningful and holding symbolic potential. Plath fantasizes about disability in this passage, imagining symbols that the heroine's broken leg would come to embody. In this way, Plath was already beginning the process of using her leg and cast as a narrative prosthesis.

On January 18, six days after Plath laments the loss of her independence and freedom to move, she drastically changes her tone within her journals. Now, instead of feeling constrained by the cast, Plath has taken "a vow to be cheerful and jolly about my legs, and gay with the girls in the house" (159). She writes that the leg has allowed her to make friends with the girls she

lives with and that the leg symbolizes not prison walls but a passport. The shift in tone over the course of a single week reads much like a persona Plath is trying on: the attitude of gratefulness that her leg is broken instead of the anger and despair she emulated before. She even goes so far as to write, "Whole-heartedly I can say now, even with four weeks a head [sic] of me: I AM GLAD I BROKE IT!"; she then reflects on the idea that the true prison was her mental state of the previous fall, the state reflected by the November journal entry, rather than the physical crippling of her leg (159). Several of Plath's journal entries from this time period seem to serve as reminders to a future self of hers who will look back and read these journals. In this case the future Plath-as-reader will understand that Plath-as-character underwent significant revision and character development in these months.

On January 25 Plath explores one of the most common and controversial themes across her body of work: the concept of rebirth. Plath wrote often about her suicide attempts as "rebirths", emphasizing this comparison specifically in *TBJ,* as well as in her later poetry. In many ways Plath's descriptions of her leg post-ski slope accident are similar to this later developed and published concept. On January 25 much of her entry consists of descriptions of childlike behavior or activities. She writes: "Very neat compromise: no jobs, no work by the scholastic minimum. Good food, sleep, company, and solitude. And best of all, after I go through the gruelling [sic] task of learning how to walk again, I'll be ready to assume the world" (165). Because she cannot walk and school has not started again for the spring semester, Plath has no job or school to attend. All she can do is eat and sleep and reflect on the impending task of learning how to walk. All of these tasks mirror infant behavior, creating the illusion that by breaking her leg on the ski slope, Plath has triggered a sort of rebirth as a result. Later in the entry Plath describes the pleasure that picking her nose brings her. She writes for an entire

paragraph lines such as "a heavier, determined forefinger can reach up and smear down-and-out the soft, resilient, elastic greenish-yellow smallish blobs of mucus, roll them round and jelly-like between thumb and fore-finger" (165). This detailing of an activity also primarily engaged in – or at least acknowledged – by children is another aspect of this idea. There is an aspect of this which welcomes being fully alone, and perhaps an archaic return to pre-social norm society. Plath is fascinated, either seriously or in facetiously, by the act of picking her nose, perhaps through sheer boredom evidenced by the painstaking diction and the amount of space dedicated to it, but it also functions as a facet of infantile pleasure and thus, rebirth and beginning again.

On February 20 Plath describes her visit to the doctor the day previous to have her cast removed. Her doctor "lifted the white plaster lid like a gravedigger opening a sealed coffin. The corpse of my leg lay there, horrible, dark with clotted curls of black hair, discolored yellow, wasted shapeless" (175). Plath compares the plaster cast to a coffin and her leg to a corpse in these lines, a sentiment that is later echoed in her poem, "In Plaster." In this journal entry, Plath treats her leg like it is not a part of her body any longer or at least not a living part of her body. In *TBJ*, Plath echoes the language she uses about the physical appearance of her leg. However, though there is a segment of the novel that addresses the ski slope scene with Dick Norton[11], the language which eerily parallels her journal entry about her leg is much later, occurring after her suicide attempt via overdose. When Esther, the main character in *TBJ*, awakens in the hospital, she looks down "at the yellow legs sticking out of the unfamiliar white silk pajamas they had dressed me in. The skin shook flabbily when I moved, as if there wasn't a muscle in it, and it was covered with a short, thick stubble of black hair" (172). She then laments that she wishes she could cover her legs because they were "disgusting and ugly" (173). Interestingly, in *TBJ* this

[11] See chapter 4 for more on this.

specific parallel to the *Journals* occurs not after her leg breaks, but instead as a result of a different hospital stay. Here, the ugliness of her legs is not a release and indicator from immobility, but the beginning of it. In *Journals* Plath is revolted by her leg in its unkempt state, but seeing it means the cast has come off and soon she will be free to move around as she pleases. In *TBJ* seeing her legs in the hospital is more complicated: she has woken up from her drug-overdose incident, but instead of symbolizing freedom from her almost-suicide, the legs seem to represent the inevitable imprisonment of Esther in the mental hospital. Perhaps Esther will be free from her own mind, but the ugliness of her legs represents her physical imprisonment in the hospital, which further scars her mentally with shock treatments.

After Plath's cast is removed, she writes that her leg was x-rayed, and the x-rays showed that "'it wasn't completely mended'" (175). The doctor did not replace the cast, though, and advised her to be careful. In the next few sentences Plath grapples with the uncertainty about how to deal with her leg now. Instead of the freedom she had anticipated, anxiety sets in for her: "Not completely mended. Does that mean I don't walk on it for another month? Or do I bury the poor-orphaned half-dead thing in another cast?" (175). She highlights "indefiniteness" as being the hardest aspect, disliking the liminal space between a bone that is broken and a bone that is mended completely. Now that the cast is off and her leg appears physically healed, Plath has a difficult time grasping an injury that may exist, but that she cannot see. In other fictional works, Plath explores her anxieties about a tangible injury versus an invisible ailment.[12]

In the February 20 entry, Plath's language also changes, either for a conscious stylistic shift or something more unconscious. Plath repeatedly omits words from the entry, skipping both verbs and subjects, which is a shift from the rest of her carefully curated sentences. She begins

[12] See chapter 3 for more on this topic.

the entry using normal sentence structure as she details what she did before her doctor's appointment, writing sentences such as, "Somehow I am very thirsty, always, and the leg feels queer" (175). However, as she explains the doctor's appointment, she starts to omit words. She writes, "Whirlpool bath at infirmary and the skin flaking off raw and white and sore", deleting both a subject and a verb from the first half of the sentence and the second half not grammatically matching the first (175). Then she writes, "Scraped at it with a razor… didn't want to claim it", omitting herself as "I" twice (175). The next sentence reads: "Almost fell on stairs, stumbled on leg, felt sharp tingling pain," omitting herself three times (175). As Plath encounters the confusing news that her leg is "not completely mended," she seems to detach physically from the retelling of the appointment. All the language in this portion of the entry is extremely stilted and awkward, which is a by-product of omitting a subject from every sentence. The entry, therefore, reads like a shopping list, which is perhaps either what Sylvia intended or an unconscious feeling. By removing all personal pronouns, all possibility for reflection is also removed, leaving only a cold rendition of the appointment and deleting her presence. The realization that her body is still injured seems to trigger feelings both of a lack of control and agency.

As Plath's most prolific body of work, her journals present a temptation to be read as a key to discover who she "truly was." However, this is only one part to the Plath mosaic. There is no one true Plath, and yet each of her protagonists contains all of her. Much like her fractured body mirrored in the fractured body of her work, her identity appears just as fragmented. In the following chapters, the ski slope story will be analyzed in multiple variations, beginning with the next chapter and correspondence between Plath and her mother and Plath and Myron Lotz. How

Plath subsequently shapes the stories of her broken leg will figure in comparison to the baseline rendition of the story examined in this chapter.

CHAPTER III

PERFORMANCE AND GENRE IN CORRESPONDENCE

This chapter focuses on Sylvia Plath's correspondence in the months of January and February of 1953, specifically regarding her broken leg. The correspondence chosen for this chapter consists of the following texts: a telegram sent from Plath to her mother, Aurelia Plath, letters to her mother, and a letter to Myron Lotz, who was Plath's love interest during these months, as discussed in the previous chapter. Correspondence warrants its own space in Plath's body of work due to the specific performative characteristics it showcases. In writing to a singular person in a letter or telegram, Plath crafted and manipulated her stories to cater to a specific audience of an individual reader. Each detail of these letters is important as a reflection of Plath's existing relationships with each person and her ability to craft a story that would be received well by the intended reader. These letters also reflect the culture and society of the 1950s. Plath tempered her stories to the expectations or desires of others. Often, this meant focusing on domestic tasks for her mother or making a story more "literary" for an academic boyfriend.

Although letters, like journals and diaries, are understudied, they warrant consideration as a distinctive genre of writing. Like journals, often letters are often considered as evidence or support for claims about primary texts, rather than as primary texts themselves. In "The Twentieth Century Letter: A Dying Art?" Leslie Mittleman writes that letters do not have a clear standard by which to analyze them as other genres do, and that "scholars…have yet to isolate,

categorize, or establish critical principles for the letter as an art form" (221). She contends that letters therefore tend to operate as "a kind of stepchild of literary affections, necessary as a resource for biographers, a delight for specialists interested in the particular letters of an author or of his or her circle" (221). While this article was written in 1990, and certainly strides have been made in academia regarding the usefulness of letters in the past three decades[13], publications in the form of novels, poetry, short stories, memoirs and plays still dominate the contemporary landscape. Mittleman points out that the neglect of letters is partially due to with the medium itself. Unlike fiction, poetry, and even autobiography, which authors prepare as whole entities, letters are fragmented and difficult to collect for publication. The nature of collection is similarly not a problem in journals, which are typically already bound together, whether or not the texts are intended for publication. Mittleman writes that "letter collections usually appear in print a generation after the writer's penultimate posthumous publication, sometimes two or three generations after the writer's work has been bundled up" (221). This is precisely the case with Plath, as the first collection of her letters was published over a decade after her death and the second, far more expansive collection was published over sixty years after. Plath's journals were among her possessions when she died, whereas the letters she had sent were scattered far and wide among relatives and acquaintances, making a cohesive publication difficult—if not impossible— for many years.

Certainly, several critics have explored the genre of letters for their performative qualities. Mittleman writes that "clearly, the writer wears a 'mask' for the letter, but the mask invariably changes according to the particular needs of the occasion or the correspondent" (221).

[13] See Guillen for an analysis of the boundaries between literary fiction and narrative pertaining to letters. See Jolly "Confidantes" for a summary of feminist discourses of letter-writing since 1970.

Here, the emphasis is on the idea of different masks – the author does not have one persona, but instead a range of personas depending on the specific audience for the letter. Similarly, Jolly and Stanley focus on the implicit relationships as the defining feature of the letter in their article exploring whether letters qualify as a genre. They write that "put simply, the 'truth' of the writing is in the relationship rather than in its subject. Many epistolary critics have accordingly developed safer terminology than truth, for example, epistolary 'performance' or 'personae'" (93). Much of what we can learn from the genre of letters has less to do with content and more to do with the relationship between sender and receiver and how those roles thereby influence the content.

The first published letters written by Sylvia Plath appeared in a collection titled *Letters Home,* which was compiled and edited by her mother and was published in 1975. This publication only consisted of Plath's letters to her mother between 1950-1963. The letters were heavily edited, some appearing in fragmented formats and some omitted entirely. Aurelia was heavily criticized for this publication, mainly on the grounds that she had attempted to craft a public persona for her daughter by manipulating her writings. Aurelia spoke on the issue, attributing the cuts she made in *Letters Home* as a response to her perception that *The Bell Jar* was interpreted as autobiography when she believed it was heavily fictionalized. Aurelia felt in many ways she had been wronged by the image of Esther's mother in *TBJ*. The harsh character traits and overall ignorance of Mrs. Greenwood were often compared to Aurelia.[14] *Letters Home* was a way for Aurelia to justify herself and enact some revenge regarding the criticism of her relationship with Plath. In an interview with the *New York Times,* Aurelia said that Sylvia

[14] Aurelia attempted to block the publication of *TBJ* in America after Sylvia's death, but Ted Hughes published it in 1971.

"manipulated it very skillfully. She invented, fused, imagined. She made an artistic whole that read as truth itself. That's why I had to have Sylvia speak in her truest voice, which I know comes through in these letters" (Robertson). Whether or not *TBJ* is autobiographical, by manipulating the letters Aurelia was inventing, fusing, and imagining a Plath all her own. The obsession with the "real" or "true" Plath comes up again as Aurelia forces a long-dead Sylvia to speak in what she believes to be "her truest voice." The line "I had to have Sylvia speak" suggests an analogy to puppetry: Aurelia as a dominating puppeteer, Sylvia as a dependent and inanimate object. Sylvia's truest voice would not need to be cut up, discarded, or omitted, and the illusion of her "truest voice" reduces and flattens her.

This was evident in the reaction to *Letters Home*. When it was published, many readers were confounded by the Plath they found between the pages. Aurelia omitted certain sentiments from the letters, such as Plath's more depressive episodes and her views on politics. If a reader had read any of Plath's other work, then the Plath they met in *Letters Home* would have seemed very manufactured and sanitized – because she was. Among the things Aurelia did not print were "the passionate, articulate paragraphs from Fall 1952 letters in which Plath opposes McCarthyism, advocates for Civil Rights, and longs to be old enough to vote for Adlai Stevenson (Aurelia supported Eisenhower)" (Schoerke 162). All the pieces of Sylvia that did not fit her mother's idealized version of her were erased in the publication.

Letters as a genre have a long and storied history, both as private writings and as the inspiration for the contemporary epistolary novel. The importance of understanding how letters relate to gender and femininity is crucial to analyzing the letters Plath sent to her mother specifically. In Dierdre Mahoney's "More Than an Accomplishment: Advice on Letter Writing for Nineteenth Century American Women", she explores the tradition of letter-writing,

specifically in the decade directly preceding Plath's life. Aurelia Plath was born in 1906, growing up in the influence of the intricate ways that letter-writing was marketed as social capital to young women, especially of upper and middle-class families, in the century prior. Many of the ways that *Letters Home* differs from *The Letters of Sylvia Plath* parallel many of the facets present in typical nineteenth-century letters. As Mahoney presents, letter-writing in the nineteenth century was gendered as primarily and particularly female: "The Reverend John Todd admonished, 'It is more than an accomplishment for a young lady to write a beautiful letter, though an accomplishment of the highest kind; it is a positive duty.' This sentiment, printed as a kind of epigraph under the subtitle 'Women Must Do the Letter-Writing,' pervades this uniquely female-directed rhetorical genre" (411). As a genre that had been gendered female, advice on the correct way for women to write letters was abundant in the nineteenth century, even extending into the twentieth century with etiquette books such as those written by Emily Post. Letter-writing, while corresponding strongly to femininity, also corresponded to class as well: instruction in letter-writing would have been a part of school for upper middle-class white women. Mahoney writes that "a growing middle class in America was at no loss for letter-writing instruction, and it was an ambitious, even voracious, group of consumers. From the 1820s until the beginning of the Civil War, a vast number of educational and social decorum texts were published" (412). Both Sylvia and Aurelia fit into this mold of white upper middle-class women; therefore, it is not surprising that both chose to communicate via letters.

As Aurelia made cuts in the publication for *Letters Home*, she largely omitted swaths of Plath's letters that did not conform to the advice put forth for female letter-writers. As Mahoney writes, often publications "advised young women 'not to tell family secrets in their letters, not to complain of their little hardships, and not to describe themselves as miserable and ill-treated,

when they are only hysterical and impatient'" (422). The advice regarding what content was permissible in letters was not nearly as abundant about what content was *not* permissible. Women were discouraged from showing emotion, especially anger, too often or too intensely in letters. That readers of *Letters Home* did not recognize the Sylvia Plath between the pages is indicative of how Emily Post-like Sylvia became. In an attempt to clean up Sylvia's letters for them to appear as "correct", Aurelia effectively erased Sylvia from them.

Where Aurelia could not erase entries neatly, she inserted her own voice into them through her editorial power. A 41-page introduction written by Aurelia begins the publication, detailing the family's history and her relationship with her daughter.[15] Before each part—totaling seven, each assigned to a chronological period of Sylvia's life—Aurelia offered more detailed commentary. While these introductions certainly influence the way readers approach the text, none of them influence quite so much as the editorial interventions of italicized explanations before specific entries. Certain entries that perhaps Aurelia felt she had to include contain disclaimers before them, such as one before November 19, 1952, only two months before the ski slope incident. Aurelia writes: "Shortly before this letter was written, there was an account published in the papers of the suicide of one of Warren's classmates at Exeter… Here in this letter is the first sign of her magnifying a situation all out of proportion" (96). In this instance, Aurelia controls Sylvia's forthcoming voice by preceding it with her own explanations. Sylvia's more expressive and intense episodes that are present in *Letters Home* are therefore hedged and tempered.

[15] On page 3 of the introduction, Aurelia writes: "Throughout her prose and poetry, Sylvia fused parts of my life with hers from time to time, and so I feel it is important to lead into an account of her early years by first describing the crucial decisions and ruling forces in my own life."

When *The Letters of Sylvia Plath* (Volumes 1 and 2) was published in 2017, a more robust version of Plath entered. *The Letters* spans 1940-1963 across both volumes, consisting of an entire decade that *Letters Home* misses. *The Letters* also includes correspondence Plath sent to publishers, boyfriends, and other friends, not only Aurelia. In an article on Plath's correspondence, Meg Schoerke writes that "the unabridged versions reveal not only how Aurelia's editing flattens Plath into a caricature of the 'all American girl,' but also how Plath herself carefully curated her experiences to pose as such a girl in order to please her mother" (162). In manipulating Plath's voice on the page, Aurelia seemed to take advantage of Sylvia's tendency to perform a certain way in order to meet expectations. In large part Aurelia was able to manipulate and omit letters because Plath had already begun crafting the illusion. In a letter to her brother, Warren, Plath acknowledges not only the existence of such an illusion, but also that she was carefully curating it all the time: "our main responsibility is to give [Aurelia] the illusion (only now it hardly seems like an illusion) that we're happy and successful and independent" (*The Letters* 621). *The Letters* also provide an interesting comparison between Plath's letters to her mother and her letters to others. The content of these letters often radically shifted – even when Plath was describing the same event, she would tailor it in a different way for her mom than for a boyfriend or a friend. For the most part, Plath repeats four major themes in her letters to Aurelia: boys, money, her writing and academics. In letters to friends, these topics differ more widely, encompassing more often occurring feelings about sex, fashion, and politics.

Between December 28 and 29, Sylvia sent her mother a telegram after she broke her leg on Mount Pisgah. Telegrams as a genre or medium are immediate, indicating to the reader that the information transmitted is important and urgent. While Sylvia wrote hundreds upon hundreds of letters to her mother, telegrams are few and far between. Unlike letters, which were charged

by postage stamps and weight, telegrams cost by the word. Telegrams, of course, died out gradually over the course of the twentieth century, becoming an extinct format. As Jolly and Stanley point out, genres of writing are "responses to social and technical situations, changing with them over time as well as promoting and constructing them, and even dying out when that situation no longer exists. (The telegram or visiting card might be examples of the latter)" (98). Even in the 1950s, telegrams' popularity was beginning to wane, which renders Plath's utilization of the form all the more interesting.

In 1950 a ten-word telegram would have cost seventy-five cents and a three-minute telephone call would have cost around one dollar and fifty cents (Nonnenmacher). In the 1950s telegrams were in decline, but they were still more cost-effective for a short message. Indeed, most telegrams were brief. Carmen Frehner writes that the "the mean length of telegrams is 14.6 words" (191). Similarly, David Hochfelder states that "more than half of the messages were 10 words or fewer" (79). Frehner also recounts a German telegram study, in which 120 messages were studied for their length. The shortest telegram was composed of only 2 words and the longest was 52. All of this history impacts Plath's telegram sent to her mother in December 1953. Plath's telegram was 50 words (counting the time of "7:41" as one word) which is over three times as much as the mean. It is also five times the number of words that would have cost her .75, making the cost likely closer to 3.75. At that point it would have been far cheaper for Plath to call her mother long distance for a three-minute call, as it would have saved her over two dollars. Elsewhere in the letters, it is clear that Sylvia worries about money, constantly trying to reassure Aurelia that she is not spending too much money or that her publications have made money. After Sylvia's father's death, Aurelia worried about money and Sylvia addressed finances often in regard to that fact. On January 9 she writes to her mother that she was worried

about taxi fares, but a "Miss Mensel" found a fund for her. She writes, "Now at least you can think of me being driven in state to all my classes, by taxis which are not paid for out of our bare pockets!" (541). Money is an oft-mentioned problem in the letters, so the fact that Plath chose to send not only a telegram, but an extremely wordy telegram at that, indicates much about of Plath's relationship to words and how she desired to craft and manipulate stories.

It is not shocking that Plath chose to write to her mother about her injury instead of calling her on the phone – hundreds upon hundreds of letters switched hands between the women over several decades. Plath also likely realized that she could craft the story the way she wanted to tell it: to make it exciting and to try the story out on paper. The telegram, limited in length and space, provided a form not unlike poetry, and indeed there is something almost poetic about the way it is written. Of course, Plath often said that she could write a story better than she could tell it. She wrote to a friend that "I am more myself in letters" (Schoerke 166). Though Plath's telegram does seem urgent at times, the telegram does not have a fearful tone, rendering perhaps an image of Sylvia slyly creating it in her hospital room while having her leg set. The telegram is incredibly and unapologetically witty and seems very self-aware of that fact. The entire telegram reads as follows:

> BREAK BREAK BREAK ON THE COLD WHITE SLOPES OH KNEE ARRIVING FRAMINGHAM TUESDAY NIGHT 7:41. BRINGING FABULOUS FRACTURED FIBULA NO PAIN JUST TRICKY TO MANIPULATE WHILE CHARLESTONING. ANYTHING TO PROLONG VACATION. NORTONS WERE PLANNING TO MEET ME SO WHY NOT CALL TO CHECK. MUCH LOVE. YOUR FRACTIOUS FUGACIOUS FRANGIBLE SIVVY (538).

This kind of thoughtfulness and detail is something so contradictory to the nature of the telegram.

The first indication that the telegram is akin to a poem in content and form is the first three words. Plath begins with "BREAK BREAK BREAK", which, as the footnote in *The Letters: Volume 1* indicates, is a reference to an Alfred Tennyson poem of the same name.[16] This sets the tone for what appears to be Plath's own, perhaps experimental, poem in what remains. Plath then diverges from the poem to clarify that her leg was the item broken, following the first words with "on the cold white slopes oh knee arriving Framingham Tuesday night 7:41" (538). In the remainder of the first sentence, Plath tells what is broken, where it was broken, and location and time information. Even though all of this information seems far more important and urgent, Plath instead leads with a literary reference. The poem she references is even more indicative than simply showing her ability to create a literary pun. The poem by Tennyson is an elegy, lamenting on the death of his friend and the isolation he was feeling. Not only is the elegy in accordance with Plath's theme of cadavers, this poem manages to also foreshadow Plath's feelings of isolation while she is immobilized due to her injured leg.

The next line of the telegram is perhaps even stranger than the first: "Bringing fabulous fractured fibula no pain just tricky to manipulate while charlestoning" (538). Plath not only writes an impressive alliteration with "fabulous fractured fibula," but she also reassures her mother that she was not in any pain. Plath chooses to highlight "charlestoning" in this line, referring to dancing the Charleston, which was very popular in the 1920s. It was not incredibly popular in the 1950s, so initially it seems strange that Plath chose this dance to reference and not

[16] Originally published in 1842, Tennyson's poem uses imagery of the sea which might explain why Sylvia knew and used this poem. Growing up near the sea herself in Winthrop, Massachusetts, she often returned to the sea for inspiration for writing.

the jitterbug, the jive, or something equally as trendy. However, Plath was likely catering to her mother as the intended audience. Though Plath was not alive in the 1920s, Aurelia was and would have understood this specific reference. This section also foreshadows Sylvia's obsession with the Yale Junior Prom later in her letters to her mother. In both the telegram and her letters, dances are measured as the ultimate athletic activity for Plath, and in both she highlights how difficult dancing with a broken leg would be.

Plath precedes the signature of the telegram with three descriptors of herself. She writes: "Your fractious fugacious frangible Sivvy" (538). Sivvy was a nickname from Aurelia and often Sylvia referred to herself that way in letters to her mother. Plath also ends the entry with alliterative adjectives to describe herself. The OED defines fugacious as "apt to flee away or flit" and "of immaterial things: tending to disappear, of short duration; evanescent, fleeting, transient, fugitive." Thus, in this line, Plath describes and refers to herself as fractured, easily broken, fragile, fleeting, and temporary. Stranger still is the meaning of the word "frangible" and the purpose that it serves. The OED defines frangible as "capable of being broken, breakable." Plath, while crafting alliterations and literary references in as short of a medium as a telegram also signals to her mother that she herself is fleeting or transitory. Earlier in the telegram Plath describes her leg as "fractured" and "fabulous", but here she chooses two different words – frangible and fugacious – to specifically refer to herself. Though her leg is the thing that was easily broken, Plath attributes that trait to her identity. It is also possible that Sylvia is referring to the construction of "Sivvy" as weak or breakable. She signs the letter as "Your…Sivvy", implying perhaps that her mother's version of her is the one is that is easily broken and fleeting. This is an observation harder to prove, as certainly Plath could simply have been referring to

herself using her nickname. Regardless, the use of her nickname reinforces the persona of Sivvy and the Sylvia that her mother knew from her letters.

In *Letters Home* Aurelia includes the telegram from Sylvia but adds an explanation in italics and brackets directly after:

> After the Christmas holidays, Sylvia and Dick had gone to Ray Brook, New York, where Dick was being treated for tuberculosis. Sylvia borrowed skis and without any previous professional instruction skied on the advanced slope. Result: a collision and a broken fibula. Her grandmother was the first to read the telegram and looked at me, puzzled. "What does she mean?" she asked. "She's broken her leg!" I exclaimed. "Oh no! Where does she say that?" Grammy queried. (102)

These lines from Aurelia sum up much of her view of Sylvia. By indicating Sylvia's borrowed skis and no experience, the tone indicates that Aurelia blamed Sylvia for skiing on the advanced slope and thereby breaking her leg. She also addresses Sylvia's difficult and artistic language with the excerpt about her grandmother. This explanation serves several purposes: Aurelia establishes that the average person wouldn't (and indeed, didn't) understand the telegram, while also acknowledging that she herself did. She also establishes that she does not approve of the way Sylvia often wrote letters. In Mahoney's article, she references several pieces of letter-writing advice: "Emily Thornwell advised, 'Never use hard words unnecessarily.' The best epistolary expression was spontaneous and undeliberate, Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms suggested: 'Let your letters be the record of the fancies and mood of the hour; the reflex of your aspirations, your joys, your disappointments; the faithful daguerreotype of your intellectuality and your moral worth'" (419). Of course, Sylvia breaks every one of these guidelines in the telegram to her mother. If even long letters were supposed to be spontaneous, a

wordy and carefully crafted telegram would have definitely broken these rules. The language in Aurelia's description of the ski slope is condescending even in its brevity. Aurelia is disappointed in Sylvia for breaking her leg, and she seems similarly disappointed in Sylvia's lavish use of language in the telegram instead of a utilitarian approach.

Aurelia similarly manipulates the ski slope event in *Letters Home*. Aurelia excerpts only specific parts of many of the subsequent letters from Sylvia to herself, by and large removing the pieces that depict Plath as a depressed invalid. She only includes excerpts of two letters between the telegram at the end of December and the letter on February 21 when Plath's cast is removed. Both excerpts from these letters include Plath viewing her broken leg as a blessing or depicting herself as cheerful and happy. By controlling the telegram via the italicized explanation and the carefully excerpted letters, Aurelia creates a narrative of a reckless Plath who broke her leg and then learned, healed, and matured from it. This is a very different Plath than we see in the journals or even the un-excerpted letters—one who bemoans the loss of her leg and mobility and who seems to largely blame Dick for the incident.

As in the journals, Sylvia often wrote to her mother comparing the physical features of Myron versus Dick Norton. On February 18 she writes that "[Myron] can carry me anywhere we want to go" (566). At the end of February, Plath writes as a post-script that "Dick is barely 6 feet tall & weighs 190; Myron is 6'4' and weighs 185. Also can carry women weighing 140 lbs. Ah, me, comparisons!" (575). While the theme of Myron being able to carry Sylvia may have indicated submission and swapping of gender roles in the journal, here Plath uses it differently. In the first letter to her mother, Plath does not indicate that Myron will take her wherever she wants to go, but rather where they both want to go – "anywhere we want to go" (566). In the second letter, the emphasis is on Myron's physical ability as a man and that he surpasses Dick in

every conceivable way. In letters to her mother, Plath's phrasing about Myron's ability to carry her indicates more of her reflections on his abilities as a man to take care of her. This focus on gender roles affirms Aurelia's view and expectations and 1950s culture writ large.[17]

Often in these letters Plath justifies why she could never marry Dick, whom Aurelia expected she would marry. One of the reasons Sylvia presents is Dick's physical health: "I also want a healthy husband so I won't have to worry about his relapsing into tb if he doesn't get enough rest" (570). In *Keywords for Disability Studies,* G. Thomas Couser writes about illness as disability. He separates the terms of illness and disease and writes that disease is the physical entity of sickness, such as mumps or measles. Illness differs from disease because it relates to the person who has it – "illness refers to a particular person's experience of a disease: its various effects on the person's existence and identity" (105). Thus, disease does not render a person disabled and neither does illness. However, illness holds the potential for disability, in that they have a "reciprocal relation" (105). Couser explains that often illnesses cause disabilities such as blindness, paralysis, etc. – and often disability will cause illness as well. In this quote from Plath, her anxiety about Dick is not that tuberculosis exists or even that he might get it again. Instead, her anxiety is the concept of having an unhealthy husband and all the side effects and possible disabilities that a relapse of tuberculosis could cause. What Plath is thus concerned about is that Dick will no longer possess – as he did not at the time – a normative, abled male body. By contrast, Myron is the clear winner in her ideal vision of a heteronormative, able-bodied relationship.

[17] In the introduction to *Letters Home*, Aurelia writes about her marriage, " I realized that if I wanted a peaceful home—and I did—I would simply have to become more submissive, although it was not my nature to be so" (13).

In the letters to Aurelia, Plath expresses deep concern over Myron's interest in her being connected to her appearance, especially relating to her broken leg. She writes: "am kicking myself (a neat trick if you can do it with a cast) for having to write and say I'm temporarily crippled. What boy would ever come up to visit a lame girl?" (540). The terms that Plath uses— "crippled" and "lame"— indicate how she views herself as disabled, although she is careful to quantify this by saying that this is only a temporary condition. In this passage, as in journal entries, Plath equates the success of her dating life with the degree to which she possesses an abled body. Similarly, she writes on February 2: "Well, after the leg gets normal, I'm treating myself to a formal downtown. After his standing me clomping around…I've got to make up for it by being feminine and lovely" (557). Plath implies that Myron is enduring her and her broken leg, using the term "clomping" as a direct contrast to what she considers to be feminine and graceful. She views her body as holding zero potential for femininity or loveliness until after the plaster comes off of her leg and she is free to "make up for it." This sentiment echoes the theory of disability studies intersected with feminist theory demonstrated in the previous chapter. Plath equates disability with the suspension of her femininity, and later when the cast is removed tells her mother that now her opportunities have returned: "honestly, now that I can walk again the world is going up in unbelievable flashes and earthquakes. I am the girl that Things Happen To" (569). As she returns to her old normative body, Plath does not feel constrained by her limitations anymore – either physical and real limitations or societal and imagined limitations – and feels like she can return to her life.

Similarly, Plath writes often to her mother about the Yale Junior Prom and her anxieties about attending. While she mentions the prom briefly in her journals, it is a much bigger subject in the letters to her mother. While Plath desires to get her cast off for a myriad of reasons in the

journals, she links the healing of her leg almost inseparably to the prom in letters to Aurelia. Almost every time she mentions her leg it is followed by concerns about not being able to dance at the prom or not looking how she wants to due to a cast or ankle taping, such as the following lines: “From the way things look now I’ll be lucky to go to junior prom in my long black dress with a taped ankle.” (567). The constant repetition of the junior prom that comes through in these letters is unmatched anywhere else in her writings – a sign that perhaps this is performative gesture intended for Aurelia.

One of the anxieties that is present predominantly in Sylvia’s letters to her mother is the concern about gaining weight or her body changing due to her broken leg. While concern for her body image was not a new theme for Plath, overall, it is an example of a topic she reserved almost solely for her letters to Aurelia. During the span of November to March, Plath rarely mentions exercising in her journals; however, it frequently comes up in letters to her mother. This indicates that either her mother asked about this topic in previous letters, or Sylvia supplied the information preemptively. Either of these possibilities suggests that this is information catering to Aurelia’s interests or expectations of Sylvia’s life. Indeed, Sylvia ends two of her letters by assuring her mother she is exercising – a seemingly purposeful choice, as typically writers put the information they wish to be remembered at the end of the letter. She ends one letter by writing: “Things are looking up (still exercising like mad)” (555) and another by writing: “Rest assured, that I am doing my exercises most faithfully…which should keep my rear from getting too flabby from sitting all day” (548). While this is likely due to Aurelia’s inquiries into how Sylvia is exercising with a cast, it reveals both women’s perceptions of disabilities and “fatness.” Sylvia reveals that she is exercising not to get stronger or healthier, but so that her body does not get “flabby.” In her article in *Keywords* on the term “fat”, Kathleen LeBesco

writes that while disability and fat are not interchangeable terms, they are not dissimilar in how they are viewed by society. Likewise, politics and fat politics are not the same, but there are similarities between them. Primarily, she writes, these similarities exist as "shared goals of access; eradication of prejudice, discrimination, and harassment; open forms of cultural expression; and recognition of dignity and happiness" (84). Sylvia's explicit and Aurelia's implicit concern over Sylvia's body changing as a result of her casted leg expresses anxieties similar to ones that Sylvia had already harbored about her temporary disability. Both alter her body, both limit her freedom, and both allow others to inscribe her body with societally damaging meaning.

Towards the end of Sylvia's stint in her cast, one of her good friends, Charlotte Kennedy, broke her leg.[18] Plath writes to her mother about this incident, not in the tone of sympathy or pity, but instead seeming to be rather excited. On February 4 she writes, "By the way, a most fantastic thing: Charlotte Kennedy called last night…and she broke the fibula of her right leg over Midsemester weekend!" (558). Charlotte was pretty and one of Plath's few close female friends, so Plath seems to be relieved to have someone else understand her pain and perhaps glad that she could pity someone else instead of herself. A few days later on February 10, Plath writes to Aurelia that she had "supper at haven house with the frail poor charlotte who has had a cold for the last week in addition to her leg" (563). Plath portrays Charlotte as frail and "poor", indicating a weakness she previously associated with herself due to her broken leg. Charlotte, with a cold and a broken leg, becomes her illness and her disability to Plath in the same way Plath resented how others viewed her.

[18] Charlotte Kennedy also attended Smith College, graduating with her BA in 1954.

Plath had a very complex relationship with her physical broken leg and the plaster cast as a symbol of its brokenness. According to Rosemarie Thomson, people with disabilities are often forced by society to distract from their physical and obvious disabilities by using humor or charm to convey to able-bodied people that they are defined by more than just their disability. Indeed, this happens often in Sylvia's letters, as she deflects with humor when speaking about her leg. For example, she said to her doctor on February 23 and then relayed the conversation to Aurelia via letter: "'I have a bone to pick with you', I told him, 'my fibula'" (568). She also very often sarcastically writes to her mother about her leg, as in a letter on February 21 that reads, "needless to say I am never going skiing again. I am going to live in a southern climate the rest of my life and play tennis (a nice safe sport) bicycle, swim and eat mangoes" (566). The dry humor of swearing to never ski again distracts from the actual broken leg, while simultaneously reminding her mother that her disability is only temporary and will heal.

As in the journal entries, Plath sees her cast, not her leg, as the physical symbol of her disability and as the difference between the old Sylvia and the new Sylvia. After Sylvia gets her cast off, this is an obvious distinction. When the cast is removed, the doctor states that the leg is not "completely mended," noting that they will not put another cast on it (566). Plath cannot seem to fathom what this means, asking in her journal and in letters what "not completely mended" means (567). She writes that her leg looks normal – she looks able-bodied again with the cast off – but the doctor has warned that it could break again. On the topic of marked bodies, Thomson writes that "in this economy of visual difference, those bodies deemed inferior become spectacles of otherness while the unmarked are sheltered in the neutral space of normalcy" (8). When the cast is removed, Plath grapples with the concept of an unmarked, but still not normative, body.

In letters to her mother, Plath constantly refuses to claim her leg through her language and dissociation from it. She refers to the plaster cast often as a "thing": "You can imagine that I want to get this thing off as soon as possible and start learning to walk again" (548). After the cast comes off, Plath refers to her leg as "the leg" instead of "my leg" or simply "it": "just let me know what hugenberger says about the leg" (567). When her doctor tells her that the leg might not be completely healed yet, Plath writes to her mother: "I'll stay in bed if necessary, just so I won't have to have it put back in plaster again" (567). The threat of walking is not that her leg will break again, but that when it does, she will have to be put back into plaster. Plath seems far more concerned with the outward appearance of disability, rather than the disability itself. Later, when she sees her leg for the first time in months when the plaster comes off, Plath writes that "the emotional shock of admitting it was my leg was the hardest" (566). The inability to admit that her leg is her own is likely another by-product of focusing all her attention on the cast – when the leg appears black-haired, flabby, and crusty, it is not the normative leg she remembered and could idealize was trapped inside the plaster for all those months.

It is in a letter to Myron Lotz that the most detailed account of the accident appears in either Plath's letters or journals. She writes to him, hoping he will still want to date her even with a broken leg, echoing the anxieties Plath expressed to her mother about her date-ability. The previous chapter established that often Plath used her journals as writer's notebooks or places where she would try new stories or ideas out. Similarly, Plath often repeated language or direct phrases between her journals and letters and sometimes between letters and other letters. In her letter to Myron, Plath uses similar phrasing as she did in the telegram to her mother, writing: "I am at present sporting a rather fabulous fractured fibula" (543), echoing the alliteration she had

used previously in the telegram to her mother, indicating this was a phrase she had deemed particularly literary in nature.

Plath repeats the phrase of "fabulous fractured fibula", emphasizing that it is only "at present" that her leg is broken. In letters to her mother, Plath was incredibly nervous about how her leg would affect her potential relationship with Myron. In an effort to assure him that she is not maimed indefinitely, she emphasizes the ski slope accident as the origin of her temporary disability. Jill Anderson addresses the concept of the accident in disability studies, writing that often strangers ask certain individuals with disabilities what "happened" to them, "as though the most important thing to know about disability is its genesis" (17). To Plath, emphasizing her accident allows her to underscore its fleeting existence. Were she to tell Myron her leg was stuck in a cast, he might be allowed to imagine this was a birth defect, a result of an illness, or a permanent disability. By answering the question of what happened to her directly, Plath anticipates interest in her broken leg's genesis, both for Myron and for herself.

Plath dramatizes the story of the ski slope in her letter to Myron. Perhaps the most interesting difference between the objective truth of the ski slope and how Plath portrays it in this letter is the omission of Dick Norton as a past boyfriend.[19] She writes that Perry, Dick's older brother and Myron's friend, may have already told Myron of the ski slope incident. However, she only mentions Dick once in the course of her story, referring him to as "my friend" or "young doctor" (543). She never refers to him by name or as "he." She omits the detail that her friend was a man, in case Perry had not told Myron she was there with Dick. However, she also emphasizes that they are only friends in case he had. By omitting Dick as an important character, Sylvia also appears as more independent. She was "learning how to ski" but she was not being

[19] Here, I am defining objective truth as when the event happened, where, and who was there.

taught by Dick in this portrayal. She also describes the moment she realizes her leg is broken as very independent. She writes that she broke her leg by "plowing face first into a drift. I got up, grinned, and started to walk away" (544) and that is when she knew it was broken. Not only does she get up by herself, but she also smiles and even attempts to walk away.

In the letter, Plath crafts an entire cinematic scene for Myron. Lines such as "there was a flash of ecstasy I stood on the top of the glass hill and saw levels of snowy mountains stretching away into grayness, and the flat, sensuously winding river far below, pale green, reflecting the greenish sky" make it difficult to believe that this is an excerpt from a letter (544). Likewise, Plath sets the scene well, even telling Myron the song that was playing when she left the top of the ski slope: "cartwheeling (to the tune of "You Belong to Me" blaring from the lodge loudspeaker)" (544). From her journal entries it is clear that Plath was nervous about Myron wanting to date her in spite of her broken leg, thus it was likely she was nervous about the best way to tell him. She chose to emphasize the accident in this letter by turning it into an example of her literary prowess. Like several of Plath's boyfriends in this period, Myron was attending Yale — as a biochemistry major — and was serious about his schoolwork and impressed with Plath's knowledge. In a way, breaking her leg afforded her the perfect opportunity to show off: not how well she could dance or walk around, but how well she could craft a story on the page.

Sylvia also portrayed the immobility of being confined to her room very differently in her letters to her mother compared to the letter to Myron. In the letter to Aurelia on January 8, Plath writes that she is going to try to spend as much time as she can in the library, "so that I won't begin to feel that the room here is a prison. I do feel awfully shut-in. I always took such a joy in walking, as part of my symbolic freedom, and now life is a weary hobbling from the bed to the toilet to the bookshelves" (539). In this passage, Plath calls her situation and confinement a

prison, painting a very dreary picture of the solitude she faces as a result of her leg. In her descriptions to her mother, Plath only seems to be walking for necessity – as she goes from her bed to the bathroom and to her bookshelves. However, in a January 9 letter to Myron, Plath's perspective on this is significantly different:

> So I sit in my room surrounded by innumerable books of verse, jugs of wine, and loaves of bread, gazing out to where the snow is coming down in gulps and blasts and sleetings and icings and softly piling up and always up. Picture me beating a track through waist-high wastes with my crutch, stoically trailing my plastercast left leg valiantly behind me… (545).

In this section of her letter to Myron, Plath describes the same scene of herself locked in her bedroom. The Plath characterized here is not a weary shut-in, however, but a romantic academic in a dreamy setting. In the first half of the passage, she creates an image of herself reading in her room while watching the snow, and in the second half she asks Myron to picture her leaving that room – her prison, as she earlier wrote to her mother – and valiantly walking through the weather with her cast. In this self-fashioning, Plath as a romantic and heroic narrator and character breaks out of her confined limitations and traverses the weather and landscape outside. To her mother, Plath seemed to anticipate her mother's expectations of her as frangible. To Myron, Plath wanted to portray herself as an independent academic.

In the same letter to Myron, Plath equates the healing of her leg to a symbol of her sexual freedom. She writes to him that she was planning "a Bacchanalian festival when I again can walk normally" (546). Bacchanalian festivals were thrown to worship Bacchus, the Roman God of wine and typically, as the OED defines them, consisted of "indulging in drunken revelry; riotously drunken, roystering" and sometimes consists of "an orgy." Though Plath is writing

hyperbolically, the indication that getting her cast off will result in copious amounts of drinking, celebration, nudity, and perhaps sex is an interesting proposition. She goes on to write that there will be "a bonfire burning my crutches, and champagne will be served under the trees in the most original punch bowl yet: it will be long, white, and shaped like Sylvia's left leg" (546). After burning her crutches in a declaration of independence, alcohol will be served in a punch bowl shaped like her healed and perfect leg. The insinuation here is that her cast serves as the punch bowl. It is essentially a celebration of the death of the cast. The purpose that this passage serves is to indicate to Myron what type of girl she will be once her cast comes off – wild, free, and restored to an able-bodied and normative condition. It also allows Sylvia to show off her knowledge of the classics, between her reference to Bacchus and later writing that she will sell the relics of the punch bowl to the Parthenon. Imagining any of this passage written to Aurelia, or even in Sylvia's journals, is almost impossible– and that is an indication of the level of performance achieved by Sylvia to portray herself as dark and mysterious.

Plath's telegram and letters to both her mother and Myron indicate how the story of the ski slope continued to evolve and change. For her mother, it was initially a carefully crafted event, soon to be eclipsed by bouts of depression. For Myron, it was a literary story told in scintillating detail, omitting her ex-boyfriend from the scene entirely. For her mother, she highlighted the anxieties about the upcoming junior prom and the obsession with her weight fluctuating, while with Myron she focused on the academic romanticism of being an invalid. With both recipients she carefully crafted stories catered to their tastes – and in both sets of correspondence her anxieties about her temporary disability come through. Ultimately, Sylvia's biggest fear during this time was her identity being reduced to solely her disability, little

knowing that this reduction of her character would continue long after her death and in terms of her mental health and depression.

CHAPTER IV

PERFORMANCE AND GENRE IN PUBLICATIONS

In this chapter I take a closer look at three of Sylvia Plath's works intended for publication, each with a unique perspective on Mount Pisgah and the aftermath: "In the Mountains," a short story written in autumn of 1954; "In Plaster," a poem written in February 1961; and chapter eight of *The Bell Jar*, most of which was written between April and August of 1961. As in the journals and letters, Plath continued to rework the story of her broken leg, only in these attempts she does so with a much larger and different audience in mind. Instead of a future Sylvia or her mother or Myron Lotz, the audiences of these works range from women's magazine readers to the general population of Great Britain.

"In the Mountains" tells the story of the beginning events of Mount Pisgah. Isobel, the heroine, has driven herself to the base of a mountain where the love interest, Austin, picks her up so that they can spend the weekend at a doctor's home near a sanatorium, where Austin is recovering from tuberculosis. However, the story ends before Austin and Isobel go skiing, and therefore Isobel does not have an accident that breaks her leg. Throughout the story, several character traits are prominent: Austin is disgusted by what he perceives as weakness and while it is clear that Isobel and Austin's relationship is rocky, Austin does show promise of compromise. The version of the story told in *The Bell Jar* stars two characters named Esther and Buddy. It begins with Buddy's father driving Esther to the sanitorium and then depicts the skiing scene and Esther's broken leg, although the story ends before her hospitalization. Unlike "In the

Mountains," it is not the love interest that is disgusted by weakness, but instead Buddy's father. It is also clear that Buddy is incapable of compromise and Esther is completely disgusted by him and the relationship is doomed. One of the key moments of the story occurs after Esther breaks her leg on the slope. Esther lies on the ground and Buddy smiles down at her — a stark difference from the letter Plath wrote to Myron depicting herself standing up and smiling after breaking her leg. The last published work I will analyze in this chapter is "In Plaster", which deals with the aftermath of the incident, taking place in the hospital and focusing on the cast that envelops the poem's speaker. Because "In the Mountains" overlaps extensively with the beginning of chapter eight of *TBJ*, I will compare the stories' contrasting events. This comparison will be followed by an analysis of Esther's broken leg in *TBJ* and the aftermath depicted in "In Plaster." I have included these brief summaries of each story to highlight the differences in each story and to suggest that there is not a synchronous understanding of the ski slope and that each story diverges in specific and important ways.

I wish to frame each of these works around two critical concepts: repetition compulsion and autofiction. Repetition compulsion originated with Freud, who theorized that rather than avoid trauma, humans return to the site of traumatic memories over and over in order to process and understand them. In "Literature and the Repetition Compulsion," Sacvan Bercovitch writes, "When the organism…suffers a threatening excitation which it fails to bring under control, a primary psychic urge drives it back again and again to the point of shock - in an effort at rearming the subject, as it were, for self-preservation" (610). Bercovitch writes that repetition compulsion, like many theories, cannot be proven or disproven. Its usefulness, then, is its potential for thematic and symbolic elements, particularly in literature (610). Bercovitch speculates that for authors the act of writing about trauma repeatedly is a particularly useful tool

for overcoming it: “Goethe…did not feel he had dealt with an experience till he had discharged it in creative artistic activity… the writer, by means of his art, is able to overcome the "distressing excitation" which obstructs adjustment and ‘deal with reality’” (610). For Plath, repetition compulsion explains the constant return to the ski slope. In previous chapters, I have examined her diary and her letters, both of which were written relatively soon after the incident. In contrast, this chapter deals with works that were written months and years afterward. The return to the ski slope in writing suggests a trauma associated with the mountain: perhaps the plummet from the top of Mount Pisgah, perhaps the knowledge that Buddy/Dick/Austin would never be the man she wanted, perhaps the leg break, perhaps the aftermath, perhaps a combination of them all. Nevertheless, the presence and prevalence of this incident in Plath’s body of work is remarkable.

The second term that is important for understanding this chapter is autofiction. Most critics of *The Bell Jar* have described the novel as a “fictional autobiography”, which, while technically accurate, I feel has a negative connotation. The adjective of “fictional” puts the primary focus on the noun, “autobiography”, indicating that first and foremost the work is autobiographical. Because autobiography is an established genre, the term seems to suggest that a fictionalized autobiography is a type of bastardized autobiography – that the story is weaker because of its fictionalized parts, and not a wholly different work instead. I believe “autofiction” places a stronger emphasis on the fictionality of the work, which is where I think the emphasis should belong. The term itself originated with Serge Doubrovsky’s 1977 novel, *Fils*. Doubrovsky was not content to call this work, which is partially his own life-story and partially fiction, either autobiography or fictionalized autobiography. In “Recycling and Repetition in Recent French Autofiction: Marc Weitzmann's Doubrovskian Borrowings,” Alex Hughes

explores the origin of the term. He writes, "Delimited in the narrowest (and, arguably, most helpful) sense, *autofiction* may be understood as a narrative modality that inhabits the referential space likewise colonized by autobiography proper, but at the same time offers a patently enriched and treated, hence fictionalized, and metamorphotic, version of the life-story of the *autofictionneur*" (567). In this way, autofiction does not rely on the specificity of narrative borders, but rather "its narrative habits tip the scale in favour of fictional textuality" (A. Hughes 567). Instead of evaluating a work on the basis of autobiography, this term opens an entirely new field of the intertwined fiction and nonfiction. The point is not that an event once happened in reality and then parts of it were fictionalized (inevitably leading to the valuing of truth over fiction), but rather that fiction and nonfictional aspects are inseparable. As Hughes states, some critics take issue with the concept of autofiction. Gerard Genette classifies autofiction as "shameful autobiographies." Hughes writes,

> What Genette implies here is that autofiction…is a writing mode whose flagged fictionality allows the *autofictionneur* … not to assume responsibility for his articulation of the 'real'/'true', a responsibility he could not elude were he to fabricate an autobiography proper…In short, Genette is, apparently, casting (Doubrovskian) autofiction as an unethical, deceptive, cowardly writing enterprise (568).

Genette's critique of autofiction centers around responsibility and truth – concerns which are common in critiques of Plath's works as well. As discussed, the obsession with the "true Sylvia" or the fictionalization of real events pervades reviews of her works. Genette's points, while understandable, seem to fall outside the realm of genre. If Doubrovsky's *Fils* or Plath's *The Bell Jar* were marketed and published as autobiography, the authors would be responsible for printing truth. However, the blurred demarcation of autofiction largely erases author responsibility to the

real or to truth: something that readers would have full knowledge of. For me, Genette's critiques of autofiction confirm the need for the term: that we have no genre to encapsulate both fiction and nonfiction without the audience feeling duped or deceived is a significant problem in literature and genre studies. Autofiction is, therefore, the lens with which I have chosen to view *The Bell Jar* (and to some extent, "In the Mountains" as well) in this chapter. This lens allows me to explore the entire story — not to parse out the nonfictional aspects from the fictional ones, but to compare it holistically to other accounts.

Plath's first attempt to fictionalize the events on the ski slope appears in short story format as "In the Mountains," which she wrote for a creative writing course in the fall of 1954, her senior year at Smith. "In the Mountains" was published in the fall 1954 issue of the college's journal, *The Smith Review*. It was not republished until appearing in the anthology of short stories and short prose titled *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams,* originally published in 1977 before being expanded and republished in 2000.[20] George Monterio speculates on the title of the short story, citing that Plath often took inspiration from Hemingway and T.S. Eliot and speculates that this is likely where the title originated. Monterio writes, "Hemingway himself

[20] After publishing "ITM" in *The Smith Review*, Plath decided she would need to rework the story if she wanted to publish it elsewhere. She did so with women's magazine audiences in mind, writing "The Christmas Heart", which is held in archive at the Lilly Library at Indiana University. Due to travel and archive restrictions resulting from COVID-19, I was unable to view this story during the research phase of this thesis. Therefore, the research presented here about "The Christmas Heart" is from secondary sources. In "The Christmas Heart", which was never published, there are two notable differences from "ITM." The first is that the sexual descriptions are diluted significantly, and the exclamations such as "God!" were removed. Both of these changes indicate what Plath thought publications such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's* and *Good Housekeeping* would want. Luke Ferretter speculates on why this story was rejected – Plath was still attempting to publish it as late as 1961 – and suggests that the morals of the story were largely to blame. In "ITM", as well as "The Christmas Heart", the hero is the character who needs to learn and develop, not the heroine. Women's magazines would have been hesitant to publish something which suggested that men needed to alter their thinking or morals and women were correct and in control of their thoughts and self-reflection. Ferretter writes: "In the world `of these stories, men are usually fixed and unalterable, and the heroine's task is simply to find the right one. The feminist desire of Plath's heroine to make the right one, in a story in which the hero learns how to love the heroine in the way she wants, is not the material of a *Ladies' Home Journal* story" (40).

seems to have borrowed his title "A Sea Change" directly from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land.* The same poem was the probable source for Plath's own title: "In the mountains, there you feel free" (94-95). In this short story, Isobel drives to meet Austin, a young doctor who is being treated for tuberculosis at a sanatorium. Austin meets Isobel at the base of the mountain and both board a bus, which takes them to a local doctor's house where they stay the evening. Though the story's setting and characters are obvious references to the events that transpired between Dick Norton and Sylvia Plath on Mount Pisgah, the actual skiing scene is not depicted, and Isobel does not break her leg. Instead, the focus rests primarily on Isobel and Austin's emotions and dialogue rather than direct action.

The most notable difference between "In the Mountains" and all of the other perspectives of Mount Pisgah is the third-person perspective. In journal entries, letters, *The Bell Jar*, and "In Plaster," the stories are told entirely in first person. "In the Mountains" is also the only depiction of the events on Mount Pisgah that does not include the physical breaking of the heroine's leg, partially due to the focus on events prior to the skiing day and partially due to the fact that the story holds more ambiguity and potential for that ending to change. Of all the depictions of the skiing trip, Isobel and Austin are the most different from any other renditions of their characters. Austin has the potential to compromise and express his feelings, and Isobel, while still struggling with her feelings for him, does feel some level of physical attraction to him not present in other accounts. That the story ends before there is even the potential for Isobel to break her leg also indicates that this might be a romanticized and idealized version of the events. If this version of events is the most idealized of all the accounts, Plath's employment of third-person pronouns and perspective to tell the story makes sense as a tool to distance the story even further from reality.

"In the Mountains" also features more proper dialogue than *The Bell Jar*. This is perhaps due to inexperience, but it could also be a stylistic choice. Plath was in college while writing the story and was likely attempting to find her writing style while mimicking other magazine authors. While *TBJ* utilizes contractions, "In the Mountains" often does not – fully spelling out "don't" as "do not", and "you've" as "you have." Interestingly, the dialogue in the story does not begin as stilted, but instead lapses into it. Austin's speech initially contains contractions: "'Of course I'm not tired,' he scoffed. 'You know I don't get tired'" (289). However, as the scene progresses to the end, the contractions disappear, and the language becomes forced and unnatural. This is seen in Austin's speech: "'I know it is different now because I never want to make you cry again" (296). It is also in Isobel's: "I think so but I am not sure. You have never before talked to me like this, you know. You always let me guess at what you meant" (296). The concluding dialogue appears to be the most fictionalized aspect of the short story, indicating Austin's ability to compromise and leaving the potential for Isobel's leg never to break. That the language shifts so dramatically towards the end of the story reinforces its fictitiousness – these words appear unnatural, not only because they are in a fictional story, but perhaps because this ending was so far from the reality of the ski slope. These lines read more like a script for actors to rehearse, perhaps literal gender *roles*. As Plath sought to publish in a magazine like *Ladies' Home Journal* or *Mademoiselle*, she had to determine what people wanted to read and the characters they wanted to see: perhaps that is why this ending dialogue is so choppy and difficult to read.

The theme of weakness as disability appears both in *The Bell Jar* and "In the Mountains", but the characters that express these anxieties are not the same. In the short story, the hatred of weakness is attributed to Austin through a conversation with Isobel, who asks if he is tired from

making the trip down the mountain to get her and then going back up again. His response suggests that this is a ludicrous assumption: "'Of course I'm not tired,' he scoffed. 'You know I don't get tired.' He had always scorned weakness. Any kind of weakness, and she remembered how he mocked her being tender at the killing of the guinea pigs" (289). In this passage, Austin verbally dismisses the idea that he would be tired, even while recovering from tuberculosis. Isobel then reflects that this dismissal is a recurring trait, linking it to a past memory where he aimed judgment at her own weakness. Alternately, in *TBJ*, the character who explicitly despises weakness is not Austin's alter ego, Buddy, but Buddy's father. Mr. Willard visits with his son for a brief moment, sees his room, and then flees. Esther reflects on his inability to stay any longer: "his father simply couldn't stand the sight of sickness and especially his son's sickness, because he thought all sickness was sickness of the will" (91). Perhaps this particular change of character weakness was due to the reflection of time – perhaps Plath realized that if young men view sickness and weakness as negative concepts, this was likely due to the influence of their father's view of the world as well. Perhaps this was due to the format – the character of Mr. Willard may have been deleted from "In the Mountains" due to the sheer lack of space, while the novel-length of *The Bell Jar* was ample room to include him. Perhaps as well, Plath knew that critiquing a young man in a short story to be published in a magazine such as *Ladies' Home Journal* would create a big enough fuss without critiquing an adult male and father. Regardless, it is another example of Plath continuing to process a real event in different ways years after, depending on the venue of publication.

Austin similarly refuses to acknowledge weakness in other men during the short story. When on the bus, Isobel notices that an older man (he is simply identified as "old man," leaving his exact age unspecified) wants the window shut because of the temperature but does not get up

to do it himself. Isobel asks Austin if he will shut the window, and Austin becomes obsessed with the idea that it is not Isobel who wants it done, but the man. When he finally shuts the window, Austin states, "'I did that for you. No one else.'…'Did you see the way he looked at me? He was perfectly able to get up and shut it himself. And he wanted me to do it.' 'I wanted you to do it too.' 'That's different. That's altogether different'" (291). In this dialogue, Austin wants Isobel to know that the man was "perfectly able to get up and shut it himself", prescribing the man with an able body capable of normative male action. Of course, age is its own disability, which Austin neglects in his insistence that the man's gender should have allowed him to get up himself.[21] However, Austin also emphasizes that he shut the window for Isobel and that that is "different" in some way, likely to do with her gender. In this instance, even though Isobel has already stated that Austin has made fun of her in the past for her perceived weakness, Austin is able to exert his manliness and able-bodiedness in contrast with Isobel's female body. To Austin, Isobel's weakness as a woman is normative, while the older man's weakness is not and thus, he judges it. In the hierarchy of able-bodied individuals, Austin ranks men above women, even men who are older and have a harder time moving freely.

While "In the Mountains" does not depict the heroine's broken leg, or indeed even allude to that idea, chapter eight of Plath's only remaining novel, *The Bell Jar*, does. *TBJ* was published in January 1963, only a month before Plath committed suicide in her home in Devon. At the end of the 2013 publication of the novel, there is a biographical note, which includes an excerpt of a letter from Aurelia to Harper and Row. She writes that Plath once told her, regarding *TBJ,* that "what I've done is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color – it's a

[21] For more information on aging as a disabling feature, see Kathleen Woodward's "Aging" in *Keywords for Disability Studies.*

pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown…" (Ames 14).[22] This disclosure is fascinating because of its many contradictions: Plath admits the novel is partially autobiographical and fictionalized to "add color." She then says the novel is a potboiler – a highly negative term and one that discredits many works as not important or meaningful. However, then Plath says she hopes the story shows how isolated people feel when having a breakdown – something that indicates a deeper meaning and purpose and renders this work the opposite of the negative connotations of a potboiler. *TBJ* follows the character of Esther, who, as Mason Harris writes in a review, is a "thinly disguised version of Sylvia" (35). The novel details Esther's internship in New York, the end of her summer spent at home, her suicide attempt, and her stay in an institution. While the physical events described in *TBJ* are very similar to Plath's own experiences in 1953, it is impossible to know how much is fabricated, leading critics to refer to it as "fictionalized autobiography" instead of simply a novel or, as previously discussed, my preferred term of autofiction.

In *The Bell Jar*, alter-ego abstractions pile on top of one another. When the novel was first published, Plath chose a pseudonym, Victoria Lucas, instead of using her own name out of concern of charges of libel against her and the content of the novel. Plath named her main character Esther Greenwood, changing her original plan to name the main character Victoria as well. In the novel, Esther decides—in a rather meta-moment—to pen her own novel. She fashions an alter-ego named "Elaine" to star in the story: "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" (120). The name "Elaine" bears six letters, just

[22] Though this kind of self-deprecation was common in Plath's writings, there is always the possibility that Aurelia fabricated this claim as well in order to temper the publication of the novel.

like Esther and just like Sylvia. However, the use of the six letter alter-ego name is not only confined to *TBJ*—it also appears in "In the Mountains" with the name Isobel and "The Christmas Heart" with the name Sheila. Isobel particularly could have been spelled differently, but Plath's chosen spelling comes out with six letters. Each of these names is different but linked by the number of letters – much like Plath's different heroines across stories, who are each unique unto themselves but are connected and hold pieces of Plath's own stories and feelings as well.

Another distinction between *TBJ* and "In the Mountains" occurs in how the heroines arrive at the mountain. While Esther is transported by Buddy Willard's father in *TBJ*, Isobel makes the trip to the sanatorium herself in "In the Mountains." Thus, in the story, Isobel both holds more and less autonomy than Esther. Isobel chooses to make the journey by herself, while Esther appears by comparison less sure of her choice to visit Buddy. In *TBJ*, Esther reflects during the drive: "I don't know what we talked about, but as the countryside, already deep under old falls of snow, turned us a bleaker shoulder…I grew gloomier and gloomier. I was tempted to tell Mr. Willard to go ahead alone, I would hitch-hike home" (87). In *TBJ*, Esther is dependent on an older male figure to take her to the sanatorium, but she also expresses thoughts of regret or feelings that the decision is not entirely her own. She decides not to hitchhike home only after looking at Mr. Willard and realizing he would be disappointed if she did. She chooses to go onwards, even while indicating to herself and the audience that she might have rather not. However, in the short story, Isobel travels alone to Austin, both expressing a sense of independence and that her desire is to visit him: "'But you made it' [Austin] said proudly. 'the subway connections and the crosstown taxi and all. You always hated traveling alone,'" revealing that Isobel traveled alone despite her dislike for it, which indicates a certain definite degree of desire to visit Austin (289). With no one to worry about disappointing and a dislike of

traveling alone, Isobel has no reason to see Austin other than her own desire. This is perhaps another example of the romanticization of events in "In the Mountains." Isobel seems independent and confident in her choices, while by comparison Esther seems trapped, confined and dependent on the men around her.

In the depiction of Mount Pisgah's events in "In the Mountains", Austin is sick with tuberculosis, but his physical body has not externally changed at all. Unlike Plath's depiction of Buddy Willard's altered body in *The Bell Jar,* Austin looks the same as Isobel remembered him: "in Albany he had been waiting at the bus terminal when her taxi skidded to the curb, and he had looked just the way she remembered him, his blonde hair cropped short and close to his tall-boned skull, and his face pink with the cold. No change there" (289). Isobel's expectation of Austin – how she remembered him to look and how she assumed he would when she saw him again – is the same as the reality, which is a very clear contrast between Esther's reaction upon seeing Buddy Willard. In "In the Mountains", Plath emphasizes how normative Austin appeared physically, despite the tuberculosis lurking "like a bomb" in his lungs.

In *The Bell Jar* there is a distinct distance between what Esther's perceptions of people and places will be and their stark realities. This is a sentiment not expressed in "In the Mountains", and likewise not explicitly mentioned in journals or letters about the visit to the sanitorium. Esther expects a romanticized version of the sanitorium, picturing "a kind of wooden chalet perched up on top of a small mountain, with rosy-cheeked young men and women, all very attractive but with hectic glittering eyes, lying covered with thick blankets on outdoor balconies" (88). In this idealized version of the sanitorium, Esther pictures a scholarly retreat in a cabin in the woods. Instead, the reality of the sanitorium is ugly and dirty: "The color scheme of the whole sanatorium seemed to be based on liver … walls that might once have been white but

had succumbed under a spreading malady of mild or damp" (89). Esther is disappointed with the sanitorium's appearance, and Buddy similarly fails the same test.

Before meeting him at the sanitorium, Esther pictures Buddy to be outwardly sickly-looking and starving: "The last thing I expected was for Buddy to be fat. All the time I thought of him at the sanatorium I saw shadows carving themselves under his cheekbones and his eyes burning out of almost fleshless sockets" (90). Esther pictures attractive men and women lying on blankets at the sanitorium, and simultaneously pictures Buddy to be lean and thin, perhaps unconsciously linking skinniness with attractiveness. Instead, as Esther soon finds out, this is a false assumption: "But everything concave about Buddy had suddenly turned convex" (90). In the same way that Plath exhibits fat-phobia in regard to herself and how her mother might view her altered body in her letters home, Plath reflects on Buddy's altered body in these passages.

One of the themes hinted at in the journals that later appears in *The Bell Jar* as a developed idea is the anxiety of an illness not physically seen – and the possible contagion of the invisible condition. In the first journal entry after breaking her leg, Plath writes of Dick Norton, "Seeing him after two months, I no longer felt the desire flame up in me. I didn't particularly want him to touch me. For one thing, since he can't kiss me at all, I have the feeling (purely mental) that his mouth is a source of poisonous tuberculosis germs, and, therefore, unclean" (155). Esther echoes this anxiety in *TBJ*, fixating on the possible contagion of tuberculosis: "I had very little knowledge about TB, but it seemed to me an extremely sinister disease, the way it went on so invisibly. I thought Buddy might well be sitting in his own little murderous aura of TB germs" (92). Especially the latter half of this passage parallels the journals, indicating that Plath may have consulted her journal while creating this scene. Unlike a broken leg, tuberculosis was terrifying to both Esther and Plath because it was unseen. Likely Plath chose this theme to

develop further in *TBJ* because the unseen threat of tuberculosis parallels Esther's unseen depression which led to her suicide attempt and shock treatments. As well as this, Plath may have expanded this anxiety in *TBJ* because of the distance that fiction afforded her. She may have been more comfortable allaying anxieties about unseen illnesses through the narrative of a fictional protagonist, rather than admitting her own worries. Alternately, as discussed in chapter three, Plath's broken leg—while a temporary disability—was very physical. There was an accident, an origin, a cause of the injury. As such, it implied a promise of healing and the return of an abled body. Plath's and Esther's worrying about Dick's and Buddy's TB is not rooted in the danger of his illness so much as the fact it is unseen and therefore harder to understand.

In Plath's letter detailing the incident to Myron, she ends the story by writing that she stood up on her own and smiled before knowing her leg was broken. In the letter, Plath characterizes herself as autonomous and independent, depicting no other people in the scene to help her. This ending is changed rather dramatically in *TBJ,* depicting Esther lying flat on her back and Buddy Willard's face appearing above her, grinning and informing her smugly that she will be in a cast for months. Esther is completely dependent in this representation, relying on other people to unfasten her bindings and pull off her boots as she lies in the snow, motionless. As Marilyn Boyer writes in "The Disabled Female body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar"*, Esther's "disabled body represents her fractured 'corpus' of writing, because she is no longer the doer of actions. Instead, things are done to her" (207). In *TBJ*, though Esther does not get up and smile, she does wish to go back to the top of the mountain and ski down again. However, Buddy informs her she cannot because her leg is broken in two places, telling her this while "a queer satisfied expression came over [his] face" (98). Boyer writes that Buddy's reaction to Esther's broken leg in this scene indicates his "outright revenge against

Esther is his attempt to escape a feminized perception of himself as passive" (208). Esther's disability renders Buddy the more able-bodied of the two, a reversal of Esther's previously abled body and his experience with tuberculosis.

In the explanatory insertion in *Letters Home,* Aurelia Plath places the blame for the ski slope incident solely on Sylvia: "Sylvia borrowed skis and without any previous professional instruction skied on the advanced slope" (102). As explored in chapter three, this places the blame directly on Sylvia's seemingly naïve and impulsive decision to ski with no instruction. However, in *The Bell Jar*, Esther begins the story of the ski slope with this statement: "All morning Buddy had been teaching me how to ski" (95). She goes on to clarify that Buddy was teaching her to ski not because he was a skilled professional, but simply had observed others skiing: "Buddy had never skied before either, but he said that the elementary principles were quite simple, and as he's often watched the ski instructors and their pupils he could teach me all I'd need to know" (95). In these instances, it seems obvious that Buddy accepts his role of skiing instructor not due to any professional training, but because he is the male in the situation. He could "teach [her] all [she'd] need to know", even though he had no personal experience with skiing (95). In "Femininity in *Letters Home,*" Wendy Whelan-Stewart references a recurring editorial in *Ladies' Home Journal,* a publication which Plath idolized and often sought to publish her stories in. The editorial, titled "How Young America Lives," would often follow the lives of a couple or family, detailing which recipes they liked to cook, how they spent their time, their money, etc. Whelan-Stewart chose to analyze a specific article out of this editorial titled "How Young America Lives: Love on Four Skis," published in 1954. In this article, the story of newlyweds Laura and Grant is the focus. Whelan observes that "hints that the partners are not equals abound. Both met as skiers, for instance, but it is obvious that the writer wishes to show

that Laura takes (and has always taken) lessons from her husband. The author of the article, Hildegarde Dolson, quotes Laura: 'All during our courtship, I had Grant screaming at me from behind, 'Bend your ankles!'" (Whelan-Stewart 90). This article, published in the magazine only one year after Plath's own ski slope accident, affirms rather directly the idea that women learned from men – even if they had the same knowledge and experience. That Plath chose to illuminate Buddy's insistence on teaching Esther to ski in the publication of *TBJ* signals an understanding of this perspective. Even if Plath never read the editorial published in 1954 about Laura and Grant, she would have recognized the sentiment: women learn from men, men teach women. Plath, in a literary move entirely subversive of these norms, chose to push back against this idea by having Esther blatantly state Buddy's inexperience of skiing and Esther's own eventual disaster resulting from this.

Indeed, one of the specific focuses of chapter eight of *The Bell Jar* is determining who was at fault for the broken leg. The end of chapter seven portrays Esther later in the year 1953, reflecting on the events at Mount Pisgah and who was to blame: "Every time it rained the old-leg break seemed to remember itself, and what it remembered was a dull hurt. Then I thought, 'Buddy Willard made me break that leg.' Then I thought, 'No, I broke it myself. I broke it on purpose to pay myself back for being such a heel'" (86). Here, Esther expresses a sentiment not found elsewhere in Plath's writing: that she broke her leg as an act of self-punishment and that plummeting down the hill was a decision she made, not an accident that happened to her. The tension between whether it was her fault or Buddy's is almost secondary to her thoughts on the slope itself, as she realizes that she might commit suicide by aiming straight down the hill. Esther thinks, "The interior voice nagging me not to be a fool – to save my skin and take off my skis and walk down…- fled like a disconsolate mosquito. The thought that I might kill myself formed

in my mind coolly as a tree or flower" (97). Esther ignores the voice of reason, the one that says that she is not experienced enough to ski down or that she might give up. In addition, the last sentence of this passage portrays this incident as perhaps a botched first suicide attempt. Esther realizes that skiing down might result in death and compares this idea to something living and blooming – a tree or a flower. To Esther, the idea of death is associated with life, similar to the language Plath uses to describe her suicide attempts elsewhere as a type of "rebirth." If this were not complicated enough, it turns out that as Esther plummeted down the mountain, she was actually not immediately heading to disaster. When she finally crashes at the bottom with a broken leg, a "familiar voice" tells her: "You were doing fine until that man stepped in your path" (98). Though Esther autonomously made the decision to pitch herself down the mountain, it was not her fault that she crashed, but rather a man's fault. Boyer addresses this male cause of disability to Plath's view of women's agency: "the agency, however indirect, is male, …in the Plathian worldview, the disabled female body is a phenomenon brought about by a hegemonic patriarchal system" (200). Esther may have independently chosen her own dangerous path, but the reason she is temporarily disabled is a result of a male's direct actions against her.

These narrative choices differ from how Plath mused about one day fictionalizing the incident in her journal entries. As discussed in chapter two, Plath wrote on January 12 that in her story, the broken leg would come about "desperately, in an effort to be part of a certain group" (157). In this story, the heroine breaks her leg in a panicked attempt to conform. As a result, the expectations of the group – and perhaps society at large – are responsible for the broken leg. Alternately, in *TBJ,* Esther's leg is broken as a result not of conformity to a group, but rejection. In the beginning of the scene on the ski slope, Esther is portrayed as conforming to Buddy's expectations: "Buddy accompanied me to the rope tow and showed me how to let the rope run

through my hands, and then told me to close my fingers round it and go up. It never occurred to me to say no" (96). However, when she reaches the top of the slope, she has second thoughts. She rejects the easy way down, the way that would result in praises from Buddy and a safe landing and pitches herself straight down the mountain instead. In this example, there is a significant change from Plath's journal ideas to one of the final published versions of the story. This change could be attributed to many things: time, wisdom, or benefit of hindsight. One other possibility is the difference of audience. During her college years, Plath was mostly concerned with publications in women's magazines for her short stories. This type of publication would have been more willing to accept stories about girls who conformed to society's expectations rather than girls who rejected the status quo. In contrast, in the 1960s Plath was writing *The Bell Jar* and the medium of publication – as well as Plath's pseudonym – offered her a sense of freedom and independence for her stories.

The concept of rebirth and cleansing pain is a theme that occurs elsewhere in Plath's writings and is fully present in *TBJ*. In chapter two, the concept of rebirth was explicit in the journals as Sylvia participated in childlike activities as if she had been born again. In *TBJ*, this appears as a vivid theme. As Esther pushes off from the top of the mountain, she describes a baby as the goal that she aims for: "People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly" (97). Instead of seeing death, similar to the metaphor of the tree or flower, Esther sees a baby in a mother's belly as the end point for this dangerous feat. More specifically than rebirth, often water and pain are used to cleanse or purge a character symbolically in Plath's works, and that theme is present here as well. *The Bell Jar* alone draws several analogies between pain and rebirth through water. When Esther envisions

cutting herself later in the novel, she decides it must happen in a bath: “When they asked some old Roman philosopher or other how he wanted to die, he said he would open his veins in a warm bath. I thought it would be easy, lying in the tub and seeing the redness flower from my wrists, flush after flush through the clear water, till I sank to sleep under a surface gaudy as poppies” (147). While in New York, Esther draws a hot bath to erase the bad things that have happened to her, likening the water to a purification ritual: “I lay in that tub on the seventeenth floor of this hotel for-women-only, high up over the jazz and push of New York, for near on to an hour, and I felt myself 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” (20). Likewise, when Esther finally crashes at the bottom of the mountain, Plath does not write that “she crashed”, but rather provides the only indication of Esther’s demise: “My teeth crunched a gravelly mouthful. Ice water seeped down my throat” (98). Esther swallows ice water, presumably from the snow, an indication that this pain and suicide attempt purified her. In Boyer’s article, she attributes this moment to the “process of silencing and freezing her” in regard to agency and language. While this is an apt conclusion to draw, Esther does indeed speak again in this scene, stating: “’I’m going up,’ I said. ‘I’m going to do it again.’” (98). While the ice water could signify a silencing of Esther, that she speaks again and with such authority perhaps indicates the water serves another purpose. It is perhaps *because* of the water and Esther’s perceived purification of her soul that she states she wants to go back down the mountain. In an attempt to feel that freedom and rebirth again, she chases the feeling of the ice-cold water and the sickening snap of her fibula.

While *TBJ* does not depict the aftermath of Esther’s broken leg, Plath’s poem “In Plaster” is set in a hospital with a speaker who is encased in a cast. “In Plaster” was written by Plath in

February of 1961 after her hospitalization for appendicitis and a miscarriage. Critics have speculated that this poem was inspired by a woman in the hospital bed next to Plath in a full-body cast, but regardless of the inspiration, much of the poem parallels sentiments earlier expressed in journals and letters about Plath's casting of her broken leg 10 years earlier. While many poems she wrote in 1961 were published in *Ariel* in 1965, "In Plaster" appeared in a posthumous publication titled *Crossing the Water* in 1971. Jo Gill writes of *Crossing the Water* that the collection consists of poems that are "indeed, 'tilted' (oblique, off-key, disordered) and 'disparate' (ranging widely in theme, form and setting). They are 'unstable' too, in the sense that they feature multiple and mutable voices, are elusive, sometimes abstract and often defy straightforward assessment" (100). Plath wrote two poems on the same day in 1961 about different aspects of her hospitalization: "In Plaster" and "Tulips." However, only "Tulips" made it into *Ariel* and therefore is the more widely known of the two. Poems that wound up in the publication of *Crossing the Water* are, as Jo Gill writes, varied in theme and speaker. While the poems in *Ariel* seem contained and purposeful, *Crossing the Water* is scattered and fragmented.

While "Tulips" clearly reflects Plath's hospital stay in 1960 and details the flowers in the speaker's hospital room, "In Plaster" employs themes and ideas Plath explored more broadly years before because of Mount Pisgah's events. "In Plaster" tackles specifically the aftermath of a broken bone – being "in plaster", feeling paralyzed, and worrying about her body as it appeared abnormal and disabled to the world at large. These are ideas not brought up in "In the Mountains" or even in *The Bell Jar*, as Plath does not break Isobel's leg at all, and Esther's story stops abruptly on the ski slope and does not follow the casting or healing of her leg. Instead, it seems like Plath reserved this reflection and material for poetry, perhaps because she felt it was more complex.

Two critics offer views of "In Plaster" that I think are worth addressing. In "'Inscrutable Intelligence': The Case against Plastic Surgery in the Works of Jean Stafford and Sylvia Plath," Mercè Cuenca argues that Plath uses "In Plaster" to "articulate a protofeminist agenda: a defence of the importance of the life of the female mind over the material consumption of the female body" (183). Cuenca posits that "In Plaster" argues against plastic surgery in the middle of the century, and while I am not dealing with the concept of body alteration, this article does offer a helpful view of "In Plaster" and the ideal of the female body – especially as it appears perfect, unblemished, and abled. Similarly, Steven Gould Axelrod writes that often Plath's poems explore "psychological extremity" in what he has termed "the domestic poem." He writes, "In such poems the speaker seems to have one layer too little of skin; her interior being becomes alarmingly visible…'In Plaster' for example, charts the speaker's growing sense of conflict between alternative identities or body senses – pure and dirty – that vie to possess her" (81). The tension in "In Plaster" thus originates from the ideal of the female body – the exterior, casted self – pitted against the realism of Plath's broken body – the interior, fragmented one. Both of these critics offer readings of "In Plaster" as commentary on the consumption of physical female bodies and as I posit below, these views can be extended to Plath's understanding of disability, much like the other works previously presented.

In "In Plaster", Plath echoes a myriad of sentiments earlier expressed in journals, letters, and *TBJ*. In the poem, the speaker expresses a fear that she will never get out of the plaster, and that there are two of her now – a double of the speaker-self living as the cast-self. The two of her that now exist are "This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one, / And the white person is certainly the superior one" (lines 2-3). The language of "the old yellow one" echoes journals and letters in which Plath described her yellowed leg after the cast was cut off and

Esther's experience in the hospital when her legs are yellowed and growing black hair. The speaker in "In Plaster" is increasingly concerned with how much the self that is the plaster cast looks the same as she does: "because she was shaped just the way I was" (line 7). In this line, Plath's fears about being viewed as only her disability return again. Indeed, as Plath symbolizes her paralysis as a manifestation of her cast within her journals and letters, she does the same in "In Plaster": "I blamed her for everything, but she didn't answer" (line 10). However, then the poem shifts. Instead of hating the self of the plaster cast, she begins to love her: "Then I realized what she wanted was for me to love her: / She began to warm up, and I saw her advantages. // Without me, she wouldn't exist, so of course she was grateful. / I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose" (lines 13-16). There is a transcendent healing in these lines, a realization that the plaster cast self was not a double, but rather a part of her. The speaker comes to realize that her beauty and identity are not—or, perhaps more accurately, should not be— tied to her normative, abled body. She realizes: "it was I who attracted everybody's attention, / Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had at first supposed" (lines 18-19). The perfect version of her, though beautiful, is ultimately silent and incapable of personality or character.

"In Plaster" too tackles the theme of rebirth present in childlike imagery. The speaker has been in the plaster cast for so long that she says, "I wasn't in any position to get rid of her. / She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp - / I had forgotten how to walk or sit" (lines 46-48). This sentiment is similar to Plath's letters and journals which detail her concern over learning how to walk again, although in this poem Plath showcases this regression not as a result of her broken bone, but rather the dependence on the plaster cast. The speaker remarks, "Then I saw what the trouble was: she thought she was immortal" (line 35). This line echoes the distance that Plath creates elsewhere between the temporary disability and the more permanent one. The

speaker in “In Plaster” realizes that the problem with the plaster cast is not that it exists, or even that the speaker depends upon it, but rather the cast-self has convinced itself and everyone else that this is a permanent state of disability.

The speaker goes on to state: “And secretly she began to hope I'd die. / Then she could cover my mouth and eyes, cover me entirely, / And wear my painted face the way a mummy-case / Wears the face of a pharaoh, though it's made of mud and water” (lines 39-42). Perhaps more than anywhere else in the writings that undertake concern about her leg or cast, here Plath grapples with the reduction of herself to a disability, her identity chiseled away by the cast. This is implied in letters to Aurelia, primarily when Plath expresses concerns that Myron will not be able to see past her cast in order to date her. In this instance, however, this fear that she will become her disability, and her disability will erase her identity, is manifest and explicit. The cast-self wishes that the speaker-self would cease to exist and then would cover the parts of the face that contributes most to autonomy: the eyes and the mouth. Once the speaker-self was blinded and mute, she would have no way to see the world or to comment upon it. The speaker ends the poem by realizing that the two selves cannot coexist: “I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her, / And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me” (lines 55-56). Plath’s speaker realizes her dependence on the cast, but also states that it will soon end, and the cast-self will cease to exist – i.e., the speaker’s disabled body will cease to exist, returning to her able-bodied self.

It is possible to think about this poem as commentary on mental illness: the perfect abled body, the cast-self is the external body and the internal, scattered, “old yellow one” is the mind. This theme—understanding physical disability versus invisible illness, like Dick’s tuberculosis for example or her own mental illness—is one that Plath struggled with for decades across her

writing. The speaker-self, the mind, realizes that the cast-self, the body, is simply the performance of perfection, but what people truly love about the self is the not the body, but the mind. In this reading, the fragmentation of the speaker is between her body and her mind – the performance of normality and the reality inside.

These three works— "In the Mountains, *The Bell Jar,* and "In Plaster"—offer three very different perspectives across three genres in different stages of Plath's life. In "In the Mountains" Plath only presents two named characters, Isobel and Austin, and the story is told in third person throughout. Intended for publication in a women's magazine, the story does not focus on a broken leg or an accident, but rather on the relationship between Isobel and Austin. In *The Bell Jar* the incident on the ski slope reflects bigger themes within the novel – independence from men, illness as disability, and suicide attempts as rebirth. In "In Plaster" more complex themes are explored – perfection masking the real person underneath. Only two characters are present, doubles of the same speaker, showing a fragmented soul present throughout *Crossing the Water*. Although the content of these stories is varied, not one of these perspectives is worth more than the rest, more "real" than the others.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In *Sounds from the Bell Jar: Ten Psychotic Author*s, Gordon Claridge, Ruth Pryor, and Gwen Watkins write, "Sylvia Plath's journals, and their schizoid contrast with letters written simultaneously, show her to be a psychotic writer, but the poems and prose meant for publication show it equally clearly. All her writing is autobiographical; she can never escape from the subject of her own impressions, her own miseries, terrors and nightmares" (207). Never has an assertion so succinctly embodied the dominant discourse on Plath and reduced both her works and literary genre so absolutely. This claim not only holds that every single piece of her writing is autobiographical—including short stories, her novel, her poetry—but it fundamentally misunderstands the purposes of genre as well. To claim that journals and letters that contrast with one another are indicative of schizoid behavior is to refuse to acknowledge the differences between the genres. Indeed, as I hope I have shown, I believe Plath's letters and journals, long overlooked and understudied, are just as performative as her fiction.

Certainly, each of Plath's works may hold pieces of herself and her identity, but isn't that all writing? When Gustave Flaubert was questioned about the model for Madame Bovary, he allegedly responded: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi!" (Descharmes 103).[23] When *Diary of a Bad*

[23] There is significant controversy over whether this remark was actually ever uttered by Flaubert. In his article, Yvan Leclerc explores the improbability that Flaubert said these words, but that Descharmes reported them and it spun so quickly into popularity works to my point here just as well as if Flaubert had said the words himself. Even if Flaubert did not believe himself to be the influence or model for Emma Bovary, others were quick to accept it.

Year was published by J.M. Coetzee, the only thing separating the opinions of Señor C from himself was the word "fiction" on the cover and the slightly altered name of the protagonist from the author's own. *The New York Times* indeed praises this breakdown of genre barriers: Kathryn Harrison writes that *Diary of a Bad Year* "force[s] readers to consider the friable boundary between fiction and nonfiction" ("Strong Opinions"). Likewise, after *The Catcher in the Rye* was published, Lawrence Grobel said, "I suspect Holden Caulfield went up to New Hampshire, found himself a place to live, kept his hunting cap on, found a wife, had kids, and that's it. We never hear from him again. That's what I think happened to Holden Caulfield because that's what happened to J.D. Salinger" (Shields and Salerno 269). Each of the books listed is praised: praised for its honesty and for its realism. We as scholars put them into the canon; we teach them in our classrooms; we speculate how much is real and how much is fiction. Each of these works acknowledges the influence of nonfiction on novels, but none of them is banished from the canon for it. Instead, we teach these works, and we call it modernism, realism, and objectivity.

So why then does Plath's fiction become taboo? Does it have something to do with gender? I posit that it does. When men put themselves onto the page and when they show vulnerability, we call it art. When women put themselves onto the page and when they are honest, we call their novels potboilers, trash, or heresy. Plath even referred to *The Bell Jar* as a potboiler herself – not because I think she truly thought it was one (how could one think of parts of their own life as a potboiler?) – but because she was conditioned to believe that women's true stories were not interesting, did not matter, and were not "literary."

Indeed, one of the most beautiful and freeing things about literature is that there is no objective truth. Instead, fiction and nonfiction alike reveal subjective truths: truths about authors, characters, and the world as one sees it. To distance oneself from the reductive notion that all of

Plath's work is self-reflexive is to see nuance and performance of identity and writing in each of her pieces. This kind of reading of her body of work allows one to let go of the feeling of being deceived by untruths and instead to perhaps question why Plath made the choices she did and for whom. Literature, and especially Plath's works, are like kaleidoscopes. Looking at her works, one sees repeated images and patterns, but each is twisted a slightly different way. Like the events on Mount Pisgah, each time the story is retold the kaleidoscope turns: similar colors and patterns shift slightly to reveal an entirely new image full of new possibilities and meanings.

So, what does this mean for future Plath studies? Writ large, this thesis is an argument for her place in the western canon of literature. It is an argument for a spot larger than "Daddy" or "Lady Lazarus" taught in lower-level survey courses in universities, and larger than how the media reduces her persona to a caricature, as in a recent *Independent* article titled "Here's Why Taylor Swift is the New Sylvia Plath." It is similarly an argument for the western canon to expand beyond novels and poetry to include more readily genres on the margins: diaries and letters. This thesis relies on letters and journals equally, if not more than, poetry and prose. If the canon is so reluctant to admit women's stories in the form of fictional novels, it is unsurprising that journals and letters are relegated to the fringes as well. The argument against journals and letters in the canon is that they are not "literary" enough, but what I hope to have proven with this thesis is that Plath's letters and journal entries, like her poems and short stories, show significant evidence of her literary craft. Her telegram to her mother reads much like a poem: it reflects form, metaphors, and alliteration in a short space. Her letters and journals hold preliminary ideas for scenes and images published years later, indicating a literary prowess in early stages. Plath catered her letters to her audience — her mother, Myron, etc. — in a similar fashion to how she would later market her short stories to different journals and magazines.

Despite the obvious literary potential nonfiction letters and journal entries hold, the difference between nonfiction letters and epistolary fiction in the literary canon is a wide chasm. If letters are published as epistolary fiction, they are accepted[24]; it is only when letters appear to be nonfiction that there is considerable backlash. However, we teach nonfiction authored by males constantly: the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and Thoreau's *Walden* to name a few. Of course, the obvious answer is that these things are autobiographies or collections of essays. These genres have been branded as "public" by the literary canon, and nonfiction letters and journal entries remain thought of as "private." Like Plath's physical body on the ski slope of Mount Saranac, her body of work has suffered significant injury and harm due to patriarchal standards. On the ski slope, the patriarchal standards existed as Dick Norton pushed Sylvia to ski when he had never skied before. In her body of work, the patriarchal standards are ones enforced within the literary canon, standards that judge what is literary and what is not, often resulting in a disregard for women's "private" writing. Those who determine the literary canon ignore these genres because the works within them were not written expressly for publication because publication has become synonymous with "good", even though really it is synonymous with "male."

In a journal entry in 1950, Plath wrote the following: "I am jealous of those who think more deeply, who write better, who draw better, who ski better, who look better, who live better, who love better than I" (*The Unabridged Journals*, 20). These words anticipate the event on the ski slope three years later with the words "ski better", but they foreshadow other things as well. She envied others who "look better", a sentiment clear in how often she compares her

[24] *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, and *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley are just a few examples of epistolary fiction that come to mind.

temporarily disabled body with a normative abled body. She envies those who “love better”, showcased with her constant push and pull between the men and her life: Myron, and Dick among others, and her love for her independence and herself. Finally, Plath was jealous of those who “think more deeply, who write better”, almost foreshadowing the scholars who would corroborate her greatest fear: that all her life was only a potboiler. I am hopeful that this thesis has shed light on the nuances of Plath’s writing. By examining performance across genre, it becomes clear that judging Plath’s body of work by her own person and personal life is a reductive approach. If we can instead acknowledge the personas she crafted through literary performances, the “true Sylvia” myth fades away and is replaced with a complex body of work worth studying.

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