

The role of food in ms. greenwood's downfall



Throughout Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, we are faced with Esther Greenwood's continual downfall as her mind sinks deeper into depression; however, Esther's one nearly consistent source of enjoyment is found in food. Esther's experience in New York City is highlighted with rich foods like stuffed avocados and bowls of caviar. Not only do these indulgences serve as an escape for Esther, but food also represents the choices that Esther is presented with in her life. The difference between her choices in life and her choices with food is that when she chooses to eat two plates of chicken and caviar, the stuffed avocados do not disappear from the table. However, once she chooses to marry Buddy Willard, she is no longer able to go to Europe and fall in love. Food offers Esther the ability to make one choice without eliminating others - something that life is not allowing her. This simple fact gives her an escape from the decisions she is being forced to make. At the beginning of Chapter Three, Esther states quite plainly, " I'm not quite sure why it is, but I love food more than just about anything else" (24). Esther is declaring that food gives her something that nothing else can satisfy, something that satisfies more than just hunger. Although she says that she cannot specifically say what it is she loves so much about food, it is easy to see that food offers her innumerable choices that never cancel each other out; some of them even fulfill a sense of nostalgia. Esther mentions that she can eat as much food as she wants without gaining weight, which just further illustrates the fact that Esther can indulge in anything without having any consequences. The limitless possibilities of food entice Esther and lures her away from the complications and finality of decision making that she is faced with. One of the great metaphors in *The Bell Jar* is the way that Esther compares her life to a fig tree. " I saw my life branching out before me like

the green fig tree from the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked...I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose" (77). The image that this brings to the reader is at first a very beautiful one, but then we see Esther wither away in indecision. The fact that her possible futures are " fat purple figs" shows, once again, the importance of food in her life and how it can represent decisions. However, Esther is only allowed to choose one of these beautiful fruits, unlike the bountiful selection she has when choosing what to eat. Shortly after her " vision of the fig tree and all the fat figs that withered and fell to the earth," (78) she was able to eat and consequently felt " immensely better" (78), again proving the comforting qualities that food gives Esther. Ms. Greenwood is essentially using food in an escapist way that comforts her and relieves her otherwise inescapable problems. Not only does food represent all of the choices that she is not able to make, but it also gives her a way to experience some of the things she felt she was missing out on. In particular, when Constantin takes her down to his restaurant that " smelt of herbs and spices and sour cream" (77) she is effectively transported somewhere that she has never been. The restaurant was hidden away in a sort of cellar and the walls were plastered with travel posters that sweep the mind away to far off destinations. Not only does this environment take her away, but the food that follows consoles her to the point that she decides to let Constantin to seduce her (77), something she surely would not have done without the intoxicating environment and comforting food. Avocados are another consoling food for Esther and have a special place in her heart. They bring up memories of her grandfather and her childhood, apparently the only

time she remembers being truly happy. " Avocados are my favorite fruit...He [her grandfather] taught me how to eat avocados by melting grape jelly and French dressing together in a saucepan and filling the cup of the pear with the garnet sauce. I felt homesick for that sauce. The crabmeat tasted bland in comparison" (28). This section brings the reader back to Esther's humble childhood especially when she announces that she feels " homesick for that sauce" because you can really feel her yearning. Also, her comparison of the crabmeat to the simple sauce shows that although she relishes the haute couture of New York City living, she will always appreciate the simplicity of her childhood. Doreen's parting gift to Esther was two-dozen avocados. The fact that Doreen knew of Esther's affection for these fruits demonstrates how Esther is nearly defined by her strong love of food. These 24 avocados took up all of Esther's suitcase, leaving room for only The Thirty Best Short Stories of the Year, a white plastic sunglasses case and no clothes whatsoever. If we look at Esther's suitcase as a proportionate metaphor to what she finds most important in her life, food would be considered number one. Esther also seems to have a strange fondness for the avocados in her suitcase since she describes their shifting weight as how " they cannoned from one end to the other with a special little thunder of their own" (113). She seems to almost admire the power of fruit that she is carrying and seems proud to have them. Esther's emotional ties with food are especially clear when she is evaluating her relationship with avocados. When Esther arrives home after her internship in New York City, she almost immediately finds out that she did not make the course that she had been hoping to take. One of the first things she does after that is " drop a raw egg into a teacup of raw hamburger, mix it up and [eat] it," (119) something that seems very strange

and quite disgusting. The two ingredients, hamburger and eggs, are American staples and a common find in any kitchen during the fifties. This drastic change from fancy New York dining to domestic cuisine signifies the change that Esther is about to undergo. Also, the fact that both of these ingredients are raw alludes to Esther's ideology about the current world she is forced to live in. "Raw," as defined by The New Oxford American Dictionary, is "frank and realistic in the depiction of unpleasant facts or situations," which is exactly the way Esther sees the world around her. She will not accept the sugarcoated version that society is trying to sell her. Ideas about how the perfect life is getting married and having children do not appeal to Esther and she sees straight through the façade. As Esther continues to fall deeper and deeper into her depressive state, she nearly quits eating altogether. She also stops sleeping and reading, two other very essential things in her life. The absence of her enthusiasm for food shows how far the depression has taken her. Since she no longer indulges herself in food and no longer has any desire to, she is not able to escape from the problems that haunt her. Throughout her whole experiences in three different mental institutions, food is only mentioned once or twice, and it is not in very appealing contexts. During the chaotic dinner scene in one of the institutions, Esther notes "Now I knew perfectly well you didn't serve two kinds of beans together at a meal. Beans and carrots, or beans and peas, maybe, but never beans and beans. The Negro was just trying to see how much we would take" (181). Her mental note of this shows the reader that she still has some respect for food and knows the proper taboos that surround them. Food has not completely left her consciousness. However, Esther is being exposed to food that she describes as "stiff, green straws

[green beans]" (181) or " stone cold and stuck together in a gluey paste [macaroni]" (181) which is not the creamy avocados she is used to. The low quality food served at the institutions offers her no escape and does not present any desirable options for her. One of her first experiences out of the institutions is her date with Irwin where she drinks beer and devours escargot. " I picked up my empty snail shell and drank the herb-green juice. I had no idea if this was proper, but after months of wholesome, dull asylum diet, I was greedy for butter" (227). This dinner, combined with Esther's newfound freedom and confidence in contraception, quickly leads to sex with Irwin. Although it is a much less exciting and far messier experience than Esther intended it to be, it shows that food not only gives Esther comfort, but also gives her poise and confidence. The revitalizing effects that food has on Esther are undeniable and are clearly seen throughout *The Bell Jar*. Not only does food offer Esther an escape to a different time or place, but it also gives her a variety of options to choose from and the best part is that she can choose more than just one. Food commonly brings up emotions for many people, not just Esther. Especially in American society, food is glorified and seen as a solution to many people's everyday problems. Esther is not alone in seeking out food to resolve her daily issues and it is a much healthier outlet than alcohol or other substances. Food, however, does not prevent Esther's depression from spiraling out of control - once it hits, her appetite is gone. It is only when the bell jar is suspended a few feet above her head (215) she is able to take pleasure in the comforts that food offers her. It is impossible to know whether food will be able to sustain her mind if the bell jar descends once more and she is forced to actually face the decisions she has been avoiding in her life.