

The mother and the self: rejection of motherhood in barnes's nightwood and plath'...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The female or female-identifying writer must often acknowledge motherhood in her writing, as men often project and expect women to act like their mothers even in sexual relationships. No matter what wave of feminism, motherhood is still seen as something central to the upbringing of children, whether it is something present or absent. While much of Freudian theory for the development of young women is father-centric, the role of the mother is crucial to who women (particularly women writers) choose to become. Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, while being anything but a traditional text, exemplifies how a woman rejects a motherhood role while also looking for a mother in her relationships in her relationships with other women. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* alternatively investigates the relationship between female domestic incarceration in Cold War-era United States to the entrapment of the asylum and mental health double standards. This essay discusses the significance of motherhood and maternal values in the texts as well as the ultimate rejection of traditional motherhood roles. The blatant rejection of motherhood by Robin in *Nightwood* and Esther's embrace of birth control to assuage her fears of becoming pregnant in *The Bell Jar* serve to expose the foundation of Modernist "New Woman" archetypes in Robin and Nora's relationship and their evolution to proto-feminist ideas in Esther's narrative. While not necessarily in conversation with each other, Barnes and Plath both expose what it means to be a woman but also in relation to other people, whether it be men, other women, and children.

Beginning with Barnes, *Nightwood* (1936) gives a taste of the complicated and charged power dynamics between women and investigates the thin separation between love and obsession and their tendency to become one.

With a narrative primarily carried through the ramblings of Doctor Matthew O'Connor, the novel explores relationships (between Robin Vote and Nora Flood, and the Doctor and the people around him) and seeks to observe the ugly feelings of fixation and unbearable passion—feelings that ultimately do not receive any resolution. Through the struggles of Robin and the Doctor, it is unclear if Barnes believes actual reinvention of the self can ever be healthily realized, but she asserts that this “ true, hidden self” that is contrary to any given societal identity will ultimately find a way to make itself known. Robin wonders both physically and existentially, constantly dispelling her given identity and expectations by society. Her first depiction describes her in stasis as if she were a plant rather than a sleeping woman: “ About her head there was an effulgence as of phosphorus glowing about the circumference of a body of water—as if her life lay through her in ungainly luminous deteriorations—the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds—meet of child and desperado” (Barnes 38). The somber, innocent sense her description evokes parallels directly to the passivity of her personality when she is awake. Robin’s sense of arrested development in a childlike state emerges consistently for the rest of the novel and emphasizes how events happen to her rather than being choices of her own will. Rejecting motherhood as well as committed relationships with her three different significant others, Robin seeks to find something or someone that does not project a premeditated identity onto her when she herself is conflicted about what it means to be a queer woman. First, in her marriage to Felix, she completely dissociates from any realization or action against her pregnancy as if she were asleep during it. There is little about Robin’s character that changes during her pregnancy; she drinks and smokes <https://assignbuster.com/the-mother-and-the-self-rejection-of-motherhood-in-barnes-nightwood-plaths-the-bell-jar/>

heavily and continues to wander freely during the night, completely ambivalent to her child. She finally has her baby, in one of the strangest depictions of pregnancy in literature: “ Amid loud and frantic cries of affirmation and despair, Robin was delivered. Shuddering in the double pains of birth and fury, cursing like a sailor, she rose up on her elbow in her bloody gown, looking about her in the bed as if she had lost something. ‘ Oh, for Christ’s sake, for Christ’s sake!’ she kept crying like a child who has walked into the commencement of a horror” (Barnes 52). Robin “ was delivered” rather than delivering the baby herself, emphasizing through the passive voice the extent to which the pregnancy was not her choice. The entire childbirth is a train wreck, posing the question of how someone can bear a child when they themselves only perhaps have the mental capacity of a child.

For all the purposes that the delivery of the child, Robin is still the baby, crying like a scared child. Following the birth, she leaves Felix after slapping him and proclaiming she did not want the child—her most aggressive action in her relationship with Felix and perhaps for a majority of the novel: “ One night, coming home about three, he found her in the darkness, standing, back against the window, in the pod of the curtain, her chin so thrust forward that the muscles in her neck stood out. As he came toward her she said in a fury, “‘ I didn’t want him!’” Raising her hand she struck him across the face.” (Barnes 53). Though Felix does not seem to be a character with a malicious agenda, he still as a male tries to hedge Robin into a role that she obviously does not want and does not even have the ability to fulfill outside of bearing a child itself. Completely dissociated from her experience, she rejects the

role that Felix projects on her, as the omniscient narrator notes, “ She grinned, but it was not a smile” (Barnes 53). From this, the reader feels that though she easily walks away from this, Robin is still affected in some painful, unspeakable way from her experience. Robin performs more actively in her passionate relationship with Nora Flood. However, her unhinged, drifting nature still makes itself clear to her lover: “ Nora was informed that Robin had come from a world to which she would return” (Barnes 63). Nora knows that there is nothing she can do to keep Robin from wandering away and ultimately leaving her, but the realization does not keep her from becoming obsessed and attached to Robin. Robin cannot be encompassed just by the word “ lesbian;” she participates perhaps more actively in her relationships with women, but women still project their desires onto her much like Felix did by pushing her into marriage and motherhood. While Robin is significant in the novel in her rejection of motherhood, she, by casting off a mothering role, simply just casts the role onto other people and often allows people to “ mother” her even in her sexual relationships. In “ The Erotics of Nora’s Narrative in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” Carolyn Allen argues that the relationship between Robin and Nora often imitate the struggle between mother and child (Allen 178). She describes their relationship: “ Nora as ‘ mother/wife’ worries about Robin’s safety but provides a center of stability; Robin as ‘ child/husband’ has a home to which to return, but only when she chooses to do so” (Allen 187). While Robin’s wandering at night perhaps scripts her in a masculine role, she still is drawn back to Nora like a child would be. Nora takes a maternal role, but she still is forced to defer to Robin’s freedom and desire. Furthermore, when Nora reveals more about their relationship to Doctor O’Connor, she shows just

<https://assignbuster.com/the-mother-and-the-self-rejection-of-motherhood-in-barness-nightwood-plaths-the-bell-jar/>

how childlike Robin can be: “ Sometimes...she would sit at home all day, looking out of the window or playing with her toys, trains, and animals and cars to wind up, and dolls and marbles, and soldiers. But all the time she was watching me to see that no one called, that the bell did not ring, that I got no mail, nor anyone hallooing in the court, though she knew that none of these things could happen. My life was hers. Sometimes, if she got tight by evening, I would find her standing in the middle of the room in boy’s clothes, rocking from foot to foot, holding the doll she had given us—‘ our child’— high above her head, as if she would cast it down, a look of fury on her face” (Barnes 156-157). Robin regresses to childlike state with her different toys, as well as demanding and manipulating Nora into seeing no one but her (even though Robin freely goes out and sees other people). It is clear that Robin needs a mother role filled and seeks that in her relationship with Nora.

Furthermore, the reader can easily forget during sequences like this that Robin herself is a mother in the biological sense. However, she consciously rejects the role for herself in the same manner that she holds contempt for the doll, holds it above her head, and eventually destroys it. In many ways, Robin enslaves Nora (though willingly), and though Nora ends the relationship, it is clear that Robin still holds all of the power. The mother is left, forgotten and in suffering. Doctor O’Connor comically puts it that Nora “ should have had a thousand children, and Robin should have been all of them” (Barnes 107). As lovers, they haunt each other, but as mother and child, they ruin both themselves and the other, leaving Nora melancholic and Robin lost. Though Robin is perhaps atypical because she is not persecuted for her lesbianism (at least in the text) and is able to travel and roam freely,

her character serves as an outlet or expose for the vulnerability a lot of women face when pushed into motherhood at a young age, when they themselves may still feel like children. Her rejection of motherhood could be read as heartless, but alternatively, it is an act of aggression in voicing her own desires despite her pattern of passivity and fragility. Robin looks for a relationship that does not project an identity upon her, culminating in her final ritualistic encounter with a dog, mirroring the animal's movements until she falls asleep.

Switching from *Nightwood*, Esther Greenwood's personal yet analytical narrative voice in *The Bell Jar* (1963) constantly refers to her feelings and confusion about motherhood and her distaste for it. For the first half of the novel, the reader follows along as Esther closely observes a childbirth and the mother figures she comes in contact with (her own, Mrs. Willard, Dodo Conway). The childbirth is the crux of her narrative commentary and critique of the societal manipulation of women into maternal roles. Buddy Willard takes her on a "date" to a childbirth at his medical school. As Buddy informs Esther of what the woman is experiencing, Esther closely sees the mother in front of her as the picture of something much bigger of the female experience: Later Buddy told me the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain and that when she swore and groaned she really didn't know what she was doing because she was in a kind of twilight sleep. I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been,

when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again" (Plath 66). This is Esther's first complete thought about her view of motherhood. Viewing everything as black and white, Esther sees the drugs that women are given during childbirth are essentially gaslighting women to forget their pain and suffering to begin working to have another child, paralleling to men tricking women into giving away their autonomy. She exhibits women as victims who do not even have a full understanding of what is happening to their bodies, stuck in a cycle of childbearing that should "give them pride" but strips them of having any different life than one of motherhood.

Esther refutes this representation again when she discusses Mrs. Willard's braiding of a rug out of strips of wool from Mr. Willard's old suits (Plath 84). When the mat becomes flattened and indistinguishable like any other kitchen mat, Esther draws a parallel to female maternal roles: "And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out under his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (Plath 85). Esther grapples with her own sexuality and observes the marriages in front of her dissolve to something sinister and unfair. Kate Baldwin in "The Radical Imaginary of The Bell Jar" asserts that the American women's relationship is connected to national narrative of the time that "place, displace, and replace women in an international, geopolitical world order as it does about the relationship between U. S. domestic incarceration and the asylum" (Baldwin 23). This female domestic

incarceration is something Esther observes and becomes extremely disillusioned with, unable to grapple with the cold reality of marriage and motherhood for so many people and as she fears for herself. This parallels to the conservative Cold War politics of the time, showing societal double standards about women and men as a national narrative, as well as the double standard in terms of treatment in mental health issues. Dodo Conway, Esther's neighbor, furthermore serves as a grotesque representation of the domestic incarceration and motherhood Esther has become disillusioned with. While Esther nervously lounges around her house, she observes the neighbors while constantly feeling her own gaze being thrown back at her. Looking out the window, Esther sees a pregnant woman with a "grotesque, protruding stomach," wheeling a baby carriage down the street with two other children walking beside her (Plath 116). This woman, Dodo Conway, seems to have a religious aura about her, and it is significant that she is a Catholic and thus not using birth control methods. Dodo represents everything about suburban motherhood with her three small children with one on the way, with a chaotic yard littered with children, toys, and puppies.

Dodo Conway's name alone shows Plath's symbolism. "Dodo," or the dodo bird, perhaps seeks to show old conventions of motherhood that are gradually becoming extinct, as well as a morbid stupidity in following these conventions, and "Conway" literally translates that perhaps women are being conned or scammed by these societal standards of happiness for the woman. Esther sees all of these women in front of her as a dark mirror of what could be for her life, and it disenchanting and sickens her: "I watched Dodo wheel the youngest Conway up and down. She seemed to be doing it for my

benefit. Children made me sick” (Plath 117). This sincere distaste for children and motherhood reduces women in Esther’s mind to the inferior other, and she desperately wants to avoid fulfilling this stereotypical female role. Dodo Conway, an ambivalent “ baby machine” in Esther’s eyes, has been scammed into a tradition that exploits her rather than empowers.

Motherhood, in turn, means an end to creativity, success, and authorship. As Esther examines the sexual double standard between men and women, she expresses her feelings about becoming sexually active and subsequent fears of pregnancy. She realizes that Buddy Willard embodies everything about men that she comes to hate. The turning point in their relationship when Buddy becomes less appealing to Esther is when she discovers he is not as “ innocent” as he had presented himself. She is appalled that Buddy had the freedom to have sex with a woman before her as they do not have the same threat and are not held to the same standard of chastity. In her time at the private institution, Doctor Nolan calls the “ vow of chastity” fed to women a form of propaganda, challenging Esther to show that women do not have to hold themselves to the virgin-whore dichotomy that even Esther herself is susceptible to. Doctor Nolan refers Esther to a gynecologist to receive a fitting for a diaphragm. Esther comments on the broken idea of virginity and purity: “ Ever since I’d learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck. It had been of such enormous importance to me for so long that my habit was to defend it at all costs. I had been defending it for five years and I was sick of it” (Plath 228).

She begins to understand the extent to which she has been fed standards that entrap her and limit her knowledge rather than extend it. Rather than buying into the virgin-whore dichotomy, Esther ultimately realizes that she <https://assignbuster.com/the-mother-and-the-self-rejection-of-motherhood-in-barnes-nightwood-plaths-the-bell-jar/>

cannot escape the convention of womanhood by becoming a woman-hater herself but rather embracing her options and different avenues.

Esther constantly searches for another female with whom she can identify, and in turn, both the mother figures and career women seem to fall short. She cannot see them as her role models, but rather their lives as avenues that hers could take. However, she keeps scrutinizing all of the paths she could take, until their flaws balloon into something grotesque and blur the manifestation of any happiness. Virginia Woolf claimed that women must kill the “angel in the house” in order to write, with the angel being the sympathetic, selfless standard of a voiceless feminine mother (Woolf).

During Plath’s and Barnes’s slightly overlapping eras, women often faced the conundrum of writing being seen as an act of masculine activity rather than feminine creativity. This is often expressed in both of their texts: Robin wanders freely at night and refuses monogamy with Nora or any of her lovers, and Esther harshly criticizes both the mothers and the career women she interacts with. Both authors show flawed women with a full stream of emotions and desire, which in tandem allows for the questioning and ultimately a rejection of motherhood. Their protagonists in turn, whether in their passive dissuasion or action rejection, are at war with institutionalized motherhood and institutionalized marriage. In her novel *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*,” Adrienne Rich describes the normative reality women face in marriage and motherhood: Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal “instinct” rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of the self. Motherhood is “sacred” so long as its offspring are “

legitimate"—that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother (Rich 42). Esther and Robin are both women who lack this maternal instinct. Through Esther's personal yet analytical first person narrative, the reader understands her intellectual prowess and distinctive writing abilities (as well as Plath's) and sees her actively reject motherhood through her choice against a marriage with Buddy Willard. Robin is a much more thickly veiled character; rather than formulating thoughts and looking at the world the way Esther and Plath do, she is much more the object that is looked at and projected upon. However, she still does reject this gaze and in a lot of ways seeks to create some sense of self, even if it is through veiled and unconventional means. Both women reference the overall movement of women becoming uncomfortable with the roles projected onto them and seeking to find a different role in the world. Rich clearly asserts the quandary: "In order to live a fully human life we require not only control of our bodies (though control is a prerequisite); we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence" (Rich 39). Robin directly rejects motherhood by leaving her child while Esther takes advantage of preventative measures, showing progress from Djuna Barnes's time to Plath's, but still emphasizing how much the struggle does not pass away.

Both Barnes and Plath create complex female protagonists whose true selves are hidden behind masks and must ultimately be realized, and these selves cannot be realized through motherhood. In "The Mother, the Self, and the Other: The Search for Identity in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Takahashi Takako's *Congruent Figure*," Yoko Sakane asserts the essential concern

regarding motherhood and authorship: “ For women writers who are daughters of mothers and often mothers themselves, the mother-daughter relationship is one of the central issues often faced and come to terms with.” (Sakane 27). Motherhood naturally is mythicized in both of the texts, but the ambivalence of the authors’ attitude toward actual mothers shows both of their attempts to recreate it as something outside the patriarchal realm, and furthermore, as a choice. While motherhood may still be central to conversations and narratives by and about women, the significance of Robin and Esther rejecting motherhood in their respective texts creates sympathy from their readers and establishes their humanity as something individual, concrete, and autonomous, separate entirely from the identity of motherhood.

Works Cited

Allen, Carolyn. “ The Erotics of Nora’s Narrative in Djuna Barnes’s “ Nightwood”.” *Signs* (1993): 177-200. Document. .

Baldwin, Kate A. “ The Radical Imaginary of “ The Bell Jar”.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* (2004): 21-40. Document. .

Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2006. Print.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005. Print.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976. Print.

Sakane, Yōko. “ The Mother, the Self, and the Other: The Search for Identity in Sylvia Plath’s “ The Bell Jar” and Takahashi Takako’s “ Congruent Figure”.” U. S.-Japan Women’s Journal (English Supplement) (1998): 27-48.

Document. .

Woolf, Virginia. “ Professions for Women.” Woolf, Virginia. The Death of the Moth and Other Essays. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974. 5.

Document..