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## Coverings of White in Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Ariel Poems

In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and "Ariel" poems, veils and sheets of white are drawn over people, objects, and even scenery throughout her work. Plath draws on images that are normally associated with purity and new beginnings, such as white clothing or fresh fallen snow. Yet Plath twists these symbols, describing snow that covers the freshly-dug grave of a young woman dead from suicide, or a hateful and violent man dressed in a pure white suit. In Plath's writing, these white exteriors do not reflect internal serenity and purity, as expected. Instead, the whiteness thinly masks morbid, angry, and painful interiors. The repetition of these white-covered images mirrors Plath's own pale and vulnerable skin. Underneath her skin, and often just out of view from an outside perspective, lies her pain and depression. These deeper and darker layers of Plath's mind and body are connected with colors such as black, blue, and red. Plath reveals these dark emotions by describing settings, people, clothing, and scenes that resemble her own body and mind. By choosing a color as vulnerable as white, Plath shows how difficult it is to prevent the darker colors and the darker sides of the mind and body to bleed through this thin layer of white.

Throughout her writing, Plath connects herself with her surroundings. In her article "Sylvia Plath: Troubled Bones", Heather McClave describes this connection, saying "Periphery, the border between self and other that contains the self and gives it a dimension in time and space, seems notably minimal in Plath" (McClave 448). McClave describes how Plath's "psychic paralysis" prevents her from being able to see the outside world objectively, and how Plath instead "strives to lose herself...by wholly becoming the Other [the outside world]" (McClave 450). The interconnectedness between the self and the other, which McClave describes, is illustrated in Plath's poem "Tulips". In this poem, the speaker lies in a hospital bed,

and has lost her inner angst to the white serenity that surrounds her. She says: “Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in./ I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly/ As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands” (ll. 2-4). The rhythm of this last line is especially soothing, with three pairs of words: “white walls”, “this bed”, and “these hands”—each word monosyllabic. Plath breaks the regular grammar of lists by leaving out an “and” before “these hands”, so as not to break the rhythm of this line, which resembles the steady beating of a heart. The speaker’s mind and body are at peace because she has become one with the white serenity that covers and surrounds her. When someone brings her a bouquet of red tulips, she cannot disconnect herself from her surroundings, and simply see the tulips as cheerful flowers. She says “Their [the tulips’] redness talks to my wound, it corresponds./ they are subtle; they seem to float, though they weigh me down,/ Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,/ A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck” (ll. 39-42). The tulips remind the speaker of her internal pain. After the wound “corresponds”, the next three lines are made up of one long sentence, sinking further down the page just like the speaker feels she is sinking under the weight of the flowers. The last line of this stanza has internal rhymes in “red” and “lead”, and repeating k’s and r’s in “sinkers”, “neck”, “red”, and “round”. This mirroring within the line creates a circular feeling, similar to the swirl of water at the bottom of a drain or whirlpool, as the speaker is sucked further down into her pain and dark thoughts. This poem reveals how Plath merges her surroundings with her own mind and body. The setting is a reflection of herself, and her descriptions of people and objects mirror her own state of mind. In *The Bell Jar*, white sheets cover dark, fearful, and macabre interiors. Plath does not repeat these images of white material masking dark contents simply to describe the people and scenes around her. All of these images

stem from Plath's own painful and morbid inner life, which are covered by a shell of white and vulnerable skin.

Plath's inner pain and white exterior appear in *The Bell Jar* through the men with whom Esther Greenwood (a protagonist resembling a young Sylvia Plath) meets. These men almost always appear in white clothing. Buddy Willard is first described in a "white turtleneck sweater" (53) and later is dressed in a "white nylon shirt" (86); she goes on a date with a man named Constantin, who is wearing a "starched white" shirt (78); her dance partner, Marco, wears "an immaculate white suit" (101); a sailor she talks to has a "white cup-cake hat", and "clean, white, linen handkerchief" (128-129). Even when they are not wearing clothes, men's bodies are white, like her seaside companion Cal, who looks like a "white worm" (154), or Irwin, who she loses her virginity to, and his "pale, hairless skin" (218). These men swathed in white may, at first glance, appear to be clean and innocent. White clothing is closely associated with marriage, (in the purity of the bride), and also doctors and medicine, (in the sterile cleanliness of hospitals). When white clothing appears in *The Bell Jar*, however, it does not reflect inner purity and cleanliness of the men who wear it.

Buddy Willard is the first man who shocks Esther with his impurity. After going on a few dates, Esther asks him if he is a virgin, expecting him to answer "No, I have been saving myself for when I get married to somebody pure and a virgin like you" (65). Instead, he answers that he has had sex, in fact many times, and Esther's conception of young men as sexually pure begins to disintegrate as she realizes that men are not expected to be virgins before marriage as women are. Buddy's white clothing conveys a false message of purity for a man who is not sexually innocent. Marco also does not live up to the "dazzling" whiteness (103) of his clothing when he is violent and nasty towards Esther. He grabs her arm so hard he leaves a bruise for every

fingerprint, and later throws her into the mud, rips her dress with his teeth, and calls her a slut while he attempts to rape her. The whiteness of Marco's clothing contrasts with the dark, seething hatred that soon shows through his pure-looking suit. When Esther punches Marco in self-defense, he takes out "a white handkerchief and dabbed his nose. Blackness, like ink, spread over the pale cloth" (105). Marilyn Boyer discusses this scene in terms of language in her article "The Disabled Female Body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*", suggesting that Marco's blood functions as a sort of text, and his handkerchief a blank piece of paper (Boyer 209). I would contend that Plath depicts something deeper and cruder than text by forming a physical image of Marco's dark moral character bleeding through his falsely innocent appearance. His blood, an internal part of his body, stains and blackens the thin white cloth that clothes him, just as his violence blackened any notion that he could be dazzling and pure. Plath twists the common association of this color with purity, by clothing most of the men Esther meets in white, even as they prove themselves to be unclean, impure, and morally dark.

In Plath's poetry and in *The Bell Jar*, snow and white blankets cover things that are dark and difficult, just as the men's white clothing covers their internal impurity. In particular, these white sheets cover death. When Esther tries to kill herself and is recovering in a mental institution, she immediately talks about this suicide attempt with her hospital roommate. When the doctors come into check on the other woman, "she lowered her voice and said something I [Esther] couldn't hear. One or two people in the group glanced in my direction. Then somebody said 'All right, Mrs Tomolillio', and somebody stepped out and pulled the bed-curtain between us like a white wall" (171). Plath implies that the woman has asked the doctors to hide Esther from view by pulling the white curtain across the room. Mrs. Tomolillio is uncomfortable seeing a woman who wants to die, so she hides Esther, an image of death, behind a white curtain. Later

on in *The Bell Jar*, when Esther's friend Joan commits suicide, Plath describes her grave as a "black, six-foot-deep gap hacked in the hard ground", but that "the traces of newness in Joan's grave" will be erased when it snows again (232). Yet again, a white blanket (this time of snow rather than cloth) covers reminders of death in Plath's writing. In Plath's poem "Berck-Plage", a man's dead body is also covered in a white sheet. In his article, "Death and Rebirth in Sylvia Plath's 'Berck-Plage'", Jack Folsom quotes Ted Hughes' notes on this poem, explaining how the scenes of this dead man were written about the death of Hughes' and Plath's neighbor (Folsom 521). Plath describes the body of this man: "Is he wearing pajamas or an evening suit// Under the glued sheet from which his powdery beak/ Rises so whitely unbuffeted?" (198). The thin white sheet physically obscures death from view, by shielding this corpse from Plath's eyes. In each of these examples of white sheets covering death, the coverings are not entirely successful in hiding their morbid under-layers. Mrs. Tomolillio has already seen Esther, and knows she is still there, so the white curtain cannot completely hide her presence. The snow covering Joan's grave is (probably) interrupted by a headstone, and eventually the temporary cover of snow will melt away. Even though Plath cannot see what her neighbor's corpse is wearing, the white sheet over him cannot obscure all parts of his appearance, and his nose points sharply into the thin fabric. In these images, Plath reveals how white can be used in an attempt to disguise something as dark as death, yet how the darker layers have ways of poking through.

Plath emphasizes the analogy between her own body and the white-veiled settings and people in her writing when she speaks about the vulnerable white shell of skin that houses her dark thoughts, pain, and blood. When Esther is about to receive her first shock treatment, she "tried to smile, but my skin had gone stiff, like parchment" (138). Her face becomes a paper-like shell that hides the fear that she feels underneath. Marilyn Boyer again discusses language in

relation to this scene, and how “The piece of stiff paper, or parchment, which she [Esther] feels that her body resembles, has yet to be written upon. She is mute, blank, and rigid” (Boyer 215). Not only does blank paper connote a lack of language, as Boyer points out, but in the context of Esther’s face, reference to paper creates the image of a mask. Perhaps Esther is not a blank slate without language, as Boyer suggests. Instead, the panicked and fearful language of Esther’s brain is smothered by the white mask of her own skin. Esther herself understands the power and vulnerability in her skin. Later, she looks at her wrists, trying to gather the will to cut them, “but when it came down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn’t do it” (142). The fragility of her skin is what gives it power over Esther’s mind in this moment. After her suicide attempt, the colors of Esther’s pain creep through the white layer of her skin. When she asks to see a mirror, she stares at her face without recognition: “It wasn’t a mirror at all, but a picture...one side of the person’s face as purple...starting to green on the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person’s mouth was pale brown, with a rose-coloured sore at either corner. The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colors” (168). When Esther moves her face and realizes that this face is not a picture and is instead her own reflection, she is so shocked that she drops the mirror, shattering it on the floor. As she explains, the bright colors in this face are what make it so striking. Esther’s pain and her near-death experience have allowed the colors of her suffering to bleed through the white cover that normally hides the contents of her mind. Covered in the white sheets of the hospital bed, Esther herself becomes these deeper and darker thoughts, and physical white cloth replaces the white skin that normally hides her.<sup>1</sup> In each of these examples, Esther describes her own skin as

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<sup>1</sup> In Marilyn Boyer’s article, she describes the blank sheets of the hospital bed to be blank paper, while Esther, with her colorful face, is “not the writing on paper, but the undercurrent that runs among the pages of a text” (Boyer 218).

a thin white covering, revealing that the scenes and people around her are reflections of her own mind and body.

In Plath's work, other people, surroundings, and objects all reflect bits of her own mind and body back again. Dark and morbid thoughts and emotions are shielded from view and disguised by white clothes, blankets, curtains, and masks. These veiled scenes are deeply connected with the author. Plath's pale and vulnerable skin contains the darkness and depression that flows underneath it. Throughout her writing, these white coverings are unsuccessful in completely hiding what is underneath. Buddy Willard immediately blushes when asked about his virginity, a dead man's nose resists the continuity of a sheet laid over him, red tulips stubbornly interrupt the peace of a hospital room, and Plath confesses and confesses her pain and depression, right through her white mask of serenity. How can she not let out this pain? How can the black of the dark hole in the basement that she crawled into, the red of her blood, the bright blue spots that she saw as she thought she was dying-- how can all of these colors be held back by the "white and defenseless" skin they have been confined to? There is an inevitability of collapse and destruction in this image that Plath creates. It seems impossible that anyone could hold in such deep and dark emotions under such a delicate mask without letting some of the color show through.

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