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THE BELL JAR AND *WHIPLASH* AS FUGUE STATES:
TORTURED ARTISTS' PAIN AND THE LANGUAGE OF THEIR STORIES

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

THE BELL JAR AND *WHIPLASH* AS FUGUE STATES:

TORTURED ARTISTS' PAIN AND THE LANGUAGE OF THEIR STORIES

BY ELEANOR MEYERS

This thesis examines the trope of the tortured artist to explore how pain restructures language, memory, and identity. I argue that *fugue* provides a dual framework for understanding this trope's relevance in literature. Drawing on disability studies and trauma theory, it positions pain not simply as an experience represented in texts but as a force that disrupts linguistic coherence and reorganizes narrative form. Engaging in debates on pain's ineffability (Elaine Scarry), its epistemological productivity (Margaret Price; Alyson Patsavas), and its recursive nature (Cathy Caruth), the project develops fugue as both a psychological condition and compositional structure that models the fragmentation of a protagonist under pressure.

Fugue operates in two key ways across the thesis' primary texts, Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), and Damien Chazelle's film, *Whiplash* (2014). First, it describes the protagonists' ambition and suffering, where intense psychological and physical strain produces disruptions in memory, identity, and self-perception. Second, fugue functions as a formal principle that organizes narrative itself, as the texts' linear progressions give way to recursive, contrapuntal, and non-chronological sequencing. Moments of pain become generative breaks from which multiple versions of the self – and of the story – emerge, diverge, and reinterweave.

Ultimately, the thesis argues that language does not simply fail under the weight of pain but can be reconstituted into fugue-like structures that expand the possibilities of narrative form, revealing new ways of articulating trauma, ambition, and the instability of the self.

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Most importantly, as this thesis represents the beginning of the culmination of my time at UCLA, I want to thank my parents for all they have done for me... and then some. Thank you for always letting me embrace my love for English, and for rooting me on without fail. I am grateful to no end. My work can come to fruition as it is built upon the foundation of your own.

“To put meaning in one's life may end in madness, but life without meaning is the torture of restlessness and vague desire – it is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid.” - Edgar Lee Masters

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“Deflect” By Anne Carson

I have a friend who is red hot with pain.
He feels the lights like hard rain through his pores.
Together we went to ask Isaac.

Isaac said I will tell you the story he told me.
It was from Adam
issued the lights.

From the lights of his forehead were formed
all the names of the world.
From the lights of his ears, nose and throat
came a function no one had ever defined.

From the lights of his eyes – but wait –
Isaac waits.
In theory

the lights of the eye should have issued from
Adam’s navel.
But within the lights themselves occurred
an intake of breath

and they changed their path.
And they were separated.

And they were caught in the head.
And from these separated lights came that
which pains you
on its errands (here my friend began to weep) through the world.

To be assured it is not only you who mourn.
Isaac lashed his tail.
Every rank of the world

was caused to descend
(at least one rank)
by the terrible pressure of the light.

Nothing remained in place.
Nothing was not captured except
among the shards and roots and matter

some lights
from Adam’s eyes
nourished there somehow.

Isaac stopped his roaring.
And my friend by now drowsy as a snake
subsided behind a heap of blueblack
syllables.

Introduction

To speak about pain, one should begin with a poem.

In the Book of Genesis, Isaac – son of Abraham and father to Jacob – is referred to as the second biblical patriarch of the Old Testament and divinely promised firstborn to 90-year-old Sarah (Genesis 16, 19). A biological and spiritual miracle, the figure is best known for his place in God’s testing of Abraham, in which he is commanded to sacrifice Isaac atop Mount Moriah (Genesis 21:1-14). After a three-day journey and grueling process of building the altar, Isaac is bound in rope and immediately commits himself to the sacrificial moment of his life’s end. As Abraham prepares to kill his son, however, an angel stops him and presents a ram for offering instead.

When people refer to the biblical Story of Isaac, they often consider him “The Son of Promise” – not “of Fulfillment.” A child of oath and the heir to God’s covenant for Abraham, Isaac’s life is miraculously saved yet severely damaged by the pressures of his predestined path of inheritance. Ultimately, the contrapuntal nature of his survival – and his unflinching willingness to sacrifice his life to a greater purpose – stunts his scriptural legacy. Through this narrative, which depicts a figure lost to the pain of obedience and sacrifice, I establish the trope of the tortured artist. In this thesis, I argue the trope’s various facets allow for a new understanding of the relationship between pain and linguistic fragmentation in stories of trauma.

My introduction centers on “Deflect,” found in *Glass, Irony and God*, because it succeeds as an account of bodily experience that establishes the fallibility of language in relation to experiences of pain through the depiction of its creation. Carson uses the metaphor of “light” to explore pain’s movement and ordering in a manner which resembles a musical fugue composition – the cornerstone of this project. She stages pain as something that *comes into being*

at the same moment as language, and as something language both creates and fails to contain. A free verse poem, Carson chooses her words with precision, as each marks an intentional move towards representing pain-based language. The 12-stanza piece, part of Carson's 1995 collection of essays and poems, introduces a subject who suffers from immense pain and therefore seeks guidance from the individual, Isaac. For the bulk of the poem, we follow Isaac's description of Adam and the birth of the "lights" that the subject falls prey to.

In "Deflect," Carson's origin story of suffering depicts Adam's body emitting lights, representing a divine energy, consciousness, or some driving force of the world's innate functions. I understand "light" as synonymous with "pain" in order to discuss both its relationship with language and its connection to my thematic focal point, fugue. Carson begins the poem with standard figurative descriptions associated with painful sensations, including "red hot" (Carson l. 1) and "like hard rain through his pores" (l. 2). Language can circle pain but cannot securely grasp it. An experience or act of suffering is neither the color red nor is it a hot temperature, yet as the reader we understand – via cultural conditioning – that these combined terms refer to hurtful sensations.

Carson's figurative theme also emphasizes how the lights produced from Adam are "a function no one had ever defined" (l. 9). This unnamed purpose mirrors pain's resistance to explanation, as language can generate infinite names for the world, yet suffering remains – produced by language yet untheorizable within it. Language is defeated by pain once again when the poem is disrupted with the interjection "but wait," followed by "Isaac waits. / In theory..." (ll. 10-12) This delay exposes the way in which language breaks down at the point of pain, as the piece dramatizes hesitation and breath – and language stalls. It also marks distance, separated by stanzas, between instances of suffering and realized verbalizations of their existence.

Pain, in my thesis, is considered *world-destroying*, and it actively resists language by shattering referential speech while moving readers towards metaphors as well as myths. Likewise, Carson uses Kabbalistic imagery of divine light to emphasize that pain is not prior to language but born from the catastrophe of its origin. The act of *naming* in “Deflect” is creative and world-making but also violent, revealing how pain imposes a unique structuring on storytelling. In Carson’s poem, the traveling of pain as light is powered by a “terrible pressure,” mirroring a character’s (Isaac’s) motivation to succeed being misdirected into suffering and subsequent identity loss.

In the case of Adam, his eyes’ light *should* issue from the navel – a central, body-bound point – but instead they are diverted and “caught in the head” (l. 18). Through this misplacement, the poem links pain to cognition and narration, expanding it beyond the body. Pain in “Deflect,” like a psychological fugue state, is trapped in consciousness and discourse, as characters do not suffer just from sensation, but interpretation. This explains why the friend weeps not at the beginning of the poem, but *during*, as language does not soothe pain but activates it; to speak pain is to re-route it through thought. To present certain characters in pain is to situate their story within the tortured artist trope.

This project is also concerned with the universality of pain, which Carson acknowledges with the line, “to be assured it is not only you who mourn” (l. 21) Though pain is something everyone experiences, it cannot be understood exactly the same by any two people. The divisive nature of pain is a dichotomy deeply rooted in language’s limitations. I read the way Adam’s light cannot issue from his eyes to be a symbolic representation of how another being’s pain may be seen and empathized with, but not shared or reproduced in any way. With every “intake” of another’s pain, the essence of light is altered and personalized in an individual, but never

released from the same source through which it is received – for instance, Adam’s eyes (l. 15). In the case of the tortured artist, every influence on their ‘art’ is an impactful shaping of their personhood as well.

My more salient introductory interpretation of “Deflect” comes from looking at pain being arranged and ranked: “And they changed their path. / And they were separated... And from these separated lights came that which pains you”... “Every rank of the world / was caused to descend... by the terrible pressure of the light. / Nothing remained in place” (ll.16-19, 23-27). With these lines, I insist a musical fugue composition can work as a narrative replacement for language in instances where pain overwhelms the traditional nature of storytelling. Seeing that the “terrible pressure of the light” (l. 26) causes every rank of the world to descend, pain here is structural, not personal. As a result, “Deflect” reframes individual suffering as a consequence of linguistic and metaphysical systems rather than a person’s private failure.

I interpret the lights not only as figurative language, but also as a gateway to implementing fugue narrative structure. Even analyzing the poem’s lights in terms of their physical geometric form, it is possible to illustrate these rays as lines of a musical composition, upon which pain – through weak language – cascades and interweaves through the progression of the poem itself. Just as Carson’s “Deflect” uses figurative language to reference the existence of pain, this project attempts to use fugue terminology to analyze narratives of pain and trauma.

My favorite bit of the poem comes at the end as it finishes not with clarity but with exhaustion: “subsided behind a heap of blueblack syllables” (l. 35). These syllables are residue, like sound without sense. Pain lands as broken language, laid to rest in bruised phonemes. The phrase is rich with imagery of damage and abuse, as to emphasize how pain torments language beyond meaning. As though the words were battered and bruised, physically destroyed until

deemed pointless, “Deflect” further positions language in a manner similar to fugue compositions, in that the subject (pain) is manipulated and contrapuntally developed until a textured interweaving of themes have been played through. Finishing in an anti-hierarchical “heap,” these lights – read as pain – prove that suffering cannot survive in fully articulated discourse without being distorted or ranked chronologically, though it *can* survive in syllables, which carry affect without interpretation. Ultimately, therefore, language does not have to fail entirely, if understood within a compositional structuring beyond traditional narration. This thesis analyzes two stories exemplifying the tortured artist trope through the dualist lens of fugue. In the process, I articulate how a fugal perspective illuminates new ways of understanding language’s relationship to pain.

Literature Review

In recent decades, the fields of disability studies and trauma theory have produced a substantial body of scholarship examining how pain, trauma, and bodily experience challenge the known limits of language. Scholars across literature, philosophy of pain, and cultural theory have emphasized that suffering frequently exceeds the narrative frameworks used to describe it.

\Rather than functioning as a stable object of description, pain often destabilizes memory, identity, and narrative coherence itself. While this growing body of research provides impactful theoretical tools for understanding representations of suffering, it also reveals significant disagreements about how pain should be conceptualized and analyzed. These tensions are productive, not problematic: they reflect the complexity of experiences that resist singular models of explanation. My project situates itself within this ongoing scholarly conversation by examining how fugue – understood both as a psychological condition and a musical structure – provides a system for understanding the breakdown and reorganization of narrative in various stories of protagonistic suffering.

One of the most influential theoretical foundations for thinking about pain and language appears in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) by Elaine Scarry. Scarry argues that physical suffering actively destroys language by dismantling the structures through which experience is ordinarily communicated. In extreme pain, the sufferer's ability to transform sensation into language collapses, leaving behind broken or pre-linguistic expression. Scarry's work has been central to subsequent discussions of pain in literary studies because it reframes suffering not simply as a subject represented in narrative but as a force capable of restructuring written form altogether. However, later scholars have challenged the universality of

this claim.¹ Rather than viewing pain solely as an experience that annihilates language, many disability studies emphasize the alternative forms of communication and knowledge that emerge from embodied experience.

Work in this field has therefore complicated Scarry's model by foregrounding what can be called *the epistemological productivity of pain*. In "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," (2015) Margaret Price critiques the persistent social myth that there exists a separation between mental and physical forms of suffering. Price introduces the concept of the "bodymind" to emphasize that cognitive and bodily experiences are inseparable within lived hardship. This framework is particularly important for analyzing literary representations of psychological fragmentation, such as fugues, where mental distress cannot be neatly separated from bodily sensation. Similarly, in her 2014 article, "Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and Feeling Discourse," Alyson Patsavas proposes that pain produces forms of knowledge that circulate socially and are not confined to individual experience. She argues that understanding pain requires tracing the discursive systems that shape how suffering is expressed and interpreted. These perspectives complicate earlier models of ineffability by suggesting that pain generates new epistemologies even as it destabilizes conventional language.

Trauma theory further develops the central conversation of this thesis by examining how extreme instances disrupt memory and narrative. In her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth argues that traumatic events resist direct representation because they are not fully processed at the moment they occur. Instead, trauma returns belatedly through repetition, flashbacks, and disjointed recollection. Narrative structures

¹ Refer to "The Contemporary Making and Unmaking of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*" by Clifford van Ommen et al.

that attempt to represent trauma therefore often reproduce this recursive temporality. While Caruth's work has been foundational in linking trauma to narrative fragmentation, critics have also debated whether trauma should be understood primarily as a structure of delayed memory or as a broader cultural and discursive phenomenon. This disagreement reflects a larger methodological divide within trauma studies: whether trauma should be approached primarily as psychological experience or as a social and narrative construct. This ongoing fluidity of trauma and disabilities studies makes space for my distinct application of fugal analysis on stories of suffering.

Additional scholarship has focused specifically on the cultural mediation of pain. In her 2003 book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag examines how representations of suffering circulate within visual and narrative media. She writes that images and stories of pain not only communicate suffering but also shape how audiences interpret and respond to it. Similarly, Eula Biss's essay "The Pain Scale" (2007) explores the difficulty of translating subjective bodily experience – especially chronic pain – into shared language. Biss demonstrates that numerical scales and descriptive metaphors fail to capture the complexity of pain, therefore highlighting the gap between a person's experience and their linguistic representation. Together, these works emphasize that pain is always mediated through cultural forms that structure its intelligibility. The meaning of a person's pain heavily relies on interpretation.

The framework for this thesis also draws on narrative theory, particularly the work of Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Said's concept of "contrapuntal reading" proposes that stories often contain multiple overlapping voices and temporalities rather than a single unified perspective. His metaphor of musical counterpoint provides a directly useful model for understanding narratives structured through repetition, fragmentation, and recursive

return – fugue. By conceptualizing an account as a polyphonic structure, Said opens the possibility of analyzing literary texts through formal models derived from musical composition.²

This thesis applies the scholarship above to two primary texts: *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath and *Whiplash* (2014) directed by Damien Chazelle. Both works depict protagonists whose artistic ambition becomes inseparable from their personal experiences of psychological suffering. While one experiences a slow deterioration of mental stability, the other succumbs to the physical pain of repeated strain and manipulation. Both exemplify a fugue state.

The Bell Jar follows Esther Greenwood during a prestigious summer internship at a New York fashion magazine – an experience that initially represents professional success but gradually exposes the pressures and contradictions that have shaped her identity. Upon returning home, Esther struggles with insomnia, creative paralysis, and an inability to imagine a coherent future, leading to a suicide attempt and subsequent institutionalization. As she undergoes psychiatric treatment, including electroconvulsive therapy, her narration reflects the instability of her psychological state, repeatedly returning to earlier experiences and memories in altered forms. Esther's narration becomes increasingly fragmented as her mental state deteriorates, producing a narrative structure marked by repetition, interruption, and shifting temporal perspectives

Similarly, *Whiplash* portrays collegiate drummer Andrew Neiman's obsessive pursuit of musical excellence within an abusive mentorship structure that gradually destabilizes his identity and relationships. The film conveys Andrew's rise within an elite conservatory jazz ensemble at fictional Shaffer Conservatory under the direction of Terence Fletcher, a conductor who pushes his students through extreme psychological pressure and humiliation in pursuit of artistic perfection. As Andrew becomes increasingly consumed by his ambition to become a legendary

² Edward Said's *Out of Place: A Memoir* touches more closely upon the use of fugue as a mode of analyzing trauma.

jazz musician, he sacrifices personal relationships, isolates himself from his father and girlfriend, and endures severe physical-emotional strain, culminating in a final performance that leaves viewers unclear about whether his suffering has produced artistic transcendence or psychological collapse.

Although these works belong to different media and historical contexts, they share a common narrative concern with the cultural trope of the “tortured artist.” This trope links creative achievement to psychological suffering, often romanticizing the relationship between artistic brilliance and personal collapse or madness. My thesis argues that both texts notably employ and disrupt the standard understandings of this trope by exposing the structural and linguistic limitations through which suffering is represented. Drawing on the musical concept of fugue, I propose that these narratives organize experiences of pain through recursive and contrapuntal structures rather than linear progression. Fugue therefore operates simultaneously as a metaphor for psychological fragmentation and as a formal model for narrative organization. By examining how fugue-like structures emerge in both literary and cinematic storytelling, this project contributes to existing scholarship on pain, trauma, and disability by demonstrating how the tortured artist trope fuels the opportunity for the breakdown of language into new modes of narrative form.

Fugue

I. Psychiatric State

Experiences of psychological rupture are rarely understood as purely individual. Instead, scholars increasingly frame mental suffering as something produced and interpreted through cultural narratives, linguistic limitations, and structures of power. *The Bell Jar* participates in this critical conversation: Esther Greenwood's descent into mental illness – often described through metaphors of suffocation, dissociation, and suspended consciousness – resonates with trauma theory's insistence that overwhelming experiences disrupt conventional narratives (Caruth 181). Rather than presenting illness as a coherent sequence of symptoms, *The Bell Jar* foregrounds fugue fragmentation. In this sense, the novel aligns with trauma scholarship's claim that extreme psychological experience destabilizes traditional modes of representation (Caruth).

In “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History,” theorist Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 181). Her formulation is particularly useful for understanding the narrative structure of Esther's suffering, which rarely appears as a single definable cause but instead unfolds through delayed diary-like recognition, intrusive memories, and recurring sensations of alienation. Trauma, for Caruth, challenges “simple models of experience and reference,” opening the possibility of “a history which is no longer straightforwardly referential” (Caruth 182). The fractured narrative voice of *The Bell Jar* embodies this epistemological disruption; Esther's story cannot be told through stable chronology or clear causality because the experience itself resists such structure. Instead, Esther reflects on her experiences in an unordered manner, bouncing back and forth between memories

– many of which are seemingly unrelated, such her interspersed accounts of dating Constantin, a United Nations simultaneous interpreter, amongst stories about her internship.

Caruth further argues that trauma's historical power lies in its flexibility: "The experience of trauma... consist[s], not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known; but in an inherent latency within the experience itself... it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (187). This paradox of memory – where trauma is both forgotten and continually re-experienced – illuminates the peculiar temporality and staggered nature of Esther's narration. The novel's retrospective voice repeatedly circles moments of distress rather than resolving them, leaving readers in a state of whiplash. In doing so, the fugue-like structuring of *The Bell Jar* critically reflects Caruth's broader claim that trauma forces a reconsideration of how history and experience are narrated. Trauma language often relies on displacement and repetition because ordinary vocabulary cannot directly capture what an individual experiences. Esther takes a similarly figurative approach to her storytelling.

Furthermore, rather than treating mental illness solely as a medical condition, disability scholars emphasize how cultural systems shape the meaning of pain and impairment. Margaret Price proposes the concept of "bodymind," challenging the fatal Western dualism that treats psychological suffering as fundamentally different from bodily illness. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther herself articulates this cultural distinction when she confesses to the reader that "if only something were wrong with my body it would be fine, I would rather have anything wrong with my body than something wrong with my head" (Plath 182). Her statement reveals how mental illness is stigmatized differently from physical disability, as bodily suffering (according to Esther) can be socially acknowledged yet psychological distress is a source of shame and silence. Esther's reluctance to tell her nurse how she felt – "the idea seemed so involved and wearisome

that I didn't say anything" – demonstrates how stigma can render pain linguistically inaccessible (Plath 182).

Price's bodymind framework also illuminates the cultural logic that makes Esther wish her suffering were physically visible. The novel repeatedly dramatizes the consequences of this false separation, which begs for an alternative lens through which the story might portray suffering. As Esther later reflects when contemplating her return to ordinary life, she imagines that people will treat her "like a leper with a warning bell" (Plath 237). The language of contagion reveals how disability, or suffering, becomes socially stigmatized; the ill subject is marked not merely by pain but by the fear she invokes in those around her.

Disability scholar Alyson Patsavas expands this discussion by proposing a "cripistemology of pain," which situates experiences of suffering within systems of knowledge and power. Patsavas asks, "Who gets to feel pain? And what kinds of pain are they 'allowed' to feel?" (Patsavas 204). This question exposes how certain forms of suffering are culturally validated while others are dismissed or misconstrued. Esther's storyline illustrates this dynamic with striking clarity, in that her distress is repeatedly minimized by those around her – framed as temporary instability or something to be forgotten. At one moment in her psychological descent, Esther worries, "when people found out my mind had gone, as they would have to, sooner or later, in spite of my mother's guarded tongue, they would persuade her to put me into an asylum where I could be cured. Only my case was incurable" (Plath 159). In the novel, Esther's obsession with external validation shifts from academic approval to concern over society's definition of her health and sanity.

In relation, Patsavas argues that "a cripistemology of pain produces knowledge from experience while simultaneously claiming a specific positionality to mark the limits of the

knowledge claims produced” (Patsavas 205). Esther’s narration functions in precisely this way: the story of her illness does not claim authority over the reader but instead foregrounds the situated perspective of someone struggling to articulate her own pain. In this way, her voice enacts a cripistemology of pain, producing a personal narrative of knowledge through its fragmentation while insisting on the incompleteness of her experience in the hospital.

Patsavas also notes that experiences of pain cannot be easily translated across bodies, which is key to Esther’s self-isolation. Patsavas acknowledges, “My experience of living with pain does not match my lover’s experience... or my family’s. Rather, these experiences bleed and leak onto one another in a way that makes talking about my pain both problematic and reductive” (Patsavas 215). This resonates strongly with the narrative distance Esther feels from those around her – whether it be at her summer internship in New York or at the mental institution. Her suffering appears detrimentally personal and strangely disconnected from the social world, yet Patsavas insists that pain is not purely individual: once we recognize the relational network through which suffering circulates, “the fixed distinction between pained and non-pained bodies begins to dissolve... and reframe it as shareable and as shared” (Patsavas 215). In this sense, *The Bell Jar* can be read as an attempt to render private suffering legible to others using fugue-like qualities that acknowledge the inevitable gaps between collective affect and individual experience.

Trauma scholars likewise emphasize that individual pain intersects with broader cultural histories and contexts. Ann Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* argues that trauma is not simply a singular psychological state but a collective experience that can be addressed through social forms. From this perspective, Esther’s mental breakdown cannot be understood solely as a private crisis – not even one shared within

the confines of an inner readership. Instead, it reflects the pressures placed upon women in mid-twentieth-century American society surrounding gender roles, professional expectations, and emotional conformity. Cvetkovich further suggests that trauma often persists not as memory but as feeling, lingering in affective states that resist clear explanation (Cvetkovich 7). Esther's reflective narration frequently operates through precisely this diffuse emotional atmosphere. This affect further allows for literary analysis of the split-personality quality in Esther's fugue state narration.

This affective dimension also complicates the ethics of representing suffering. In her work, Susan Sontag asks a provocative question: "What does it mean to protest suffering as distinct from acknowledging it?" (Sontag 40). The distinction is crucial for trauma narratives, which must balance the desire to expose pain with the risk of aestheticizing or simplifying it. Esther's refusal to accept her precarious mental state as medical rather than socially-constructed demonstrates Sontag's consideration of protest versus acknowledgement. Throughout *The Bell Jar*, readers begin to wonder if Esther's narrative can be trusted, or if she truly does not have a firm grasp on the state of her well-being. Moreover, the novel often refuses straightforward protest; instead, it dwells in the unsettling space of acknowledgment, presenting suffering without providing easy moral or political resolution, even by the end. The narrative's emphasis on subjective perception – its shifting metaphors, dreamlike descriptions, and moments of dissociation – forces readers to confront the difficulty of fully comprehending another person's pain. This is an indication of an overarching need for alternative methods of discussing suffering and narrative.

One of the most striking examples of this narrative strategy appears when Esther describes her dissociation while wanting to harm herself: "If I looked in the mirror while I did it,

it would be like watching somebody else, in a book or a play” (Plath 147). The simile introduces a disturbing theatricality, suggesting that Esther experiences her own body as a distant spectacle. This moment exemplifies the kind of psychological fragmentation frequently associated with trauma and fugue states, in which the subject becomes estranged from her own actions as a mechanism of defense and protection. The language also reflects the broader representational crisis described by Caruth: Experience becomes mediated through metaphor and narrative imagery because direct perception is unbearable (Caruth). Esther’s narration is fugal on purpose.

These theoretical perspectives reveal how *The Bell Jar* participates in a broader scholarly conversation about disability, trauma, and the limits of language. The novel does not merely depict mental illness; it dramatizes the epistemological challenges involved in representing pain at all. By foregrounding dissociation, stigma, and linguistic fragmentation, Plath situates Esther’s experience within the intertwined frameworks of trauma narrative and disability studies. Understanding these frameworks provides the necessary context for examining the novel’s depiction of fugue states and the fractured language through which Esther attempts to narrate her suffering.

II. Identity

Esther’s experience in *The Bell Jar* can be analyzed using the psychiatric definition of fugue. Clinically, it is a disturbed state of consciousness characterized by dissociation, memory loss, and sometimes physical or psychological flight from one’s ordinary environment (Cleveland Clinic). Individuals may perform actions with apparent awareness yet later have little recollection of them, and they may also lose a coherent sense of identity or even adopt alternate selves as an unconscious response to overwhelming stress or trauma. The tortured artist trope therefore hinges on two central elements – identity and memory – both of which are destabilized

under the same pressures that can cause fugue states. Esther's narrative repeatedly exhibits these qualities. By oscillating between lucid reflection and estranged observation, her story is a literary representation of dissociation that parallels the psychiatric description of a fugue.

One of the earliest hints of this fractured consciousness appears in Esther's admission that she sometimes feels "as if I had a split personality or something" (Plath 21). The phrasing is tentative though it signals her awareness that her thoughts and perceptions no longer align with a stable sense of self. Rather than experiencing the world through a unified perspective, Esther describes a divided interior landscape in which multiple voices and impulses compete for authority. Such moments foreshadow the more explicit dissociative experiences that follow later in the novel, when Esther begins to perceive her own suicidal actions as though they belong to another person. Her language of split identity thus anticipates the fugue state's defining feature and touchstones of the tortured artist trope: a disruption of the relationship between consciousness, selfhood, and purpose.

This dislocation becomes especially visible in Esther's relation to memory. Trauma theorists emphasize that overwhelming experiences often distort the processes through which memory is formed and articulated. As Sontag suggests, the representation of pain involves a fraught negotiation between acknowledging experience and translating it into communicable language. Esther's narrative often reflects such disconnect, particularly when she recounts medical interventions or moments of emotional crisis. After being told Esther may undergo shock therapy, for example, her mother remarks: "'Doctor Gordon doesn't think you've improved at all...'" to which Esther reflects, "I felt a sharp stab of curiosity, as if I had just read a terrible newspaper headline about somebody else" (Plath 135). The simile transforms her own life into a detached news story, and memory registers the moment not as lived immediacy but as

mediated narrative, an externalized account – or fugal counterpoint – belonging to “somebody else.” This displacement mirrors the dissociative quality of fugue states, in which events may occur without being integrated correctly into the subject’s autobiographical memory.

Esther’s story also dramatizes the instability of memory through the breaking of her inner voice. She describes preparing to self-harm: “I told myself, ‘and then I will go somewhere and do it.’ I summoned my little chorus of voices. Doesn’t your work interest you, Esther? You know, Esther, you’ve got the perfect setup of a true neurotic. You’ll never get anywhere like that, you’ll never get anywhere like that, you’ll never get anywhere like that” (Plath 146). The repetition and multiplicity of voices evoke a consciousness divided against itself. Rather than a single coherent narrator, Esther becomes the audience to her own internal dialogue, inviting readers in but at an inherent distance. Within the framework of fugue, this moment resembles a form of dissociative, contrapuntal self-hypnosis: the mind splits into observing and acting components, allowing the individual to perform actions while remaining partially estranged from them (American Psychiatric Association).

Such scenes also reveal how memory can be reshaped or rearranged when pain overwhelms language. Biss writes in “The Pain Scale” that suffering often isolates the subject within the limits of the body: “I hate the knowledge that I am isolated in this skin – alone with my pain and my own fallibility” (Biss 12). Pain creates a profound epistemological gap between the sufferer and those who attempt to understand the suffering, which Biss describes as “the pain of feeling, the pain of caring, the pain of doubting, the pain of parting, the pain of paying,” to suggest that emotional and physical forms of pain collapse into a continuous spectrum (Biss 8). Esther’s experiences similarly resist neat classification – far from it. Her distress manifests simultaneously as intellectual pressure, emotional exhaustion, and physical sensation. The result

is a narrative voice that struggles to locate not only the root of its pain but the adequate language to label its own suffering. Biss ultimately concludes that “imagination is treacherous... I think I should only map my pain in proportion to pain I have already felt” (Biss 17). Yet Esther cannot rely on such proportional mapping; her experiences exceed the linguistic framework she previously possessed for understanding them – a quality that establishes the relevance of a tortured artist.

Esther’s narrative again performs a collapse into the fluidity of suffering when she reflects on her academic success, attempting to dismiss the seriousness of her condition by insisting, “I didn’t think I deserved it. After all, I wasn’t crippled in any way, I just studied too hard, I didn’t know when to stop” (Plath 58). The statement reveals the cultural hierarchy that privileges visible bodily injury over mental distress. Because Esther’s suffering lacks obvious physical markers, she interprets it as undeserved. Yet the novel gradually exposes this distinction as illusory: the psychological pressures she experiences manifest as bodily exhaustion, dissociation, and eventually institutionalization.

A similarly striking example of a character’s fugue-like psychological state occurs in *Whiplash*, during the film’s prolonged practice montages. In one sequence, Andrew continues playing long after his hands begin to bleed, striking the drums with increasing intensity as blood splatters across the instrument. The camera cuts between close-ups of his hands, his face, and the vibrating drumheads, creating a visual rhythm that mirrors the music’s accelerating tempo (*Whiplash* 53:00:00). Andrew eventually smashes his fist through the drum set in frustration before plunging his bleeding hands into a bucket of ice, only to resume playing moments later. This scene, using an absence of dialogue, reinforces the impression that Andrew has entered a dissociative state in which bodily awareness recedes and rhythmic repetition takes control.

Within the framework of psychiatric fugue, such moments resemble a temporary suspension of *identity*: Andrew becomes less an individual subject than a mechanical extension of the drum kit itself. Conscious intention dissolves into rhythmic compulsion, and artistic autonomy leads to ruin.

The film's most literal representation of a fugue state occurs at the latter half of the film – the car accident. While rushing to make his final pivotal performance on time, Andrew looks at his phone as his rental car is violently struck at an intersection. Disoriented and bleeding, he crawls out of the flipped car and runs toward the concert hall, clutching his injured arm and stumbling through traffic. The scene unfolds with minimal dialogue, only incorporating a backing track of high-pitched ringing, which emphasizes Andrew's disheveled disconnection from ordinary perception. He carries his battered body in haggard dragging motions, driven less by conscious decision than by his obsessive compulsion to perform. This resembles the psychiatric description of fugue as a state in which individuals continue to act with apparent awareness yet remain psychologically detached from their actions. Andrew's physical flight from the wreckage toward the auditorium mirrors the classic fugue motif of wandering or escape. The accident itself can be understood as the culmination of the escalating pain that had structured the film thus far, finally pushing Andrew fully into a state where identity collapses into a single obsessive objective – playing the drums.

The fugue framework of analysis also illuminates the relationship between identity and environment. Psychiatric descriptions often note that fugue episodes involve sudden departures from familiar surroundings or introductions to new contexts that intensify psychological strain (Cleveland Clinic). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's narrative is structured around precisely such transitions: the move from college to New York, the competitive atmosphere of her magazine

internship, the pressures of academic ambition, the return to suburbia, and later the alienating environment of psychiatric treatment. Each new setting introduces additional expectations and social roles that Esther struggles to inhabit. In this sense, identity becomes contingent upon external pressures rather than stable internal coherence. A body is not distinct from its brain nor its environment, and neither is suffering. As scholar Cynthia Wu observes academic labor, she writes, “identities matter because they are produced by and respond to historical and structural forces that have consequences” (Wu 43). Esther’s sense of self is therefore inseparable from the cultural conditions shaping her life as a tortured artist: gender expectations, professional ambition, and the mid-century ideal of intellectual achievement.

Wu further argues that “writing is an act borne on the body” and that the products of intellectual labor inevitably “bear the traces of our embodiment” (Wu 41). This insight resonates with the recurring trope that underlies Esther’s experience. As the cultural myth of the suffering genius often portrays creative ambition as inseparable from psychological distress, Esther internalizes this narrative, interpreting her academic intensity as both a source of *identity* and a potential symptom of instability. The pressures of intellectual success thus contribute to the dissociative spiral that culminates in her breakdown and subsequent cascading of split-personality counterpoints. Narration, as Wu suggests, can be both a source of pleasure and a source of pain – “then again, everything is” (Wu 48). For Esther, the pursuit of excellence becomes indistinguishable from the process of self-destruction, as each experience of pain breaks down the language needed to differentiate ambition from desperation.

This dynamic is further intensified by the societal stigma surrounding psychiatric disability. Price reminds us that to talk about disability without acknowledging pain risks erasing important lived experiences. Esther’s fear of institutionalization reflects precisely this erasure.

She imagines the consequences of her illness with mounting dread: “I would simply have to ambush it with whatever sense I had left, or it would trap me in its stupid cage for fifty years without any sense at all... when people found out my mind had gone... they would persuade her to put me into an asylum where I could be cured. Only my case was incurable” (Plath 159). The passage dramatizes the internalization of medical authority. Esther’s identity becomes diminished to flawed diagnostic language rather than personal agency.

Through fugue-like experiences, *The Bell Jar* and *Whiplash* reveal the limitations of existing language for describing pain and psychological fracture. Notably, Esther’s memory becomes fragmented, her identity becomes unstable, and the novel’s storyline splinters into contrapuntal, competing perspectives. By analyzing the protagonists’ experiences through fugue – especially its emphasis on dissociation, memory loss, and identity disruption – we can better understand how Plath’s novel and Chazelle’s film participate in a broader cultural obsession with the suffering genius. At the same time, the texts expose the costs of that fascination. The tortured artist trope does not simply romanticize suffering; it also reveals the ongoing inadequacy of language used to describe trauma, ambition, and the fragile relationship between creativity and mental health.

Pain

I. Language

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath constructs her protagonist's suffering as an experience that progressively destabilizes the referential capacity of language, forcing narration to operate through displacement rather than direct articulation. Esther's pain resists linguistic containment from the outset, appearing not as an internal certainty but as a self-protective, unaccountable imagined sensation. On the novel's first page, Esther projects this experience onto Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, American communists convicted of conspiring to share U.S. military intelligence to the Soviet Union during the Cold War and eventually executed by electric chair in 1953:³ "It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves" (Plath 1). Beyond the irony of the reference to her electrotherapy itself, this sentence establishes language's frailty long before pain enters Esther's own body in the novel. The subjunctive phrase, "it had nothing to do with me" functions as a defensive linguistic boundary, an attempt to preserve the coherence of Esther's subjectivity by positioning the pain of others – though similar to her eventual own – outside herself. Yet this boundary immediately collapses through the involuntary intrusive thought, "I couldn't help wondering," making the inability to avoid curiosity an indication that pain exerts pressure on consciousness prior to its actual embodiment. Suffering and torture is immediately established as an individualistically-isolated experience that can also be felt or considered in a collectively subjective manner, as Esther contemplates the Rosenbergs' death as a distanced yet personally relevant memory. Pain exists first as linguistic speculation, but this conjecture destabilizes the distinction between self and other, and warns of future pain to come.

³ FBI. "Atom Spy Case/Rosenbergs | Federal Bureau of Investigation." *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, 2016.

This beginning instance in the novel exemplifies what Scarry identifies as pain's capacity to destroy the stability of language by undermining the subject's ability to anchor experience in communicable terms – especially when it is their own suffering, remembered or experienced. Pain, Scarry argues, resists objectification because it lacks external referents. Esther's description of pain – “burned alive all along your nerves” – relies on metaphor to approximate sensation. The metaphor exposes language's inadequacy – and the infallibility of narration – by revealing its dependence on already-known sensations, which vary from person to person.

Esther's compulsive observation of others' suffering further demonstrates pain's destabilizing effects on linguistic and cognitive coherence. While out getting drinks with her internship friends, she reflects, “I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations ... even when they surprised me or made me sick I never let on, but pretended that's the way I knew things were all the time” (Plath 13). Her insistence that she “never let on” reveals the gap between internal sensation and external expression. Pain produces an internal disturbance that cannot be translated into socially legible language, and instead of articulating her reaction, Esther suppresses it, performing linguistic competence while internally experiencing fragmentation and detachment.

Sontag also observes in her work that exposure to suffering often produces a paradoxical combination of fascination and distance: “To represent war in words or in pictures requires a keen, unflinching detachment. When Leonardo da Vinci gives instructions for a battle painting, he insists that artists have the courage and the imagination to show war in all its ghastliness” (Sontag 74). Within the trope, the tortured artist is known to understand both the personal dangers and idealized prospects of their creative path, and pursue it anyway. Esther's act of staring “so hard [she] never forgot it” demonstrates pain's capacity to inscribe itself into memory

without purposeful linguistic mediation. Recollection here does not operate through narrative sequencing but through visual fixation, like Sontag's analysis of pictures, and this is further amplified by the fact that Esther is offering this detail via a recollection of past experience. Pain overpowers language entirely, periodically embedding itself in Esther's consciousness as image rather than description. This bypassing reflects Scarry's assertion that pain dismantles language, reducing the subject to pre-linguistic modes of perception: "Physical pain... [brings] about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (Scarry 4).

Lingual deconstruction becomes more explicit when Esther is sick with food poisoning, at which point the coherence of her narration collapses into sensory fragments: "After each wave it would fade away and leave me limp as a wet leaf ... then I would feel it rising up in me again" (Plath 44). The simile of the leaf presents an attempt to stabilize pain through comparison with a passive natural object, though it more so emphasizes Esther's loss of agency. The leaf possesses no internal structure or resistance; it is entirely subject to external forces. Esther's body becomes similarly passive, stripped of volition. With every new instance of suffering in *The Bell Jar*, Esther's existence is fragmented and reconfigured towards a slightly altered version of her identity.

Furthermore, the phrase "it would fade away...then I would feel it rising up in me again" demonstrates pain's cyclical temporality. Pain cannot be narratively contained because it does not obey linear progression; Instead, it emerges, recedes, and returns without warning, especially in the case of trauma. This recurrence prevents Esther from both constructing a coherent narrative framework and recalling memories in full. Narrative regularly depends on sequence –

the ability to position events in chronological relation to one another. Pain disrupts this process by inserting itself unpredictably into Esther's consciousness.

In addition to sequential destruction, pain also affects cognitive digestion of knowledge. For example, Esther's description of her uninvited shock treatment – "Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled" – represents a regression from semantic language into pure sound (Plath 143). The onomatopoeia contains no semantic content; it communicates sensation without meaning. Language dissolves into noise, reflecting the nervous system's raw electrical disruption. Esther's attempt to narrate pain produces not an explanation but acoustic residue – a fugal phenomenon seen in *Whiplash* as well.

Though rendered in words, these instances of visual and auditory sensations replace language. This regression into sound corresponds directly to Scarry's argument that pain forces language toward its pre-linguistic origins. The shriek resembles the involuntary vocalizations of a body under extreme stress, which is not chosen but produced automatically. Esther does not describe pain; she reproduces its sonic impact, bypassing linguistic mediation entirely.

During a mid-novel appointment with her doctor, Esther is forced to explain her mental state, causing her to wonder, "What did I think was wrong? That made it sound as if nothing was really wrong, I only thought it was wrong" (Plath 130). The verb "think" becomes an obstacle rather than a tool: to say she thinks something is wrong implies uncertainty, speculation rather than reality. Yet Esther's suffering is not speculative – it is physically and psychologically real. By using the existing language to describe her experience, she undermines her pain by framing it as cognitive rather than somatic. Esther's limited faculties for understanding her own suffering categorizes her character as a tortured artist.

This linguistic inadequacy reflects the argument of Biss, who writes, “I hate the knowledge that I am isolated in this skin – alone with my pain and my own fallibility” (Biss 12). For Biss, the fear of only understanding one’s own suffering stems from the idea that pain cannot be externally verified; it exists only within the sufferer. Esther’s inability to linguistically validate her suffering – throughout the novel and especially during her institutionalization – produces a form of ontological instability. If language cannot confirm pain’s reality, pain becomes epistemologically uncertain, even to the sufferer herself. Thus, the fugue state ensues.

This unreliability intensifies during Esther’s moments of suicidal ideation, at which point she discovers that the source of suffering cannot be physically located: “It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse...but somewhere else, deeper, more secret” (Plath 147). Her wording of “somewhere else, deeper, more secret” reveals pain’s resistance to anatomical localization. Language depends on spatial specificity as it names objects, locations, and causes. Pain shatters this by existing everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, and Esther’s inability to source her pain physically prevents her from naming it linguistically. Pain becomes an absence within language, a gap that cannot be filled by orthodox description. Due to this, Esther’s story in *The Bell Jar* must be told using alternative structures, ones that allow a character (or reader) to better map the rhythms of pain without fear of misinterpretation.

Moreover, Scarry argues that pain actively separates the sufferer from the world by collapsing the distinction between self and sensation. Esther’s description of her body as a “stupid cage” reveals this breakdown (Plath 159). The body becomes both the prison and prisoner, containing and generating the moment and existence of suffering. Language cannot reconcile this contradiction because it depends on stable subject-object relationships, so pain

destroys such relationships by merging subject and sensation into a single indistinguishable experience.

Ultimately, Esther's descriptions of suffering exemplify Scarry's argument regarding language's fundamental limitations. Pain resists linguistic capture because it exists prior to and beyond semantic structure, and Esther's reliance on metaphor, repetition, and sound reflects her inability to directly articulate suffering. Language does not represent pain; it circles around it, producing approximations that reveal its own inadequacy. Pain dismantles Esther's linguistic identity, forcing the narration of her tortured self into fragmentation. Words no longer stabilize experience but expose its instability. In this way, Esther's suffering reveals the limits of narrative itself, demonstrating that pain exists at the threshold where language fails and consciousness confronts its own inarticulable reality.

Following this collapse of language in *The Bell Jar*, a similar narrative problem emerges in the film, *Whiplash*. While Plath's novel responds to the inadequacy of language through metaphor and sonic fragmentation, Damien Chazelle's film turns to music itself as an alternative narrative medium. Importantly, the protagonist Andrew Neiman's experience of artistic ambition and bodily pain unfolds most intensely during scenes where dialogue disappears altogether, replaced by extended drumming performances. In these moments, the film abandons conventional storytelling structures in favor of musical progression. The absence of speech suggests that Andrew's suffering cannot be adequately articulated through language; instead, it must be expressed through rhythm, repetition, and acceleration. If *The Bell Jar* demonstrates how pain dismantles linguistic narration, *Whiplash* explores what happens after that collapse: narrative is capable of recognizing itself through musical form. Throughout the 1 hour and 46 minutes of *Whiplash*, Andrew's most physically painful experiences consistently occur when

language disappears. During the film's extended rehearsal and practice sequences at Shafer Conservatory, Andrew rarely speaks; instead, the camera lingers on images of strain, exhaustion, and bodily deterioration. His hands blister, bleed, and eventually split open as he continues to play (*Whiplash* 31:00:00).⁴ The absence of dialogue during these scenes is not incidental – it signals that Andrew's pain and desperation for success cannot be translated into verbal explanation. Akin to Esther's regression into sound in *The Bell Jar*, Andrew's suffering forces narrative away from linguistic articulation and toward sensory expression. The film repeatedly substitutes musical performance for speech, allowing rhythmic exertion to communicate the emotional intensity. As Andrew practices alone late at night, the soundtrack consists only of the drums themselves – rapid, relentless patterns that grow increasingly unstable as his physical condition deteriorates. Language becomes irrelevant within these moments, and what remains is a direct acoustic manifestation of pain, endurance, and obsession. Already, *Whiplash* introduces an alternative form used to portray the tortured artist.

Andrew's suffering is intensified through his relationship with his mentor, Terence Fletcher, whose verbal abuse and physical aggression function as a second narrative voice within the film's fugue-like structure. Fletcher's language always oscillates between instruction and humiliation, transforming musical rehearsal into psychological warfare. During Andrew's first rehearsal with the studio band, Fletcher abruptly throws a chair at Andrew's head and slaps him repeatedly while screaming "1-2-3-4," forcing Andrew to maintain tempo under extreme pressure. The violence of this moment introduces pain as a structuring element of Andrew's artistic development and narrative digestion. Fletcher's counting establishes rhythm while simultaneously inflicting trauma, merging musical discipline with bodily punishment (*Whiplash* 27:00:00). In this sense, Fletcher's voice operates as a form of counterpoint within the film's

⁴ Read the screenplay [here](#).

narrative fugue. While Andrew's perspective is increasingly expressed through non-verbal drumming sequences, Fletcher's language intrudes rhythmically, shaping Andrew's perception of action-reaction success and failure. The moral ambiguity of Fletcher's character becomes inseparable from Andrew's pain: viewers interpret Fletcher primarily through Andrew's suffering. Pain therefore mediates the audience's understanding of language itself – language that allows the audience to determine whether Fletcher's commands appear as mentorship or abuse.

In this sense, *Whiplash* and *The Bell Jar* confront the same representational problem from different formal directions. Both texts depict protagonists whose suffering destabilizes linguistic narration. Where Plath turns to metaphor, repetition, and sonic fragmentation, Chazelle turns to musical performance, allowing the structure of a musical composition to narrate psychological fugue.

II. Memory

In her novel, Plath presents pain as a force that reorganizes memory and, in doing so, alters the function of language itself. Pain does not merely produce suffering in the present; it determines what can be remembered, how it can be remembered, and how – or whether – it can be articulated. As explained earlier, memory can be structured around pain, privileging moments of distress while erasing neutral or pleasurable experience. Esther explicitly acknowledges this selective preservation while reflecting on a play she had once talked about with her friends at the beach: “The only reason I remembered this play was because it had a mad person in it, and everything I had ever read about mad people stuck in my mind, while everything else flew out” (Plath 155). Pain acts here as a mnemonic filter: Experience is not stored evenly but hierarchically, with suffering exerting greater force on memory than ordinary details. Language, which depends on memory as its archive and baseline of existence, is consequently shaped by

pain's distortions, which Cvetkovich establishes in her work. She considers "trauma as connected to the textures of everyday experiences," and likewise, Esther's narrative voice is built from what textures of pain permit her to remember (Cvetkovich 3).

This restructuring of memory corresponds to Sontag's saddening claim that "all memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person" (Sontag 86). Pain intensifies a being's individuality by isolating memory within their body. Esther's memories cannot be externally verified or shared with the same intensity as the original experience, which is in part what allows her to narrate in whichever form she prefers (and readers can then interpret in whichever way they choose as well). Her memories exist as internal residues rather than communicable events, and this separation destabilizes language since it depends on shared reference points. Her story therefore is analytically malleable. Esther can describe her memories, but she cannot transmit their full sensory and emotional weight.

Experiences of pain also transform memory into a visual, as Esther recalls her mother's visit to the mental hospital in the form of an image: "My mother's face floated to mind, a pale, reproachful moon" (Plath 237). This memory appears as a static visual metaphor. Sontag observes that modern memory increasingly operates through imagery rather than narrative continuity: "To remember is ... to be able to call up a picture" (Sontag 89). Esther's use of metaphor – her mother's face as a moon – reveals language attempting to stabilize an image that resists literal description due to the trauma tied to its context. The imagery substitutes for direct articulation, demonstrating that pain converts memory into symbolic fragments rather than coherent sequences. In this way, trauma language would benefit from incorporating systems that better embrace the visual and temporal nature of memory and suffering.

Pain further produces a paradoxical relationship between memory and forgetting when Esther reflects on her experiences, saying, “maybe forgetfulness, like a kind of snow, should numb and cover them. But they were part of me. They were my landscape” (Plath 237). The simile of snow suggests both concealment and preservation, since it covers objects but still preserves them beneath its surface. Painful memories function similarly: Esther desires their erasure, but they remain embedded within her identity. The phrase “they were my landscape” indicates that pain has permanently reorganized her internal geography. Memory is no longer something Esther possesses; it is something she inhabits. This influences her narration. Language reflects this transformation by shifting from the possessive of “my memories” to the constitutive, “my landscape.” Pain not only produces memories but becomes the medium through which Esther experiences herself, and in this way, her narrative can be built upon a fugal language that amplifies trauma and discards chronology.

Her internalization of pain aligns with Biss’ observation that the body cannot remember the absence of pain in the same way it remembers pain itself. Biss writes, “I cannot ask my body to remember not feeling pain it does feel” (Biss 18). Pain establishes a permanent reference point against which all future sensations are measured. Esther’s anticipation that her community will lose interest in her demonstrates pain’s asymmetrical temporal structure: “My mother and brother and friends visit me, day after day, hoping I would be better. Then their visits would slacken off, and they would give up hope. They would grow old. They would forget me” (Plath 160). Esther cannot forget her suffering, but she fears being forgotten by others. In this way, *The Bell Jar* is in direct discussion with Sontag, who argues that the loss of memory becomes “...the death of reason, the death of the intellectual, the death of serious literature” (Sontag 110). Pain produces memory internally while threatening external erasure, which Esther fears due to her personal

obsession with reputation and legacy. The asymmetrical nature of Esther's story, in that her memory of it will not be identical to anyone else's, intensifies her isolation, as her most vivid memories are inaccessible and misunderstood to those around her. This condition is the motivation for expanding the horizons of trauma studies and the language of disability.

Pain in *The Bell Jar* also alters memory's temporal orientation, collapsing distinctions between past, present, and future. Esther imagines her family abandoning her long before any abandonment occurs. This imagined future becomes as emotionally true as past experience – a contrapuntal reality that fuels the very autobiographical nature of the book. With this in mind, we read how Biss observes that intense pain produces fear not of the present sensation but of its imagined duration: “When I cry from it, I cry over the idea of it lasting forever, not over the pain itself” (Biss 19). Pain shifts memory into anticipation. Esther remembers pain that has not yet occurred – applying the experience of electrotherapy sessions to the possibility of future ones – demonstrating that memory under the influence of suffering extends beyond chronological boundaries. *The Bell Jar* is unordered to accentuate the tortured artist trope's labile nature.

In the novel suffering also produces a sort of mnemonic fixation, in which certain memories become inescapable linguistic anchors. As she finishes the novel, Esther narrates, “I remembered everything” (Plath 237). This declaration appears paradoxical, but its purpose is to reflect pain's subjective totality. Suffering makes certain memories feel absolute, dominating consciousness so completely that they eclipse all other experiences. Language exaggerates in response to this domination, producing totalizing statements that reflect psychosis over clarity. At the same time, pain produces gaps in memory that correspond to gaps in language. For instance, Esther explains she had hoped to describe her suffering to a nurse but found the idea “so involved and wearisome that I didn't say anything” (Plath 182). Pain makes articulation

cognitively exhausting, and the effort required to translate suffering into language exceeds Esther's available psychological resources. Esther suffers from the ineffectiveness of her pain, and silence therefore becomes the only possible linguistic response. This silence represents not the absence of memory but its excess. Being simultaneously an individual and collectively subjective experience, pain produces more memory than language can contain.

As expressed throughout Esther's suffering in the novel, pain transforms memory from a narrative archive into a linguistic problem. Memory no longer provides stable material for storytelling but instead produces fragments, images, and metaphors that inhibit coherent articulation. Language becomes reactive rather than representational, responding to pain's mnemonic distortions rather than controlling them. Esther's narrative demonstrates that pain does not merely inhabit memory; it reorganizes memory's structure and, in doing so, exposes the limits of language's ability to stabilize subjective experience.

Fugue

I. Musical Composition

A fugue, in its most precise musical definition, is a composition structured around the systematic repetition, transformation, and interweaving of a central melodic idea – the “subject” – which is introduced by one voice and then successively taken up, echoed, modified, and contrapuntally developed by others. Unlike homophonic musical forms, which organize sound around a single dominant melodic line supported by subordinate harmonies, the fugue is polyphonically textured: each voice retains its own structural integrity while participating in a larger, emergent coherence; No one account is more important than the other. The fugue thus does not progress through linear replacement, but through accumulation and recursive variation. Its governing logic is contrapuntal simultaneity rather than chronological succession, in which multiple parts coexist, overlap, and interfere with one another.

This musical innovation reaches its most sophisticated form in the work of German composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), whose fugues transform music from a sequential unfolding into a dynamic field of interdependent returns (Britannica). In Bach’s fugues, the subject is first introduced in isolation. A second voice then enters, presenting the same subject transposed into a different key, known as the “answer.” Crucially, the original voice does not cease when the answer appears; instead, it continues alongside it, producing counterpoint – a condition in which independent melodic lines coexist without collapsing into singularity. The fugue’s complete phase, called the “exposition,” establishes the subject’s structural authority through repetition across all present voices (Understanding Music). Yet this authority is immediately destabilized through development, as the subject is fragmented, inverted, displaced,

or interrupted in subsequent “episodes.” The fugue therefore does not simply state an idea; it offers that idea to transformation, producing a structure defined by recursive instability.

Edward Said’s engagement with fugue and counterpoint in *Culture and Imperialism* constitutes one of the most profound theoretical bridges between musical structure and narrative form in twentieth-century literary criticism. For Said, fugue is not merely an aesthetic device but an epistemological model – a way of understanding how global narratives, identities, and histories exist not as singular, linear developments but as interwoven, recursive, and structurally relational formations. In his novel, the scholar utilizes Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi’s famous opera, *Aida*, which maintains respect amongst musical critics and musicologists as well as intersectionality theorists (Said 112). He writes, “A full contrapuntal appreciation of *Aida* reveals a structure of reference and attitude, a web of affiliations, connections, decisions, and collaborations, which can be read as leaving a set of ghostly notations in the opera’s visual and musical text” (Said 152). The narrative structure of a text – its “web of affiliations” – successfully reveals the inner workings of a tortured artist’s story if analyzed through fugue.

Drawing explicitly on the musical logic of contrapuntal composition, Said develops what he calls “contrapuntal reading,” a critical method grounded in the recognition that narrative meaning emerges through the coexistence of multiple voices that do not collapse into unity but instead retain their structural independence while participating in a larger, relational whole. As he explains, “in an important sense, we are dealing with the formation of cultural identities understood not as essentializations ... but as contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives” (Said 79). This formulation explicitly reframes identity itself as fugue-like: not a singular melodic line but a

polyphonic structure composed of simultaneous, interacting, and often conflicting thematic elements.

II. Narrative Structure

A theoretical framework emerges directly from Said's understanding of musical counterpoint, which he describes as the coexistence of independent melodic lines whose interaction produces meaning through simultaneity rather than succession. Counterpoint, being defined as the "simultaneity of voices" in which a melodic idea is "always in the process of being repeated by one or another voice," producing a horizontal, relational form of structure rather than a vertically hierarchical or chronological one (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). In fugue specifically, this repetition and transformation of the subject across multiple voices creates a structure in which meaning emerges not from linear progression but from recursive variation and fracturing. Said adopts this musical logic as a model for narrative and rhetorical analysis, arguing that accounts must be understood not as self-contained chronological sequences but as contrapuntal formations shaped by overlapping temporalities, interpretive frames, and historical forces.

Based on this notion, Said explicitly rejects ordered narration as the organizing principle of narrative meaning. He writes, "although I proceed along generally chronological lines... I am not in fact trying to provide a consecutive sequence of events... Each individual work is seen in terms of both its own past and of later interpretations" (Said 138). This statement fundamentally redefines narrative temporality. Reception of historical and canonical literature, in Said's formulation, does not move forward in a linear chain of causality but exists within a recursive field in which past and present continually reshape one another. This structure – applicable to a novel's narration – precisely mirrors the musical fugue, in which the subject introduced at the

beginning is not left behind but continually reappears, transformed by its interaction with subsequent entries.

The fugue therefore provides both a metaphor and a structural model for narrative itself, as it operates through the persistence of prior entries within later developments. Even when the subject is not explicitly present, its structural influence remains. Earlier voices continue to resonate within later ones, shaping the meaning of subsequent developments. Narrative, in Said's formulation, operates in precisely this way. The past does not disappear but persists structurally, shaping present perception even when not explicitly acknowledged.

This fugue-like understanding of narrative also allows Said to articulate the relationship between narrative and power. He argues that counterpoint "reaffirm[s] the historical experience... as a matter first of interdependent histories, overlapping domains" (Said 287). This overlapping of domains corresponds directly to the fugue's structural logic, in which independent melodic lines coexist without resolution into singularity. The meaning of a story emerges not from the dominance of a single interpretive voice but from the relational interaction between multiple voices. Fugue thus works as a model for understanding narrative not as the expression of unified subjectivity but as the structural interaction of competing experiential existence.

Said's work provides a crucial foundation for interpreting the narrative structure of Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Esther's story does not unfold as a chronological sequence of events but as a fugal composition in which experiential subjects recur, overlap, and transform across the novel. Moreover, her psychological state does not progress linearly from stability to breakdown; instead, moments of fragmentation appear early, recur later in altered forms, and continue to resonate structurally even when not explicitly foregrounded.

This fugal structure becomes immediately apparent in Esther's description of her own psychic condition that a person can exhibit or experience: "I felt dull and flat and full of shattered visions" (Plath 60). The phrase "shattered visions" introduces fragmentation not merely as emotional state built on memories or hallucinations, but as structural condition. Vision – the faculty through which narrative coherence is normally secured – is itself broken. This fragmentation functions as a subject: a foundational thematic element that will recur throughout the narrative in different forms. Like a fugal subject, Esther's fragmentation is introduced early but continues to reappear, transformed by its interaction with subsequent experiences. This recursive structure becomes even more explicit in Esther's description of time itself, when she spends the latter half of her summer at home in a Bostonian suburb:

"I saw the days of the year stretching ahead like a series of bright, white boxes... Only for me... I could see day after day after day glaring ahead of me like a white, broad, infinitely desolate avenue." (Plath 128)

This passage reveals a subthematic collapse of chronology into repetition. The days do not flow into one another but appear as discrete, isolated units, stripped of narrative continuity. This perception corresponds precisely to the structure of fugue, in which temporal progression is replaced by thematic recurrence. Each "box" functions like a restatement of the subject: structurally identical yet experientially transformed. With this, fugues can be found within the novel specifically as well as implemented as an overall method for analyzing Esther's tortured story.

Said's concept of "ghostly notations" provides a particularly powerful framework for understanding Esther's narrative structure. The protagonist's experiences do not disappear as the narrative progresses; they persist structurally, shaping her perception even when not explicitly

present. Even unordered, every part of her story is told in this manner because they are influenced or connected to a part that occurred before it. Earlier fragmentation continues to resonate within later ones, producing a narration defined by recursive return rather than chronological development. Her consciousness operates contrapuntally, with past and present coexisting simultaneously.

Said's theory therefore allows us to understand Esther's narration not as a failure of coherence but as the emergence of a different – and equally important – structural logic. Her narrative does not collapse but reorganizes itself according to fugue principles, and we must read it as such. The experiential “subjects” of her storyline recur in altered forms, interacting contrapuntally with one another. Her suffering becomes structurally legible, not through chronological explanation but through reiteration.

This structural transformation ultimately reveals something fundamentally new about narrative itself: A coherent story does not require chronological continuity because fugue demonstrates clarity can emerge through recurrence, variation, and relational interaction. Esther's narrative, similarly, achieves structural integrity not by eliminating separation but by incorporating into its compositional logic and portrayal of suffering.

This musical form also provides a significant model for understanding Esther's many moving subjects – institutional pressure, bodily alienation, maternal authority, artistic aspiration, and psychic disintegration – as they emerge, recede, and return in altered forms. Her narrative consciousness moves associatively rather than sequentially, introducing experiential fragments that are not resolved but instead echoed later in transformed configurations. At any given moment in the novel, Esther is worried about different realms of her life, and this exemplifies the novel's participation in the trope's key traits.

This structural transformation is inseparable from the experience of pain itself. As Scarry argues suffering does not merely resist expression – it dismantles the cognitive structures that make expression possible. The sufferer does not lack words, but rather, pain dissolves the relationship between words and world. Esther’s narrative fragmentation therefore reflects not stylistic experimentation but structural necessity. When language loses its capacity to represent experience, narrative must seek alternative organizational principles.

The fugue provides precisely such an alternative. Unlike linguistic narration, which depends upon sequential referential continuity, fugue operates through structural revisiting of subjects in new forms. As stated before through Cvetkovich’s discussion of contextual influence, meaning emerges from relational positioning. A subject acquires meaning through its repetition in altered spaces and times, and Esther’s narrative follows this logic. Her sense of uncontrollable descent, for instance, appears not once but repeatedly, in shifting experiential registers. Reflecting on a ski trip with her lover of the time, Buddy Willard, Esther describes her helplessness: “Edging to the rim of the hilltop, I dug the spikes of my poles into the snow and pushed myself into a flight I knew I couldn’t stop by skill or any belated access of will” (Plath 97). This moment functions simultaneously as literal event and structural metaphor. The sensation of reckless movement and acceleration becomes a recurring experiential subject that reappears in various later moments.

For example, when Esther refuses to cooperate with a nurse at the mental hospital and kicks a tray of thermometers off her hospital bed, the thermometers break and Esther grabs a ball of mercury from the broken pile. She considers it: “I opened my fingers a crack, like a child with a secret, and smiled at the silver globe cupped in my palm. If I dropped it, it would break into a million different little replicas of itself, and if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse,

without a crack, into one whole again” (Plath 183). In the novel, Esther regularly looks for objects or sensations of violence apart from her body that she can project control over.

This repetitive experiential structuring corresponds closely to Biss’s description of pain as fracturing the unity of subjective experience. “Although the distance between one and two is finite, it contains infinite fractions,” she writes. “This could also be said of the distance between my mind and my body. My one and my two. My whole and its parts” (Biss 9). Such formulation captures the paradoxical simultaneity of unity and fragmentation that characterizes fugue structure. The subject remains structurally singular yet experientially multiple. Esther’s narrative voice likewise remains grammatically consistent while structurally fragmented. Her identity is not replaced but reconfigured, exemplifying her descent into mental instability.

This fragmentation also produces counterpoint between competing experiences. Esther’s interactions with her mother provide a particularly clear example of narrative counterpoint. Her mother continues to interpret Esther’s story within the framework of normative recovery, insisting upon coherence where none exists. She waits for Esther to “return” to her previous self. Esther, meanwhile, internally recognizes the persistence of fragmentation. These two interpretive frameworks coexist without resolution, producing a condition of structural counterpoint. Esther occupies two mutually incompatible narrative realities simultaneously: one defined by institutional expectations of recovery, and one defined by the ongoing internal experience of disintegration. Such coexistence exemplifies Said’s concept of contrapuntal identity, in which opposing interpretive structures remain simultaneously present, and equally relevant.

A comparable form of counterpoint appears in Andrew’s relationship with his girlfriend, Nicole, in *Whiplash*. Unlike his mentor, Fletcher, Nicole represents a differing interpretive framework through which Andrew’s life could be organized – one grounded not in achievement

but in ordinary relational stability. Andrew ultimately rejects this possibility, however, preemptively ending their relationship with the explanation: “Because I want to be great” (*Whiplash* 00:51:00). His reasoning mirrors the contrapuntal tension present in Esther’s interactions with her mother. Just as Esther recognizes that her mother’s advice emerges from genuine concern yet experiences it as incompatible with her internal reality, Andrew acknowledges the value of his relationship with Nicole while determining that it cannot coexist with the obsessive, tunnel-vision demands of artistic ambition. The breakup therefore represents not simply a personal sacrifice but a structural narrowing of Andrew’s narrative world. Competing experiential frameworks – intimacy and excellence, relational life and artistic devotion – cannot coexist within the same narrative field, and Andrew resolves this counterpoint by eliminating the voice that threatens to interrupt his singular pursuit of greatness.

Furthermore, the fugue-like structure of Esther’s narration reveals fundamentally new details about the tortured artist trope. Traditionally, the trope frames artistic suffering as the manifestation of innate psychological fragility. Yet Esther’s suffering emerges not from instability but from structural contradiction. She is subjected to institutional systems that demand continuous productivity while offering no structural protection against psychic collapse. Her narrative fragmentation reflects not personal weakness but structural overload. A fugue structure thus exposes her suffering as relational rather than intrinsic. Esther’s fractured narrative voice reflects the structural contradictions of the institutional systems she inhabits, and the overarching limits of current pain language. Her suffering does not progress toward resolution – as there is no clear indication she fully recovers in the novel – but instead it circulates through recurring experiential subjects of ambitious downfall.

The conceptual relationship between fugue and psychic fragmentation is equally legible in *Whiplash*, though it manifests through a different narrative medium. Whereas Esther's fugue-like consciousness emerges through linguistic fragmentation and recursive narration, Andrew's experience unfolds through musical performance and institutional discipline. Andrew does not initially appear psychologically unstable; his transformation occurs gradually after his introduction to Fletcher's elite studio band, a new environment defined by extreme pressure and relentless evaluation. This transition functions as the narrative "entry" of a new subject, comparable to the introduction of a fugue theme. Fletcher's rehearsal space becomes a structural field of repetition and escalation in which Andrew's ambition is repeatedly tested, challenged, and intensified. His earlier aspiration toward musical success begins to narrow into a singular obsession, producing a progressive contraction of identity around performance itself.

Andrew's own declaration to Fletcher early in the film that he "doesn't want perspective" foreshadows this narrowing of consciousness (*Whiplash* 00:06:00). He immediately discards balance for success and reward. Perspective, in ordinary terms, implies distance and contextual awareness – the ability to situate one's experience within a broader framework of relationships, values, and temporal continuity. Andrew explicitly rejects such distance. In his mind, ambition demands complete immersion in the present moment of performance, which is a condition that increasingly resembles the dissociative narrowing characteristic of psychological fugue. As Fletcher's demands intensify, his student's world contracts around a single metric of value: musical excellence. Friendships, romantic relationships, and even physical wellbeing gradually lose significance in comparison to this singular goal. The resulting psychological state is not simply ambition but fixation – a recursive return to the same experiential subject, repeated across rehearsal, performance, and solitary practice.

This contraction of consciousness becomes particularly visible in the film's rehearsal scenes, where Fletcher repeatedly interrogates Andrew's perception of rhythm. During one early practice session Fletcher abruptly stops the band and demands that Andrew determine whether the tempo was "rushing" or "dragging" (*Whiplash* 00:27:00). The question appears simple, yet it operates as a test of a highly specialized perceptual language. "Rushing" and "dragging" are distinctions that acquire meaning within the context of musical timing and notation. Fletcher's question therefore requires Andrew to inhabit rhythm as a system of subtle temporal relations rather than as a neutral sequence of beats. In this sense, the rehearsal space itself begins to resemble a fugue-like environment. Musical time becomes recursive rather than linear: each repeated phrase invites microscopic variations in tempo, interpretation, and control. Andrew's consciousness becomes absorbed within this repetitive structure, attuned exclusively to minute rhythmic deviations. His narrative is situated beyond language.

Under these conditions, Andrew's psychological deterioration can be understood as a form of experiential fugue. His identity gradually dissolves into the recursive structure of musical performance itself. Physical injury – blistered hands and the physical exhaustion of extended rehearsals – does not interrupt this process but intensifies it. Pain narrows Andrew's perceptual field even further, reinforcing the obsessive focus required to sustain Fletcher's standards. The result is a condition in which artistic ambition and psychic fragmentation become indistinguishable.

This dissociative dynamic reaches an extreme during a rehearsal in which Fletcher dismisses the rest of the band and forces the three drummers to compete for the top position. The sequence unfolds over a montage portraying hours of relentless practice, with Fletcher screaming insults as the musicians struggle to maintain tempo. Sweat pours from Andrew's face while his

hands bleed against the drums, though he continues playing long after exhaustion sets in. The scene functions structurally like a musical fugue: a single rhythmic motif – the drum pattern conducted by Fletcher – reappears again and again, each time intensified through variation and repetition. Andrew's consciousness appears to narrow entirely around this pattern. Identity becomes secondary to performance; the only remaining objective is maintaining tempo. Within the broader narrative of the film, this sequence marks a turning point in Andrew's transformation into the archetypal tortured artist. Pain is no longer a consequence of artistic ambition but one of its most necessary conditions.

Taken together, these sequences express how *Whiplash* organizes its narrative through a structure analogous to musical fugue. The film repeatedly returns to a set of thematic motifs – discipline, humiliation, bodily pain, and artistic ambition – consistently intensifying them through new variations. Andrew's drumming sequences function as the film's primary "subject," replacing conventional dialogue-driven storytelling with musical progression. When pain overwhelms Andrew's ability to speak or reflect, narrative responsibility shifts to the music itself. Rhythm becomes a form of storytelling, articulating emotional states that language cannot capture. Like Esther's fugue-like narration, Andrew's experience demonstrates how recursive structures of storytelling can reorganize consciousness itself. The fugue thus operates not only as a musical composition but as a model for understanding the relationship between the protagonists' artistic discipline, psychological disintegration, and the obsessive pursuit of excellence.

The Tortured Artist Trope

The “tortured artist” trope is rooted in ancient ideas linking creativity and madness, particularly the concept of “divine madness” described by the Greek philosopher Plato. However, the stereotype developed most strongly during the late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century movement of Romanticism, which valorized intense emotion, suffering, and individual genius in reaction to Enlightenment rationalism and social upheaval. Romantic writers such as Lord Byron and John Keats popularized the image of the melancholic, emotionally tormented creator. Later cultural narratives surrounding figures like Vincent van Gogh reinforced the myth, which persists in literature and cinema as a shorthand linking artistic brilliance with psychological suffering.

In nineteenth-century literature and culture, the trope became attached to the Romantic cult of genius⁵. Romantic writers portrayed artistic creativity as the product of intense emotion, alienation, and suffering, presenting the artist as a figure estranged from bourgeois society. Biographical narratives of poets such as Byron, Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley helped construct the image of the misunderstood and melancholic creator whose sensitivity set him apart from ordinary life. Visual art reinforced the pattern: painters, including Vincent van Gogh, were later fossilized as tragic geniuses whose psychological struggles were inseparable from their artistic innovation.

Twentieth-century literature and cinema continued to reproduce and reinterpret the trope. Novels such as Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* explore the destructive costs of artistic genius, while modern films frequently depict creators whose brilliance is tied to obsession or instability, such as Darren Aronofsky’s “Black Swan” (2010). Biographical films about artists often

⁵ Lilian R. Furst discusses the context of the cult of genius in “Romanticism in Historical Perspective” (1968).

emphasize mental illness, isolation, and sacrifice as the price of creativity. The myth then developed that suffering becomes evidence of authenticity, reinforcing the persistent cultural assumption that extraordinary art emerges from psychological torment.

The tortured artist trope in *The Bell Jar* operates not simply as a romanticized alignment between creativity and suffering, but as an institutional and linguistic mechanism that produces suffering through systems of ambition and hierarchical power. Plath and Chazelle expose the trope to be a structure that rewards achievement while actively destabilizing identity, subjecting the artist to external pressures that fracture both their selfhood and narrative coherence. Esther's suffering emerges not from artistic sensitivity alone, but from her entanglement within institutional reward systems that convert intellectual ambition into a form of psychological captivity. Pain, in this framework, is not incidental but structural – it is the inevitable consequence of being shaped by systems that demand continuous achievement while offering no stable identity in return. This is the epitome of the trope, for the sake of this argument.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's early life is defined by what she describes as “nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another,” a phrase that transforms achievement into bodily exertion (Plath 19). Running suggests not intellectual fulfillment but bodily exhaustion – achievement is not experienced as growth but as acceleration without rest. The phrase “running after” implies pursuit without possession, suggesting that success is always slightly out of reach and deferred into the future. Esther establishes her ambition within a plane of physical sensation, allowing for a better understanding of her external bodily strain as a result of internal hubristic suffering. Her identity becomes structured around anticipation rather than presence, and her admission that she was “dropping clean out of the race” signals not simply disengagement but structural collapse (Plath 19). If Esther's identity had been consistently

constituted by movement toward institutional rewards, then stopping produces an ontological occlusion. She does not simply stop achieving; she ceases to exist within the linguistic terms that previously defined her.

This dynamic corresponds to the classical structure of the artist's tragedy, in which their internalization of idealized goals produces their eventual collapse. As Houston A. Baker explains in *A Tragedy of the Artist: The Picture of Dorian Gray*, suffering emerges when "the overly self-conscious artist... projects his own personality too severely on the public," resulting in a destructive fusion between identity and artistic performance (Baker 350). Esther's identity becomes indistinguishable from her achievements as a college student, and her sense of self exists only as a projection within institutional systems that evaluate and reward performance. When those systems no longer provide clear validation – such as her rejection from professor Frank O'Connor's prestigious writing class at Harvard University – her identity loses coherence, and becomes vulnerable to a process of fugal collapse.

Esther's description of her academic life intensifies this dynamic: "All my life I'd told myself studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do" (Plath 31). The language of "working like mad" operates as both metaphor and diagnosis. It reveals how ambition itself seems to contain the seeds of madness, transforming intellectual discipline into psychological destabilization. The phrase also suggests compulsion rather than choice, as Esther does not simply work but labors excessively, beyond the limits of sustainability. The tortured artist trope emerges here not as inherent psychological fragility but as the result of prolonged exposure to systems that reward overextension while offering no protection against its consequences. As William Havender notes in "On Human Hubris," many of humanity's crises

originate not in individual weakness but in “the unjust structure of modern societies,” which produce suffering through the very institutional arrangements they normalize (Havender 52).

The fragility of this structure as reflected in *The Bell Jar* becomes apparent when Esther is asked about her future:

“What I always thought I had in mind was getting some big scholarship to graduate school or a grant to study all over Europe, and then I thought I'd be a professor and write books of poems or write books of poems and be an editor of some sort. Usually I had these plans on the tip of my tongue. ‘I don't really know,’ I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true.” (Plath 32)

The linguistic rupture of “a deep shock” foreshadows her electroshock treatments, establishing shock as both psychological and physical phenomenon. The shock stems from language rather than external intervention. Esther's own words destabilize her identity by revealing the absence of coherent desire beneath her achievements, and language exposes the emptiness produced by institutional ambition as well as the lack found in conversations of success more generally. Her previous plans – to write poetry, win scholarships, become a professor – existed not as authentic desires but as linguistic scripts she had internalized, and when she speaks without these scripts, she encounters silence, in a manner similar to pain's erasure of language. The unordered narrative structure and poetic stylization of the novel itself further professes such instability and unorthodoxy.

Esther's silence – mirroring Andrew's lack of dialogue as he drums – reflects the collapse of language and identity under resistance to their excessive ambition. She reflects that, “the trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn't thought about it. The one thing I

was good at was winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end. I felt like a racehorse in a world without racetracks” (Plath 76). Her metaphor reveals how institutional structures create the very identities they later abandon, since a racehorse exists only in relation to the racetrack and without it, the horse’s purpose disappears. Esther’s identity, constructed through academic competition, becomes meaningless when removed from its institutional context. Achievement does not produce a stable self; It produces dependency on systems, notably language systems, that define and evaluate achievement.

Ambition henceforth becomes a mechanism of self-erasure rather than self-realization, and causes splintering in the protagonist’s introspection and well-being. This canceling corresponds to the devolution of identity described by Biss, who connects it to chronic pain, saying, “I no longer know who I am, or if I am in charge of myself” (Biss 20). The tortured artist trope thus reflects structural dispossession rather than individual pathology. Esther’s identity has been shaped by institutional expectations to such an extent that she cannot locate an autonomous self outside them, and her suffering then emerges from the realization that her achievements belong more to the system that produced them than to herself. Built on a language that cannot accurately describe its parts nor its whole, this system ultimately kaleidoscopes Esther’s identity.

I. Mentor-Mentee Relationships

Adult mentors in Esther’s life intensify the fracturing of her personhood and relation to the collective by positioning authority figures as both guides and agents of control. Early in the novel, Esther observes that influential women “all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them” (Plath 222). Guidance here appears here not as empowerment but as assimilation. The phrase “for the price” reveals mentorship as transactional – Esther receives aid in exchange for conformity – and her identity becomes subject

to external molding from other characters, shaped according to institutional expectations rather than personal desire.

This dynamic is particularly evident in Esther's relationship with Doctor Nolan, the psychiatrist working at the private mental hospital Esther attends. Following yet another electrotherapy session – which Esther was promised she would no longer require – the protagonist reflects in betrayal, “I liked Doctor Nolan, I loved her, I had given her my trust on a platter and told her everything” (Plath 211). The wording suggests sacrifice and vulnerability, as Esther does not simply trust Doctor Nolan, but presents herself for consumption. Their relationship operates through asymmetrical power, with Esther surrendering autonomy in exchange for protection and resolution. Her imbalanced reliance on Doctor Nolan is further reflected when she pleads to her doctor, “Promise you'll be there,” and “hung on to Doctor Nolan's arm like death” (Plath 112). Doctor Nolan's presence becomes necessary for Esther's perception of survival, transforming mentorship into a form of psychological containment. As Sontag puts it, “compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated” (Sontag 101). In the case of Esther, once she is shown care, it becomes difficult for her to exist without it – simply knowing Doctor Nolan is helping her is not enough. She reveals the need for concrete proof of safety.

This dynamic corresponds to Baker's observation that the artist's tragedy emerges from excessive self-consciousness and internalized ideals. Esther's ambition produced vulnerability not autonomy, making her susceptible to institutional manipulation. Her suffering legitimizes external intervention, transforming her into an object of management rather than a subject of experience. The tortured artist trope thus reveals the relationship between pain and linguistic

fragmentation. Esther's suffering destabilizes her narrative voice, producing a fractured structure that mirrors her psychological state. The novel's fugue-like narrative form, with its interruptions and temporal dislocations, reflects the breakdown of language under institutional and physical pressure. Pain disrupts linear storytelling, forcing Esther's narrative to operate through fragments rather than continuity.

This breakdown then relates to Sontag's observation that suffering becomes a spectacle, something "being watched (or ignored) by other people" (Sontag 42). Esther's suffering is constantly observed and managed by institutional authorities. Her pain – and success as a student and daughter – becomes visible within institutional frameworks but remains linguistically inaccessible. Others can observe her suffering, but they cannot fully comprehend it.

This structural paradox becomes even more visible in *Whiplash*, where artistic suffering is not merely represented but orchestrated through the mentor-mentee relationship between protagonist Andrew and conductor Fletcher. Like Esther, Andrew exists within a system that transforms ambition into discipline and discipline into suffering. Andrew's psychological deterioration is most visible not in dialogue but in extended drumming sequences: his suffering becomes audible rather than verbal. Music functions as a narrative substitute for language at precisely the moments when pain overwhelms Andrew's handle on hubris and autonomy.

Andrew's ambition appears almost indistinguishable from physical injury throughout the film. As he practices, his suffering leaves visible traces of blood that blur the boundary between bodily harm and artistic output. The drum kit becomes both instrument and wound site, producing sound through the very damage inflicted on Andrew's body. His obsessive rehearsals thus perform a psychological fugue state, where consciousness narrows around a single compulsive action while the broader sense of identity begins to dissolve. Andrew's only apparent

release from psychological pressure occurs when he performs. He channels both his ambition and suffering into rhythmic repetition, transforming music into a mechanism through which trauma is simultaneously expressed and produced.

Such pain is intensified through Andrew's relationship with Fletcher, whose mentorship oscillates between guidance and calculated cruelty. Early in the film Fletcher assures Andrew, "You're here for a reason. You believe that, right?" (*Whiplash* 00:24:00). The statement appears supportive, yet it simultaneously establishes the hierarchical framework that governs their relationship. Fletcher positions himself as the arbiter of Andrew's artistic legitimacy, implying that Andrew's presence within the studio band depends entirely on Fletcher's recognition of his potential. Mentorship thus becomes conditional authority rather than collaborative development. By this time in the story, Andrew's ambition is no longer self-directed, but mediated through Fletcher's approval.

Andrew's vulnerability to Fletcher's manipulation stems partly from the same structural pressures that shape Esther's experience of ambition. A dinner scene in *Whiplash* reveals how Andrew's identity has already been destabilized by external expectations of success. While eating with his extended family, who all boast relentlessly about their achievements in collegiate sports, Andrew's artistic endeavors are dismissed as trivial. When they ask him about his dream to become a famous jazz pianist, saying "that's your idea of success?" he responds, "I think it would be anyone's idea of success," and becomes highly defensive (*Whiplash* 00:46:00). His reaction exposes the fragility of his identity as a tortured artist. Because his achievements lack immediate institutional validation compared to athletic or academic success, Andrew becomes increasingly dependent on Fletcher's recognition, since his mentor's approval fills the void created by broader cultural skepticism toward artistic labor.

This reliance reaches a critical point when Andrew arrives late to the final performance and Fletcher reminds Andrew of the hierarchy governing their relationship by refusing to let him perform as lead drummer. The protagonist argues, “It’s my part,” to which Fletcher says “No, it’s my part and I decide who to lend it to ... you lost the part.” Andrew responds once more, saying, “But I earned it,” and this phrasing transforms artistic opportunity into personal property (*Whiplash* 1:05:00). The music does not belong to the performer who practices it but to the authority figure who distributes access to it. Andrew’s response – “But I earned it” – reveals the extent to which he has internalized the meritocratic logic (and language) of the institution. His belief that effort should produce ownership collides with Fletcher’s assertion of absolute control. Ambition, once again, produces dependency rather than autonomy.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this relationship emerges late in the film after Fletcher is forced to resign due to anonymous allegations of abuse. When Andrew’s father and a lawyer propose taking legal action against Fletcher, Andrew refuses to participate. Despite having suffered repeated humiliation and physical harm, he attempts to shield Fletcher from punishment (*Whiplash* 1:13:00). This reaction illustrates the psychological entanglement of traumatic mentorship relationships – which is arguably one of the most seminal aspects of the tortured artist trope. Andrew’s identity as a musician is shaped almost entirely within Fletcher’s system of language and discipline, making it difficult for him to separate personal ambition from the abuse that facilitated it. His loyalty reflects something other than forgiveness: It is a deeper confusion regarding his relationship between suffering and artistic achievement.

This bewilderment becomes explicit during the film’s final conversation between Andrew and Fletcher. Over drinks, Fletcher attempts to explain his severe philosophy of mentorship:

“The truth is I don’t think people understand what it is I did at Shaffer. I wasn’t there to conduct. Any idiot can move his hands and keep people in tempo. No, it’s about pushing people beyond what’s expected of them. And I believe that is a necessity. Because without it you’re depriving the world of its next Armstrong. It’s the next Parker.”

(*Whiplash* 1:22:00)

As Andrew listens attentively at the bar, Fletcher continues with intensity: “Take it from me, and every Starbucks jazz album only proves my point. There are no two words more harmful in the entire English language than ‘good job’” (*Whiplash* 1:21:00). Praise, in his view, encourages mediocrity by allowing artists to settle for goodness rather than greatness. Andrew hesitates before asking, “But do you think there’s a line? You know – where you discourage the next Charlie Parker from becoming Charlie Parker?” and Fletcher responds that “the next Charlie Parker would never be discouraged” (*Whiplash* 1:21:00). Andrew’s question ultimately remains unanswered and his mentor’s motivations stay ambiguous. Fletcher’s logic is both persuasive and disturbing, suggesting that extraordinary talent will survive even extreme cruelty. Andrew’s silence following this explanation reveals the lingering ambiguity of the tortured artist trope.

Continuing on, Fletcher adds that “the truth is I don’t know if I ever had a Charlie Parker... But I tried. And that’s more than most people can say, Andrew. I tried. And even if I never find one, I will never apologize for trying” (*Whiplash* 1:20:00). The film ultimately refuses to decide whether artistic greatness can justify the suffering required to achieve it, leaving the tortured artist trope to be a substantial philosophical idea but an undone cultural symbol in the media. Fletcher acknowledges this uncertainty when he admits he does not know if he ever had a “Charlie Parker,” insisting only that he tried and would not apologize for his attempts, no matter how volatile. His statement reframes the pursuit of genius as a possibility rather than a guarantee,

leaving the logic of the tortured artist trope unresolved. This ambiguity reflects a central concern within trauma and disability studies: experiences can be critically examined and interpreted but resist definitive resolution. The inconclusive ending of *Whiplash* largely reinforces the central paradox of the trope: suffering may produce art, but because of language's infallibility, the value of pain can never be fully measured or justified.

What does become clear, however, is that Fletcher's manipulation extends beyond Andrew's psychology to shape the narrative structure of the film itself. As conductor, Fletcher literally orchestrates the musical sequences that replace dialogue throughout *Whiplash*. His authority determines which musicians play, when they play, and how long they endure his relentless rehearsals. In this sense, Fletcher functions not only as Andrew's mentor but as a narrative force directing the rhythm of the film. His commands create the conditions under which Andrew's fugue-like drumming sequences occur. The violent relationship between mentor and student thus produces a series of counternarratives within Andrew's perception of reality. Fletcher's alternating praise and humiliation destabilize Andrew's understanding of success, creating conflicting interpretations of his own suffering.

The unresolved ending of *Whiplash* ultimately reinforces this ambiguity. Andrew's final drum solo appears to achieve the transcendence Fletcher demanded, and it also confirms the psychological cost required to reach that moment. The film refuses to determine whether Andrew has triumphed over Fletcher's abuse or succumbed to it. Like Esther's fragmented narration, Andrew's performance exists at the intersection of artistic achievement and psychological collapse. In *Whiplash* and *The Bell Jar*, the tortured artist trope reveals its central theme: suffering produces the conditions for artistic expression while simultaneously threatening to destroy the subject who creates it.

Conclusion

The tortured artist trope ultimately exposes the paradoxical relationship between suffering and artistic identity, a condition that becomes formally legible through Esther and Andrew's fugue-like narrative structures. Pain produces consciousness by destabilizing ordinary language, forcing the artist to develop new forms of expression, yet it also threatens to destroy the very subject who experiences it. In both *The Bell Jar* and *Whiplash*, suffering is often more institutional than it is personal: Esther's ambition entangles her in systems that reward achievement and destabilize identity, and Andrew's relentless pursuit of greatness binds him to a pedagogy that equates abuse with excellence. Pain becomes the condition of artistic creation as well as the force that renders creation necessary, revealing how these protagonists' fragmented identities are not dismissable pathologies but expressions of a larger structural crisis.

This thesis expounds the tortured artist trope using a critical framework for understanding how pain reshapes language, aiming to expose gaps in trauma and disability studies that often overlook form. By reading fugue as both a narrative structure and a model of consciousness, I argue the split, whiplashed selves of Andrew and Esther should not be discounted, but understood as articulations of pain and trauma that exceed linear narration. Though their stories may be muddled and their pain unreachable to audiences, the fugal epistemological significance of *The Bell Jar* and *Whiplash* will continue long after the music fades out.

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