

Posture Pictures and Other Tortures: The Battle to Control Esther Greenwood's Body

 quarterlyhorse.org/fall16/lewis

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Beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the 1960s, Dr. William H. Sheldon and his assistants took thousands of what became known as the “Posture Pictures” at the Ivy League, Seven Sister, and other colleges as well as at hospitals, factories, and prisons. Sheldon believed that there were three basic factors in human body types and that any given body could be mapped and charted using a three-digit code he called the “somatype.”[1] In the 1954 *Atlas of Men*, Sheldon published over one thousand examples of his eighty male somatypes at various ages and stages of life. *Atlas of Men* is a studbook as Sheldon identifies each somatype with a unique number and corresponding animal totem expressing the subject's strength, relative intelligence, and virility. Sheldon begins to reveal the depths of the project's duplicity when he states that “it may be a good thing, on the whole, that courses in somatyping are not yet generally taught in the women's colleges” (209). While somatyping may not have been taught at the women's colleges, patriarchal control of women's bodies, enforced by fears of punishment for deviance from the norm, surely was. And that lesson stuck as evidenced by Sylvia Plath's description of Posture Pictures in her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), published some thirteen years after she stood for her own Posture Picture as a new student at Smith College.

Deception defined the project, and these lessons in patriarchy may have been the sole purpose of the Posture Pictures. In the 15 January 1995 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, Ron Rosenbaum reveals that Sheldon and his team were not checking posture as a form of preventive medicine. Rosenbaum quotes Yale art historian George Hersey who contends that the purpose of the study was “eugenic” (30); further, Sheldon's published work never included any pictures of women, and his slowly work fell into disrepute among charges of falsifying data.[2]

Fears of Sheldon's pictures getting out into the general public were rampant in college towns, not simply for the injury of having one's body exposed to the male gaze, but for the insulting labels Sheldon's team affixed to deviant postures. Sylvia Plath twice described these fears in writing; while at Smith College, years before fictionalizing the experience in *The Bell Jar*, she wrote a letter to her mother dated 30 September 1950:

My height is an even 5'9"; my weight 137; my posture, good; although when my posture picture was taken, *I took such pains to get my ears and heels in a straight line that I forgot to tilt up straight*. The result was the comment, “you have good alignment, but you are in constant danger of falling on your face.” (*Letters Home* 48, emphasis added)

Plath details that she carefully posed for the camera, painstakingly lining up her body against its natural deportment, but she also confesses to failing to tilt her body up properly straight. Naked in front of Sheldon's camera, Plath tried to exhibit perfect femininity and was marked down in terms that suggest her posture, inadequate to the male gaze, foretold complete failure.

In the novel, Plath's narrator Esther Greenwood expresses fears of being placed low on the hierarchy of potential mates because she is five feet, ten inches tall. Esther takes measures to offset the power imbalance signified by her stature: "when I am with little men I stoop over a bit and slouch my hips, one up and one down, so I'll look shorter, and I feel gawky and morbid as somebody in a sideshow" (8). This is one of the first descriptions of Esther's body in the novel and opens the discourse of posture as the performance of femininity. For Esther any deviance from the correct image of femininity (being too tall, for example) is freakish; but it is her performance (looking shorter for the "little men") that has her thinking of herself as belonging "in a sideshow." We can see this double consciousness in Esther's fears about her body in Plath's reference to the posture pictures in the novel. For Esther, the idea of having sex with Buddy summons the memory of the posture picture as allowing Buddy to see her naked body would invite the same kind of judgment made by those who took and kept her posture picture in the college records:

[U]ndressing in front of Buddy suddenly appealed to me about as much as having my Posture Picture taken at college, where you had to stand naked in front of a camera, knowing all the time that a picture of you stark naked, both full view and side view, is going into the college gym files to be marked A B C or D [sic] depending on how straight you are. (56)

The fear of having poor posture was a part of the heteronormative culture of the 1950s, and magazines like *Mademoiselle*, where Plath interned while at Smith, played an important role in establishing proper models of femininity. A woman with bad posture was a poorly constructed product that would be left on the shelf because a "C" or "D" body, and a correspondingly negative Sheldon somatype would obviously not appeal to male desire.[3]

For Esther, having her posture picture taken was just one in a series of violent invasions of her personal space by men like Buddy, and she has little constructive outlet for these violations. Throughout the novel, Esther turns upon her own body as a part of this vicious cycle of always striving for, yet never quite achieving, perfect femininity, culminating in her attempted suicides. Men in the novel punish female bodies—men playing this role include Buddy and Doctor Gordon, the obstetrician and emergency room doctors, and Marco and Irwin. Plath emphasizes this violence in her depictions of the delivery room where Esther watches Mrs. Tomalillo give birth (53) and of the electroconvulsive therapy table when Esther is first institutionalized. In both instances the real source of Esther's terror is ignorance; she must imagine what will happen because no one sees the need to explain medical procedures to her. Her description connects the torturous effects of ECT and the execution of Ethel Rosenberg. At the end of the novel's opening paragraph, she wonders "what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves" (1). Later, she knows:

Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. / *wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done.* (117-18, emphasis added)

The message is clear: Esther did some terrible, yet unrevealed, thing, and she is being punished for it in the same manner that befell the body of the deviant spy. They are both criminal, and they deserve the same fate.

Esther Greenwood resists being commodified for male consumers—she “hated the idea of serving men in any way” (62)—but she also fears rejecting this choice because doing so meant defying the America that destroyed Ethel Rosenberg and held her up as a warning to other deviants who did not toe the line of patriarchal models of femininity as passive and subservient. However, Esther ironically reveals in the novel’s conclusion that she is still subject to the male gaze. She carefully arranges her appearance for her release from the institution, even suggesting marriage traditions: “My stocking seams were straight, my black shoes cracked, but polished, and my red wool suit flamboyant as my plans. Something old, something new” (199). Esther is still trying to achieve a version of femininity constructed to imprison women when she carefully presents the same straight lines of femininity that Plath did when she precariously lined up her ears and heels for her posture picture. Now, though, she is fully clothed, costumed, really, aware that she is playing a clichéd part. And clothing makes the spy, hiding her “flamboyant . . . plans.” Thus, Esther’s release from the institution in no way suggests release from the terrors so deceptively and torturously expressed by Sheldon’s bogus project.

NOTES

1. Sheldon defines the somatype as “A quantification of the three primary components determining the morphological structure of an individual. Expressed as a series of three numerals, the first referring to *endomorph*y, the second to *mesomorph*y, and the third to *ectomorph*y” (337).

2. His proposed Atlas of Women could not find a publisher. Among the more torturous fears of the return of the repressed posture pictures were rumors of the women’s pictures turning up for sale on the streets of Cambridge, New Haven, Princeton, Providence, Philadelphia, Ithaca, Hanover, and New York. Assistants later went public with accusations that Sheldon changed ages and heights to make individuals fit the established somatypes, and he refused to follow accepted standards of deviation (Carter and Heath 14).

3. In “‘The Woman is Perfected. Her Dead Body Wears the Smile of Accomplishment’: Sylvia Plath and *Mademoiselle* Magazine,” Gary Leonard argues that “‘femininity’ is a cultural construct defined in terms of male desire and designed to instruct a woman on how to become a ‘woman;’ that is, how to package her sexuality in a manner that appeals to the male consumer” (74-75).

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Quarterly Horse 1.1 (Nov. 2016), <http://www.quarterlyhorse.org/fall16/lewis>.