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TO WITNESS SUBMISSION IN HUMAN CONDITIONS: A GENDERED REDEFINING OF LEVINAS' RESPONSIBILITY IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR* AND JEAN RHYS' *GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT.*

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Emmanuel Levinas presents the human condition as fundamentally shaped by responsibility (Morgan 114). In this, we are born with a "debt contracted before any freedom and […] consciousness," paid off in an endless passivity to the needs of those around us (Morgan 125–29). While he frames this as a universal philosophy, extending beyond social structures and institutions towards an abstract 'meaning' (Morgan, 130), he articulates submission using gendered language:—'Eros, the feminine, modesty, the caress' (Morgan 125). This has since been the target of gendered critiques by feminist philosophers such as Irigaray, who maintains that "Levinas considers sexual difference as secondary to ethics, [establishing] paternity as the paradigm of self-transcendence" (Vasseleu 110). Thus, the seemingly "universal" state of Levinas' ethics highlights an important overgeneralization: submission is more readily described as feminine because it disproportionately applies to women's experiences compared with men. Under these sexual assumptions, I wish to defend the notion that Levinas' philosophical framework unknowingly functions on the "effacement of the feminine" before the establishment of social and ethical relations (Vasseleu 111).

Accordingly, this essay argues that 'Levinasian' responsibility is not an entirely universal *human* condition but rather a distinctly *feminine* way of being. To demonstrate this, I examine Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight*, where the female protagonists are so deeply constrained to 'passive' responsibility that they come to see themselves as sexual and social objects. This self-objectification then mutates in various ways—through imagined futures, dark' female counterparts, and a painfully embedded subordination, they become reduced to spectators of their own lived experiences. Reframing Levinasian responsibility as *extreme feminine passivity*, I contend that these women are burdened with the role of observer in order to live 'meaningfully'. Consequently, the 'feminine' drive toward death in these texts is not simply suicidal, but a rejection of the masculine demands that dictate a woman's world.

The Self-Determining Man vs The Sterile Woman

Firstly, Levinas seems to underplay the social differences of sex in his ethical framework, which overlooks the destructive "sexual duties" coded into women's roles.

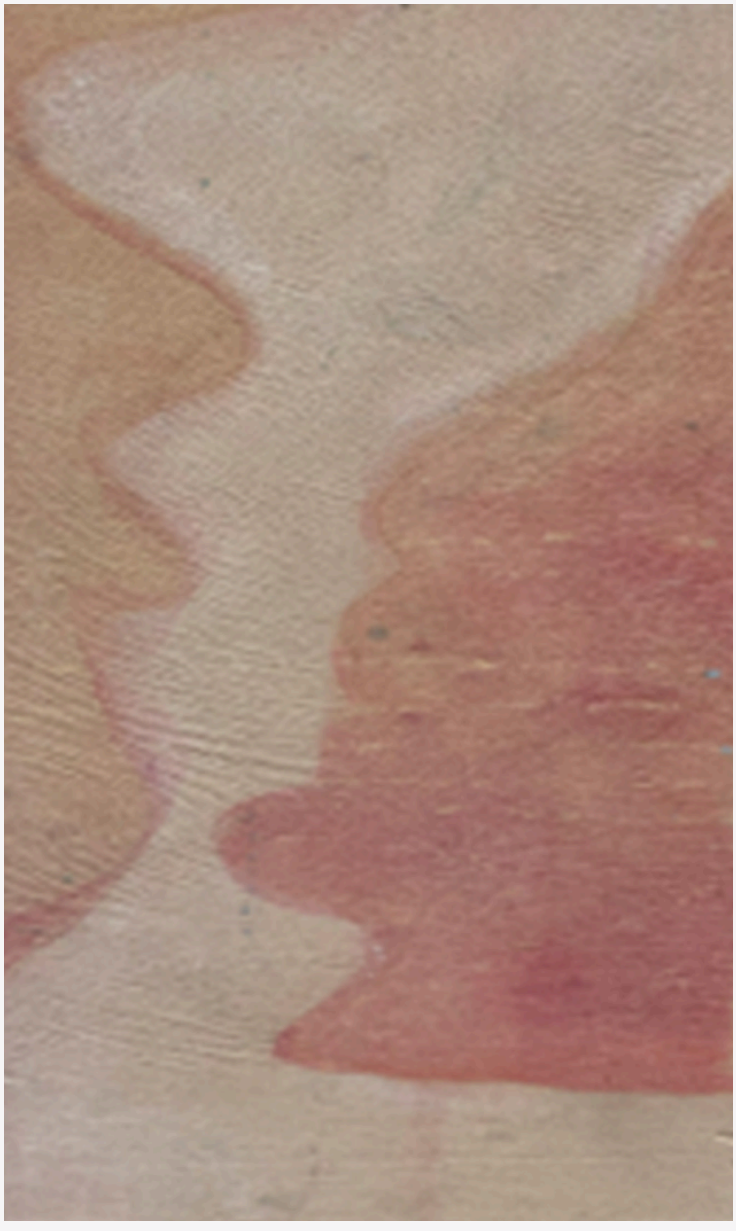
In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha experiences an overwhelming responsibility to sexually 'perform' for men. This can be seen in her relationship with Enno, who leaves her because she doesn't 'know how to make love, [she's] too passive […] lazy, [a] bore' (Rhys 105). Here, Sasha's social value is entirely contingent on sexual desirability—her duty is to entertain, and in failing to do so, she jeopardises any 'meaningful connections' with men. Yet this demand for responsibility is inherently paradoxical: Enno condemns her 'passivity' while simultaneously criticising her lack of submission to his sexual interests. Enno expects Sasha to attain a mythical state that rejects passivity while giving into it, to lie as both victim and perpetrator. In this setting, Levinasian responsibility cannot be argued as a universal philosophy as it demands different things of these two characters – Enno actively frames the sexual expectations for Sasha, while she must passively mould herself to his contradictory, idealised desires.

Plath's novel presents a similar dynamic through Esther, who also grapples with the paradoxical and oppressive desires of her male love interests. This is seen when Buddy Willard, after first revealing his naked body to Esther, tells her: 'I think you ought to get used to me like this' (Plath 65). Once again, the expectation for a woman to actively engage in her own passivity emerges—Buddy asserts control over Esther's desire, not allowing her to experience it for herself but instead directing it toward a wider sexual duty, one that surrenders to male fantasies. This can offer a gendered reading of Levinas' notion that "the free agent is always already accused by the other" (Morgan, 131). Buddy's sexual advance is one that accuses Esther of inaction, that calls her into a passive, sexual subordination. In other words, although Buddy may be physically exposing himself, it is only Esther who is being stripped of agency.

Plath extends this theme beyond sexuality, translating Esther's enforced passivity into a wider intellectual and existential submission. Buddy's medical background compels him to demean Esther's literary aspirations by stating that a poem is a 'piece of dust' (Plath 52). For him, existential permanence is measured using the logical material of the "real world" – one of science rather than art. However, it must be emphasised that this comes as a symptom of the masculine, and not human, condition. Buddy is able to appeal to rational structures as they already work in his favour – his lived

experience is "quantifiably justified" simply by him being a man. For Esther, however, she must look for meaning outside of what is offered to her. Her feminine responsibility condemns her to servitude and passivity rather than transcendence and self-determination. In other words, Esther's search for permanence is innately disintegrating – to find meaning as a woman amongst men is analogous to building structures with dust.

This redefines Levinas' assertion that one only becomes an "I" by accepting their body as a way of being in the world (Morgan 122). For Esther and Sasha, existing as *women* means being tied to more regressive and demanding forms of passive responsibility that are *fundamentally different from men*. Their identities are shaped by submission, reducing them to silent, sexual objects. Despite Levinas' universal claim of responsibility, his framework ultimately positions female responsibility as entirely directed towards their male counterparts.



Losing Oneself in "Imagined Worlds"

As both Esther and Sasha struggle with the gendered burdens of Levinasian responsibility, they develop an intimate desire to escape their passive roles. This longing manifests in the rare moments where they have been—or imagine they will be—happy. For Esther, this is seen during her skiing accident, where she thinks: '[t]his is what it is to be happy' as she 'plummeted down […] through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromise, into my own past' (Plath 93). For Sasha, happiness appears as a 'miracle', found in a 'vague dream' of living in an empty room with '[n]othing in it but a bed and a looking glass' (Rhys 81). In both cases, happiness exists only as an imagined miracle—either as nostalgia for the past or a fantasy of the future. In this way, Levinas' argument that the "self is object before it is subject" (Morgan 127) once again carries different gendered weights. For men, the reality of the self-as-object is not entirely objectifying – even if a man's responsibility renders him passive and subordinate to others, there still remains a residue of agency in his cultural "superiority" over women. For Esther and Sasha, however, the self-as-object is taken literally in Levinas' case – the possibility of genuine agency, for them, is something that can only truly exist in imaginary or nostalgic realms.

Levinas posits that even in total isolation, "human life is essentially social" (Morgan 125). However, from this statement, the naturalising of the social elements into personal life embeds cultural power dynamics as a fundamental part of the human condition. In this way, the characters of Esther and Sasha experience passive responsibility as a form of a woman's meaningful nature. These fantasies of detachment, then, are marked by an ironic rejection of this "genuine female authenticity."

For Esther, this is found through her relationship with Joan. Towards the end of the novel, Joan emerges as a figure of gendered individuality, unable to comprehend Esther's sexual encounters with men, which she finds 'utterly incomprehensible' (Plath 221). Despite Esther sharing Joan's aversion—she 'hated the idea of serving men in any way' (Plath 72)—she instead vilifies Joan as a gothic doppelganger, one whose feelings were 'a wry, black image of [her] own' (Plath 210). Similarly, Sasha encounters the figure of the cérébrale, 'a woman who likes nothing and nobody except herself and her own damned brain' (Rhys 134). Here, the idea of an 'active'

woman—one who exists for herself rather than in subservience to men—is framed as 'a monster' (Rhys 134). Levinas understands responsibility and passivity as the very conditions for meaning: one can only recognise herself in relation, and subservience, to others (Morgan, 130–32). A true departure from this structure, then, is not simply a rejection of duty, but a frightening rejection of meaning itself. Esther and Sasha thus remained trapped —they feel alienated in a masculine world that demands passivity, yet leaving it would deepen this alienation. In other words, they can only destroy, not replace: to bite the hand that feeds them leaves nothing but a bloody stump. Therefore, when confronted with figures of radical female otherness, it is not surprising that Esther and Sasha respond with fear rather than solidarity—to abandon their assigned roles is not merely to witness oneself from afar, but to lose the ability to witness at all.

Suffering, Suicide, and Self-Determination

Suffering, in Levinas' eyes, arises precisely from this confrontation with impossibility: it is a direct exposure to 'being,' in which there is an 'absence of refuge' (Morgan, 123–24). The female characters suffer not only under the weight of masculine control but from the realisation that there is no escape. Sasha implicitly understands this throughout the novel, acknowledging the absurdity of her dreams of happiness: 'there is no past, no future, there is only this blackness, changing faintly, slowly, but always the same' (Rhys 143). Esther echoes this bleak recognition, understanding that: '[she] had been inadequate all along, [she] simply hadn't thought about it' (Plath 72). The tragedy of Levinasian responsibility is thus not simply its demands, but its inevitability—these women despise serving men, yet they are always required to do so. Levinas spoke of the 'end of mastery' (Morgan 124) as a moment of confrontation with death, suffering, and responsibility. Yet this confrontation is more profoundly feminine than Levinas accounts for: these women do not await death to experience their limitations—they are consistently reminded of them, their world structured around the impossibility for them to have any other life. If Levinas describes the responsible subject as some kind of 'hostage' (Morgan 129), then womanhood itself is an unending hostage condition, wherein these women are always confined to the same spot, only able to witness life pass them by in their captivity.

However, even in witnessing their own immobility, Esther and Sasha retain the distinction between the internal and external self that makes a witness. The world may strip them of autonomy, but maybe the one thing left untouched is the pocket of space within themselves. This idea manifests in both novels through internal vacancy, depression, and stillness. Sasha's social agitation is 'only on the surface […] Underneath there is always stagnant water, calm, indifferent—the bitter peace that is very near to death' (Rhys 126). If a woman's life is defined according to men's disruption, then stillness—however sad—resists feminine passivity. Esther reflects this same impulse through her attraction to death, seeing it as a confrontation of her internal self: what she 'wanted to kill wasn't in that skin […] but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at' (Plath 142). This challenges Levinas' view that to confront death is to 'encounter negation by

the other' (Morgan, 124–25). However, death for Esther is not a submission to the power of the surrounding world, nor an acknowledgement of men's power—it is a surrender to something beyond this masculine world obsessed with meaning, submission, and responsibility. Suicide, in this context, is not simply self-erasure, but a refusal of the idea that the self must be fully possessed, manipulated, or called to responsibility. Even in the extreme passivity that appears embedded in women's 'responsible' lives, a choice remains.

Conclusion

Therefore, Levinas' account of the passive, subjected self overlooks the ways in which responsibility manifests differently for different people. Social ties can tighten, cut, and bruise depending on the bodies they wrap around. Here, the extremes of responsibility, the pervasiveness of objectified self-witnessing, and the ends to which these characters are driven expose the corrosive nature of Levinas' "ethical woman". The effort to please men requires a form of self-erasure—women must hollow out authenticity, emotion, and sentience to perform the feminine identity as "significant", submissive, and above all, sexual. Ironically, the symptom of this erasure is also its cure: social death through passivity in the masculine world can be countered by literal death, which cuts the very ties that enforce this condition. Perhaps in responding to Levinas, we find that if a woman is only allowed to live as a mannequin, then the one thing she owns is the space under her caste— an emptiness entirely within her control.

Footnotes

1. In this paper, I will use Morgan in reference to Levinas as his essay offers a comprehensive outline of Levinas' theory of ethical responsibility.

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