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Undergraduate Dissertation

MISS AMERICANA AND THE HEART-BREAK DREAM: THE ALIENATION OF ESTHER GREENWOOD IN *THE BELL JAR*

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is based on Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) and intends to analyse the alienation of women in the America of the 1950s. Through her alter ego, nineteen-year-old Esther Greenwood, the author offers the testimony of a young woman isolated in the 1950s socio-economic context, which induced her to depression. What the novel confirms is that the 1950s American society constructed women's identity through the media; it was contradictory and incompatible with intellectual female aspirations, since women were educated to abandon their professional careers once they got married.

Key words: Alienation — Femininity — Marriage — Mental health

RESUMEN

Este trabajo se centra en la novela *La campana de cristal* (1963), de Sylvia Plath, para analizar la alienación de las mujeres en la América de los años 1950. A través de su alter ego, una joven de diecinueve años llamada Esther Greenwood, la escritora ofrece el testimonio de una mujer aislada en el contexto socioeconómico de los años 50, que le llevó a la depresión. La novela demuestra que la América de los años 50 construía la identidad de la mujer a través de los medios de comunicación; era incompatible con las aspiraciones intelectuales femeninas, ya que las mujeres eran educadas para abandonar sus carreras profesionales una vez que se casaban.

Palabras clave: Alienación — Femeninidad — Matrimonio — Salud mental

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They tell you while you're young / "girls, go out and have your fun" / Then they hunt and slay the ones who actually do it.

"Nothing New", Taylor Swift (Phoebe Bridgers)

"The world is fucked by unemotional, rational men deciding shit."

Before Midnight, Richard Linklater.

"I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.
I am, I am, I am."

The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath.

1. INTRODUCTION

Being in one's twenties is not an easy thing; it is well known that young people want to see the world with their own eyes and experiment things in their own flesh. For instance, it is very common to feel an urge for change while also finding it difficult to make decisions, which leads to depression and a feeling of being stuck in life, as if one were running out of time despite having the whole of one's life ahead. Esther perfectly describes this strange feeling at the beginning of *The Bell Jar*:

I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo. (2-3)

In this novel, protagonist Esther Greenwood discovers how hard it is for an ambitious, white, middle-class girl in her twenties to fit in the America of the 1950s. However, being young at that time was very tough, especially when one wanted to find her place in the world. This disappointment with traditional rules, in addition to the existential crisis, was suffered most by a group of young artists and intellectuals who started to feel alienated and began to criticise the society they were living in. Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956) summarised this collective anxiety in the very first line of the poem: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness".

This dissertation will explore the way in which the protagonist of *The Bell Jar* is alienated within the socioeconomic context of 1950s American society, which destroyed a young woman's expectations to have her own professional career by pushing her to marry and become a mother. I will rely on a number of theories, and give several examples from the text and the author's *Unabridged Journals*, in order to demonstrate that the dominant conservative social values of the time provoked Esther's collapse, and that she was eventually able to recover from her depression.

The Bell Jar, a roman à clef about a girl growing up in the America of the 1950s, was written by Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). Plath was a poet, novelist and short-story writer. Among her works, we can also find *The Colossus and Other Poems*, *Ariel*

(1965), which was published after her death, several letters that were printed in two volumes some years later, and her *Unabridged Journals* (2000). Furthermore, *The Collected Poems*, also published posthumously, were awarded the 1982 Poetry Pulitzer Prize.

To understand Esther's conflicts and why they led to her collapse, though, it is necessary to approach the historical framework of the 1950s. World War II was over, but the Cold War had just begun and it would last until the 1990s, which means that many generations grew up during these decades. The 1950s was one characterised by the presidency of Eisenhower, who was in the White House from 1953 to 1962. These dates are worth mentioning, as 1953 was the year when Plath suffered her collapse and first attempt of suicide, which would years later inspire her to write *The Bell Jar*. Historians tilted Eisenhower Era as the 'Golden Age of capitalism'. According to Professor of American History Alan Brinkley (2015), Eisenhower was: "[...] the cautious, prudent, conciliatory paternal figure presiding over the heyday of middle-class dominance of American life". He was an advocate of capitalism.

As soon as World War II ended, a period of progress and economic expansion began in the United States. The country reinforced its economic and military dominance and influence, especially during the Cold War. The boom of consumerism in this capitalist system became a symbol against the communism of the USSR.

The 1950s were a period of economic stability, optimism, and demographic expansion due to the baby-boom. The average income grew, and in just a few years the country improved its infrastructures with a number of highways, which allowed people to go and live in suburban areas. The 1950s were also very favourable years for education, technology and automobile industries. People who lived in those residential areas needed a car to go to the mall to buy the products that were advertised on TV. In addition, technology industries produced commodities that transformed Americans' daily lives. The proliferation of tangible goods made it possible for the middle classes to buy products since they had enough money to do so. Altogether, this turned American society into a consumer one, deeply enrooted in materialism.

Propaganda played a very important role in spreading the nuclear family model. Consumer culture reinforced the superiority of the American way of life, in clear contrast with the Soviet one. Television was a powerful ideological weapon that

contributed to offering a fake construction of reality. Not only did it advertise products in order to encourage audiences to buy them while providing entertainment for American society, but it was also an ideological tool to prompt the restoration of Christian values, regarded as essential in the fight against communism. American historian Richard Hofstadter (2006) described how propaganda was enrooted in the American DNA: “The growth of the mass media of communication and their use in politics have brought politics closer to the people than ever before and have made politics a form of entertainment in which the spectators feel themselves involved”.

In the USSR, women were part of the labour force, whereas the American woman was to remain at home and be the ‘angel in the house’. Advertisements, movies and TV shows depicted marriage as the ultimate goal for American women. The America of the 1950s strengthened the conservative values which relegated women to this passive position of housekeepers and child care providers, whereas men became the breadwinners. The nuclear family (consisting of husband, wife, children, a dog, a car and a TV) was the means to sustain the American Dream and keep communism at bay. As long as society felt comfortable with these conventional rules, the American Dream would come true. Males had the opportunity to study and develop their professional careers, while women had to put their dreams aside once they got married —for the country’s sake, because that was how American women fought against communism.

However, any person who was not a white heterosexual male had very few possibilities of success. This group included black people, homosexuals and, of course, women. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) highly criticised the middle-class consciousness that the system had implanted in women’s minds, which implied the end of their professional careers after marriage. Friedan defined the 1950s housewife as “healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She [the housewife] had found true feminine fulfilment” (46). Actually, Friedan stated that several women in their forties and fifties “still remembered painfully giving up those dreams, but most of the younger women no longer even thought about them” (44).

Sylvia Plath lived her twenties in this difficult context. Her personal experience therefore set the basis for her development as a female writer, which clearly shows in *The Bell Jar*. And it was in this context that Esther, as well as the author herself, became alienated. Without doubt, the historical situation in which Esther Greenwood

lived made her go through a deep existential crisis that ended up in collapse. Hopefully, she was eventually able to overcome it.

2. ESTHER GREENWOOD: A CRACKED MALE-FACTURED WOMAN

In order to understand the collapse that Esther, the protagonist in the novel, suffers, it is necessary to explain, first, what kind of woman she is. Esther describes herself as a girl who

[...] lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car. (2)

The Bell Jar was inspired by the events that Sylvia Plath lived the summer of 1953. She won a job as guest editor in *Mademoiselle* magazine. Esther Greenwood can be seen, thus, as Plath's alter ego, as she partakes of the author's experiences; just like Plath herself, Esther was able to work in a magazine, in this case, *Ladies' Day*. Plath was given the opportunity to live the American Young Woman Dream, and this is how she describes this experience in her journals: "[...] I am going to be a Guest Editor on Mile in June because I wanted it and worked for it" (*Journals*, 183).

Similarly, Esther is some kind of 'manufactured' woman living in Eisenhower America and victim of the dominant ideals of femininity, "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" (Leonard, 74-75). Esther has her coming-of-age at a difficult time, and she consequently suffers a deep identity crisis.

Simone de Beauvoir argued: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (273). Esther lives in a world where the female body and the idea of femininity are strictly defined by 1950s official discourses, which created a false picture of women and imposed rigid gender roles on them. They taught them how to be 'real' women and behave accordingly. These impositions were reinforced in women's magazines, movies, fashion and the beauty industry. De Beauvoir highlighted how the female identity is shaped by men, who spread their role models through the media. "Fashion shows and

women's magazines [...] make it obvious that what is usually taken for granted is not natural at all" (Séllei, 133). Women interiorized these discourses and built up their identity in accordance. Esther, like her friends Betsy and Doreen, is a victim of the artificial society enhanced by the media with a view to controlling women:

I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size seven patent leather shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocketbook to match. (2-3)

As is shown here, Esther is defined according to female expectations. She is a commodified woman living in a male-designed world. Her outfit is in accordance with a proper dress code, which tried to be appealing and "the envy of thousands" (2). She is a hard-working college student who participates in a contest, together with some other eleven girls. As she finally manages to become the guest editor of the *Ladies' Day* magazine, it can be said that she has accomplished her goal. With the help of every beautiful dress, leather shoe and expensive lipstick, Esther is truly living the dream that she always wanted to live —or rather the dream that she was told to live. In her *Journals*, Sylvia Plath summarised her whole New York experience as being "pain, parties [and], work" (187).

Esther is the proof that demonstrates how 1950s conservative values and the falsification of reality actually hurt women. Since the very beginning of the novel, Plath presents the dissociation that Esther suffers on account of the aforementioned social expectations. However, she stands out among her companions because she feels different. She should be living the dream. Yet, she is paralysed.

In the first nine chapters of the book, Plath describes Esther's one-month stay in New York. Ghandeharion et al. (2016) state that Esther's discontent is closely related to her job as an editor at *Ladies' Day*, since her position in this magazine makes her realize the illusion in which she has lived during her entire life. Just like Neo in *The Matrix*, Esther can realise that the picture of the 1950s woman is nothing but a falsification. *Ladies' Day* is just another "women's magazine that serves as a means to promote the desired model of womanhood" (68).

Jean Baudrillard's theories could well be of use here. In the novel, there is evidence that 1950s American society's demands for women's lives and aspirations could be regarded as some kind of simulacrum created by males. The period of time that Esther spent in 'the city that never sleeps' induced her into depression, and made her understand that, behind the sparkling glamour of New York City, nothing was actually real; everything was a pure farce.

It is clear that Esther's disenchantment echoes Baudrillard's theories on *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). As this philosopher argued, in the postmodern era, people substitute the signs of the real for reality itself. In this way, the copy becomes reality. In 1950s America, advertisements and beauty industries pretended to care for women's well-being and development when, in fact, they were only leading them to consume more and more goods. Women were thus educated to 'catch' a perfect man, whom they could marry and with whom they could have children. Furthermore, women were taught to be pretty and look gorgeous by using makeup. They were also supposed to learn how to cook and keep a clean household. Fashion magazines helped to perpetuate this conservative ideology. Every average young woman in the Eisenhower era was to fulfil this pattern because: "it [was] no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real [was] no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle" (Baudrillard, 10). The media transmitted these conservative dogmas and created copies by imposing on women the desires of a simulacrum invented by men. This made-up reality, which was a counterfeit of what reality was, tended to erase and isolate any person who felt different. While working at *Ladies' Day*, Esther could see through this matrix of false femininity. She could truly understand how the world in which she and the girls of her age were living functioned. Femininity was, in short, a fictionalized world commodified by patriarchy.

Garry M. Leonard (1992) provides a brief study on cosmetics accessories that highlights the femininity of *The Bell Jar*. With the help of several magazines, such as *Mademoiselle* —the one in which Plath worked— he gives evidence on how Esther was drowning, rather than navigating, through this ocean of femininity: "[F]emininity is an illusion carefully and expensively manufactured to produce profit at the expense of the insecure female consumer" (75). The feminine world was a social construct based on conservative values. Esther was supposed to assimilate "[...] hard work, healthy grooming [and] virginity until marriage" (Leonard, 61).

Leonard analysed some issues of *Mademoiselle*, which assured to “transform a woman into a woman” (64). He mentioned columnist Bernice Peck, who wrote in August 1953 that “a body is what you’ve been given [and], a figure is what you make of it” (62). This suggests how the system creates the ideal of woman that has to be followed by all girls in order to become “worthy of their clothes” and have more chances to be noticed by men —as the final destiny for a woman was no other than find a husband. It cannot be denied that women are endowed with some degree of intelligence, by virtue of which they should never forget their main objective in life: marriage and motherhood.

Being the ideal of womanliness a dogma imposed by men, it is no surprise that the two mothers who appear in the book should adjust to conservative patterns. For instance, the protagonist is tired that the mother of Esther’s boyfriend, Mrs. Willard, keeps on saying that “what a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security”, and “a man is an arrow into the future and a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from” (67). Mrs. Willard repeats the mantra that she has heard her entire life: men and women belong to different worlds and marriage is the bond that sustains and links both worlds.

Sylvia Plath complained about all of this in her *Journals*: “Girls look for infinite security; boys look for a mate. Both look for different things” (54). And she goes on to say that she “[...] at odds, dislike[s] being a girl, because as such [she] must come to realize that [she] cannot be a man” (54). Similarly, in the book, Plath projects her frustrations onto her alter ego and yearns for equal opportunities in life. Esther’s aspirations to maintain a professional life before and after marriage are unladylike and related to male aspirations.

Furthermore, Esther’s own mother sends her daughter an article to justify the importance of virginity for both men and women —but especially for women. It exposes the reasons why a woman should not sleep with any other man but her husband, as the 1950s double standard of morality demanded. Esther finds out that her boyfriend Buddy has had sex with another woman before sleeping with her and feels angry. She “couldn’t stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not” (77). This will lead Esther to discard marriage:

That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted 'change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket. (79)

In this way, Plath is reproducing the thoughts that she already expressed in her *Journals*. Esther in *The Bell Jar*, like Sylvia in her *Journals*, is "jealous of men" (98). That envy emerges out of "the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening" (98). This quote is a desperate cry that encapsulates the voice of many young females whose testimonies Betty gathered and compiled in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Both Plath and her alter ego "envy the man [and] his physical freedom to lead a double life —his career, and his sexual and [his] family life" (*Journals*, 98).

As Ghandeharion et. al (2016) pointed out, the metaphor of the arrow stands for the freedom that Esther years for. She wants to "opt for mutually exclusive things; the freedom to lose her virginity without having to worry about an unwanted pregnancy; and finally, the freedom to transcend the boundaries set by her sociocultural milieu" (69). She wants to achieve the life that men have. *The Bell Jar* openly condemns the double standard that rules men and women's lives, especially regarding sexual behaviour. Esther yearns to sleep with somebody, yet she is afraid of an unwanted pregnancy. Moreover, she cannot stand the hypocrisy of Buddy, so she decides to forget "about staying pure [herself] and marry somebody who wasn't pure either" (77). In the future, Esther will make a significant decision with regard to the control of her own body.

Plath's novel is the fictionalised testimony of a young woman living in the early 1950s, a woman who feels isolated because she believes that she is the only one who can see through this artificial matrix. Anyone who thought differently could not possibly be represented, because all discordant voices were automatically silenced. As was argued before, Friedan published in *The Feminine Mystique* the testimonies of actual women who lived in the suburbs, and concluded that the origin of their disenchantment was the "feminine mystique". Esther was not alone, then, as her vision of the world was shared by many others like her. Friedan (1963) wanted to deconstruct the fictionalised image of woman that was being forged in the media, according to which women were exclusively defined in relation to men.

Friedan proposed that it is by creative work that a woman can find and liberate herself. Accordingly, Esther wants to devote herself to creative writing. She wants to labour in whichever work she is able to use her imagination: as an editor or professor. But, mostly, she wants to become a poet. Interestingly enough, her boyfriend Buddy despises poetry, as he considers it to be a mere “piece of dust” (52). Furthermore, he once told Esther that “after [she] had children [she] would feel differently, [she] wouldn’t want to write poems anymore” (81). This is followed by a brief monologue, in which Esther agrees that “maybe it was true that when [a woman] married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward [she] went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state (81).

The way in which Esther describes marriage is worth taking into consideration. For a woman, marriage means, not only being married to her husband, but also to the state and the conservative values on account of which she voluntarily accepts —she has been educated for this— to be the mother of future generations. Young American women were thus married to both their respective husbands and Eisenhower’s creed. Esther does not directly acknowledge this in the text, but is clearly indicating that women are basically zombies: Declan Smithies (2012) stated that “a zombie is a creature that is just like a conscious subject in all relevant, physical functional or behavioural respects, except that it has no conscious states” (343).

The idea of women losing their autonomy as a result of marriage and motherhood was also discussed by Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, in which the power of women’s magazines to indoctrinate women is clearly brought to the fore:

Over and over again, stories in women’s magazines insist that woman can know fulfilment only at the moment of giving birth to a child. They deny the years when she can no longer look forward to giving birth, even if she repeats that act over and over again. In the feminine mystique, there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future. There is no way she can even dream about herself, except as her children’s mother, her husband’s wife. (87-88)

As was discussed before, Esther rejects marriage and infinite security as she wishes to chase her dreams. At first she is a commodified woman because, according to the do’s and don’t’s advices in the magazines, she acts as such. Gayle Whittier (1976) states that the traditionalism of the 1950s makes it impossible for Esther to bring her

personal and professional life together: “According to her society’s standards, ‘an intellectual woman’ is herself a cultural contradiction in terms, a disharmonious combination of biology and intelligence” (130). Because of this, Esther grows increasingly depressed. The protagonist has been educated to study and have a successful life until she finds a suitable man to marry. Once she finds the one, she must give up their dreams in favour of her husband. However, being a successful woman and having a balanced love life at the same time seems to be completely impossible. For Esther, these two things are absolutely incompatible, and she therefore decides to reject the alleged security of marriage.

Yet, she does not shut the door to marriage in the end —at the beginning of the book, a grown-up Esther says that she has become a mother and pulls up a piece of the starfish plastic from the sunglasses that was given at *Ladies’ Day* “for the baby to play with” (3). Thus, Esther’s initial dream of having an independent life outside marriage eventually becomes yet another illusion.

Betty Friedan made it clear that ‘free choice’ was simply impossible for women, as “editors of women’s magazines were men” (16). Propaganda encouraged women to buy “feminine” products and highlight their beauty, and gave them tips to look marriageable and recipes so that they could cook for their husbands. Furthermore, women also incited other women to stick to the same values because they had been educated according to a male-dominated vision of the world. Esther is, for example, unable to cook, and her mother and grandmother try to teach her how to boil the food, but “the instructions slid through [her] head like water, and then [she]’d always spoil what [she] did so nobody would ask [her] to do it again” (71). The protagonist fails to adjust to dominant feminine patterns.

Caroline J. Smith (2010) discusses this domestic ideal and, just like Leonard, provides examples of real testimonies and fragments of magazines containing contradictory discourses for young ladies. Smith paraphrases the ideas of Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, who wrote *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice on Women* (1978), and analysed several women’s advice magazines and propaganda, including *Mademoiselle* and *Cosmopolitan*. She also mentions Nancy A. Walker’s *Shaping Our Mother’s World: American Women’s Magazines* (2000). Here, Walker analyses family life messages during the 1950s. Smith relies on both works to conclude that women were given contradictory discourses: They were educated to be

angels in the house, but also to learn languages and typewriting and to travel abroad. *Mademoiselle*'s editors filled up pages with pieces of advice, "promising women [with] all [of] the answers [...] at the same time, these articles [...] provide their readers with dual messages, encouraging women to be self-sufficient while also offering them limited options for achieving self-sufficiency" (Smith, 6). Esther's inner conflicts will inevitably bring about her imminent collapse.

3. THE FALL OF ESTHER GREENWOOD

As was said before, Esther feels in her own flesh the void of New York. Her alienation is due to unhappiness, drunkenness, violence, parties and the superficiality of New York. Instead of going out, she prefers to stay in the hotel lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, while she is consumed by her own depression. She cannot enjoy parties nor go to the cinema. Besides, her contradictory thoughts feed her mental breakdown and lead her to collapse.

Chapter 9 is quite decisive because it is there that the protagonist explodes. New York simulacra drown her more and more, to the point that it becomes unbearable. During the first nine chapters, Esther has been silently falling into a loop, and no one can notice that there is something wrong with her. She is unable to identify with her two friends, Doreen and Betsy. Doreen is a platinum blonde girl who fully enjoys her sexuality and Betsy is a sweet girl from Kansas, hard-working and photogenic.

The night before leaving New York, Esther puts an end to the disgraceful pain-parties-work experience: under the lights of the city that never wakes up, she goes up the terrace and dumps all the expensive clothes that she did not dare to wear. The wind catches them "like a loved one's ashes" (107). Full of sorrow, she throws the ashes of her cracked delusion. New York City witnesses the fall of Miss Americana and the shattering of her heart-break dream.

These clothes can be seen as a reminiscence of the withered figs crumbling down in the imaginary of Esther Greenwood. She reflects on her life using the fig tree metaphor. The protagonist describes her future as a fig tree and contemplates the branches, while the fruits are opening to her:

One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and

South America, and another fig was [...] a pack of [...] lovers [...], and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. (73)

Future possibilities unfold in front of her like the pages of a book. However, Esther cannot decide which fig she is going to take. She wants to live as many lives as possible. Her short-term future could materialise in getting a scholarship, studying in Europe and becoming a professor or an editor and writing poetry books. Esther has built her identity in college terms. She is an accomplished student who has won scholarships, but now that her University days are coming to an end, she feels the social pressure to become a housewife. Her own mother, the magazines, Buddy and society as a whole encourage her to be what is expected of a young woman.

At eighteen, Plath wrote: “[...] you don’t want to live just one life, which could be typed, which could be tossed off in a thumbnail sketch. She was the sort of girl [...]. And end in 25 words or less. You want to live as many lives as you can” (64). The collapse of the protagonist is the outcome of her being unable to decide what she wants to do. Esther’s fig tree metaphor again echoes Friedan: “wide horizons of the world and the life of the mind had been opened to [her]. [...] But now that the time had come to make [her] own future, to take the deciding step, [she] suddenly did not know what [she] wanted to be (94).

Some chapters later, Jay Cee, the boss at *Ladies’ Day*, summarises Esther’s ambitions telling the photographer that she wants to be everything. This may be a subtle reference to Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, in which Amy March wants to be either “great or nothing” (156). Esther is “either nice or she is not; she is either loved for denying her needs, or she is abandoned as punishment for exploring the world on her own” (Leonard, 70). The protagonist wants to develop as a young intellectual woman and, since she cannot possibly adjust to the female expectations of her world, she prefers to die rather than live in misery.

As Whittier claimed, Esther is a human contradiction. She herself admits having a discrepancy of thoughts: “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell” (89-90). Plath said something similar about herself: “I desire the things which will destroy me in the end” (*Journals*, 55-56). Esther’s mind cannot process being both a wife *and* a professor, a mother *and* a poet.

“Would marriage sap my creative energy and annihilate my desire for written [...] expression which increases with this depth of unsatisfied emotion [...] or would I achieve a fuller expression in art as well as in the creation of children?” (55-56). Young women with a promising career and willing to set the world on fire finally burn all their dreams.

Esther can only think in binary terms, that is why choosing one life means to discard the others. These conflicts recall Friedan’s words: “Education, independence, growing individuality, everything that made [women] ready for other purposes had constantly to be countered, channelled back to the home” (231). Because the protagonist is unable to make up her mind, the figs wrinkle and die at her feet. Esther’s burning desires will destroy her soon afterwards.

4. DEEP DOWN

When Esther returns to her home in Boston, the symptoms of her depression worsen by the minute. Esther’s nervous breakdown discloses her inability to adapt to the constructed feminine pattern of the 1950s, because she cannot “find her place in a society with expectations of ‘femininity’, which she cannot identify [herself] [with]” (Pinke, 4). She feels detached from all the women she interacts with: her mother, Buddy’s mother, Doreen, Betsy, even Jay Cee. The novel “represent[s] satisfied wives and mothers” (Pinke, 4). She prefers to die rather than be alive in a society which does not let her exist as an individual.

Esther feels suffocated within the house but she rarely leaves it. She is not even able to take extracurricular activities for the summer. She feels frustrated and suffers from insomnia, and spends too much time alone with her thoughts. Her depression is growing by leaps and bounds. Esther wastes her time imprisoned in the suburbs. Nonetheless, she does not give up her greatest passion and she decides that she will write a novel (this is quite metafictional, as Plath is writing her own experience through Esther’s). Yet, as soon as Esther starts typing, she feels incompetent and concludes that this kind of work demands experience. “How could I write about life when I’d never had a love affair or a baby or even seen anybody die?” (117).

Evoking the fig tree metaphor, Esther begins to meditate and decides to “put off the novel until [she] had gone to Europe and had a lover” (118). In addition, she will not learn shorthand —this is a desperate attempt not to be like her mother but rather a new version of woman. It must be noted that Esther is a determined young woman “with fifteen years of straight A’s (80), and that she has devoted her entire life to academic validation, but now finds her future truncated. She even considers quitting college and moving to Germany in order to be a waitress.

I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three ... nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn’t see a single pole beyond the nineteenth. (118)

Esther’s identity crisis is insufferable. As was stated before, when writing *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan interviewed several unhappy housewives, most of whom agreed that when [they] were growing up, many of [them] could not see [themselves] beyond the age of twenty-one” (94). Women in the Eisenhower era had no idea of their own future, because women as individual entities did not matter. Patriarchal society did not care about women’s wishes. To make matters worse, if they did not feel comfortable with their household lives, the system blamed them for not being happy.

The story of Esther clearly resembles the author’s. Thus, while Esther is staring at the lamp considering the different plans for that summer, in her *Journals* Plath severely analyses herself in second person: “THINK CONSTRUCTIVELY”; “You are frozen mentally”; “If you can’t think outside yourself, you can’t write”; “please, think”; “You must think” (*Journals*, 186; emphasis in original). Plath’s real agony gives voice to the stream of thoughts inside Esther’s mind. The protagonist of *The Bell Jar* also judges herself: “You’ve got the perfect set-up of a true neurotic” and “you’ll never get anywhere like that” (141).

In the following pages of the book, Esther gives detailed information about how awful she feels. The protagonist can neither “sleep, nor read, nor eat” (170-71) and she visits Dr. Gordon —a man who turns out to be ineffective, until she is finally taken to a hospital under the supervision of Dr. Nolan. Plath provides her own critique on psychiatric treatments, remarking that prescriptions for mentally ill patients had poorly improved since the 19th century, when any woman who did not accommodate to patriarchy was diagnosed with hysteria. Dr. Gordon revises Esther’s case without any

empathy. He discredits the protagonist and applies shock treatments to her. As male psychiatrists' methods are inadequate, Esther does not improve at all and is hospitalised in a private institution, where she receives electroshock, which makes her feel "terrible", [...] "dumb and subdued" (139-40). Ineffectiveness leads her to self-harm and to commit several suicide attempts, first by drowning and then by swallowing pills.

Esther is then taken to another private hospital. Dr. Nolan is a much modern woman, who administers electroshock in a softer way than Dr. Gordon. She is also treated with insulin injections. Although the methods are more benevolent, Elaine Showalter (1985) made it clear that "electroconvulsive therapy leads to short-term or partial amnesias" (in Séllei, 147). Women who underwent shock treatments were "more manageable and obedient as a result" (in Séllei, 147). Electroshock numbs the brain and eradicates any abnormal desire. Moreover, it is easier to handle women after that, since it turns them into tamed housewives and mothers-to-be. Esther was also treated with insulin needles that made her gain weight.

5. A BRAND NEW ESTHER

With the help of Dr. Nolan, Esther does not feel depressed any more. Furthermore, she is given the name of a doctor who can offer her a diaphragm. The book recounts that Esther wants to have sexual freedom, just like men. "Would you act differently if you didn't have to worry about a baby?" (212), Dr. Nolan asks her. When she can enjoy birth control, she feels in charge of her own body. "I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex" (213). Esther desperately wants to have sex with the right man, because her virginity is choking her, and wants to lose it in order to experiment male freedom. That is, she wants to have different sexual partners with no strings attached. She physically needs to rebel against norms.

Finally, Esther comes out of the bell jar. "I was my own woman" (213), she says when she feels cured. Yet, the world in which she lives is still the same. "How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (230). The ending is hopeful yet bittersweet. As the story is narrated years later by herself, the reader can conclude that the bell jar has not trapped her again. However, she ends up married and with a baby.

6. CONCLUSION

After having analysed in detail the reasons why Esther Greenwood collapses in *The Bell Jar*, we can conclude that the 1950s American socio-economic context prompted the protagonist to become alienated and suffer depression. The novel is characterised by a sense of ambiguity and contradiction. Esther is a character that feels overwhelmed by a country that is constantly encouraging her to develop as a ‘woman’. Yet the femininity and the life that she should achieve is different from what she actually wants. She realises this when she becomes a recluse within the hotel in New York, after having worked for a month as an intern for *Ladies’ Day* magazine. Women’s magazines give contradictory messages about what they should aim for in life. According to Friedan, some women are satisfied because they are brainwashed (just like Doreen or Betsy), while others struggle with difficulty to adapt to the pattern (Esther’s case). The impossibility of flourishing as the person she wants to be (poet, editor or professor), together with the constant battle to lose her virginity without being judged (just as men do), and the pressure to have sex without marrying the wrong person or having an unwanted pregnancy lead the protagonist to a nervous breakdown. Esther enters a hospital that has questionable methods to cure her depression, as they dull her mind. When the treatment ends, Esther is born as a new woman, but society remains as conservative as it was before she collapsed. Although in the future she becomes a mother, Esther has somehow gained some freedom: she gets fitted for a diaphragm. All in all, it can be concluded that, in spite of the novel’s apparently conventional ending, the protagonist nonetheless manages to partly challenge the 1950s American society that aimed to alienate her and clip the wings of all of her dreams.

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