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## Trabajo Fin de Grado

# THE HEROINE'S QUEST AS REFLECTED IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*

Autor/es

Enma Pisco Perna

Director/es

M<sup>a</sup> Dolores Herrero Granado

Facultad de Filosofía y letras  
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### **Abstract**

During the 1950s, women had to face numerous problems due to society's expectations. Esther Greenwood is the main character in the novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), written by Sylvia Plath. In this novel, the protagonist has to face these adversities, which lead her to suffer from depression. *The Bell Jar* is not only a *Bildungsroman*, but also a heroine's quest, and as such will be analysed.

**Key words:** Mental health — Heroine's quest — Womanhood

### **Resumen**

Durante los años 50, las mujeres tuvieron que enfrentarse a numerosos problemas debido a las expectativas de la sociedad. Esther Greenwood es el personaje principal de la novela *La campana de cristal* (1963), escrita por Sylvia Plath. En esta novela, la protagonista tiene que hacer frente a estas adversidades, las cuales le llevan a padecer depresión. *La campana de cristal*, además de ser un *Bildungsroman*, se puede percibir como un monomito, y como tal será analizada.

**Palabras clave:** Salud mental — Monomito — Femenidad

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“I am, I am, I am.”

*The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

To understand Esther Greenwood, the main character of *The Bell Jar*, it is important to take into account the context of the setting of the novel (the 50s) and the period in which it was written (the 60s). As this novel shows, being a nineteen-year-old woman in the 50s was not easy. As Lichtenstein et al (2000, 544-605) explain, the end of World War II (1939-1945) brought peace. However, be that as it may, the Cold War (1947-1991), which confronted two superpowers, the US and the USSR, also became a reality a few years afterwards. This was a conflict, not only ideological, but also economic and political, as both superpowers started to compete for their global influence and power. Moreover, “politics became more conservative at home. Although the Great Depression had discredited business leaders, the successful wartime production effort seemed to prove that American capitalism worked” (Lichtenstein et al, 555). It is also noteworthy that the Cold War created a division between American citizens, as a result of which many were persecuted on account of their suspicious opinions. This consequently encouraged secrecy. President Truman tried to bring social peace and improve the economy during his presidency (1945-1953) and, although Congress turned aside Truman’s economic program one year later, it nonetheless brought hope to the American citizens, as it somehow provided some kind of improvement in their daily lives. Truman’s program focused on national health insurance, public housing and aid to education. The next president, President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1954-1961), was more conservative. He

pushed for private development of off-shore oil and hydroelectric power (...). And he favored balanced budgets (...). The president created a new cabinet office (Health, Education, and Welfare), raised the minimum wage, and broadened Social Security coverage. (...) Eisenhower endorsed the liberal view that federal funds were needed

to improve American education in science, technology, and languages. (Lichtenstein et al., 568-69)

The postwar period was, on the whole, a period of economic growth. In fact, it was called the “golden age” as there was less unemployment, wages were higher and living conditions improved. Moreover, the “car culture spurred the growth of suburbs, the proliferation of interstate highways, and the emergence of drive-in movies, restaurants, and shopping centers” (Lichtenstein et al., 571). The automobile had a huge impact on American people’s lives. As their incomes were higher, they also fed a baby boom. During this period, clerical and service employment also became highly significant. It is worth noting that it was marginal groups, such as women, who took those jobs: “Ninety-five percent of them [working women] worked in just four job categories: light manufacturing (home appliances and clothing), the retail trade, clerical work, and health and education. Within those categories, high-status work was usually assigned to men; low-status work, to women” (Lichtenstein et al., 588). Besides, popular media encouraged the idea that women should marry in order to reach stability. However, although many women worked, married women tended to stay at home, taking care of their children and the house while their husbands worked.

## **SYLVIA PLATH**

Sylvia Plath was born on 27th October 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts. Her parents were Aurelia Schober and Otto Plath. During 1950 and 1951, she studied at Smith College in Massachusetts. In 1953, she suffered from depression, received bipolar electro-convulsive shock treatments and tried to commit suicide several times. She married poet Ted Hughes in 1956. In 1960, *The Colossus*, a poem collection, was published. She finally committed suicide in 1963. That same year *The Bell Jar*, her only novel, was published under a pseudonym, Victoria Lucas. In 1965, *Ariel*, another poem collection was published, which prompted Plath’s cult. In 1966, *The Bell Jar* was published under Plath’s name. In 1981,

Hughes edited and published *Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems*. One year later, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

*The Bell Jar* “reveal(s) the extreme psychological consequences of the pressures and contradictions of female adolescence, which sometimes result in a descent into madness” (Davidson, 11). As will be shown, Greenwood’s depression was the result of excessive social expectations and the pressure she felt regarding her professional and romantic future. Moreover, *The Bell Jar* is a Bildungsroman, that is, a novel “of development (Bildung) in which the hero[ine] ventures forth to develop [her]self fully and to win adult membership in [her] community. (...) The author express[es] rebellion by satirizing how patriarchal society dwarfs their hero[ine]’s full human development ” (Davidson, 104). As a matter of fact, Esther Greenwood has to fight against many kinds of obstacles in order to develop herself. It can thus be said that *The Bell Jar* is a good example of a heroine’s quest, in which many hostile forces prevent Esther from accomplishing her mission, her process of maturation and growth. This being said, there are also other more positive forces that will in turn support her. In the 50s women were supposed to stick to certain patterns, the deviation from which led to sorry cases like Sylvia Plath or Esther Greenwood’s. Finally, it must be said that the so many similarities between Greenwood and Plath have led critics to conclude that *The Bell Jar* is, on the whole, quite an autobiographical novel (Wagner-Martin).

## 2. ANTAGONISTS FOR ESTHER’S MATURATION AND GROWTH

Building a balanced identity is not easy for Esther, as many forces prevent her from doing it. These forces, or antagonists, are a key element in the novel, as in every *Bildungsroman*. In this section, these antagonists and the effect that they have on Esther will be analysed. These negative forces are, basically, New York, men and sexuality, social expectations and her own

mother. In the context of the novel, a “bell jar” should be understood as “an environment in which someone is protected or cut off from the outside world.” (*Oxford Dictionary of English*). Accordingly, it is these antagonists that cut off Esther from the outside world.

## **NEW YORK**

From the very beginning, New York is presented as “bad enough” (Plath, 1). What is more, Esther states: “I didn’t know what I was doing in New York” (Plath 1), which implies that she feels lost and displaced there, contrary to what she had expected. As Wagner affirms, “in the traditional bildungsroman, the character’s escape to a city images the opportunity to find self as well as truths about life” (56). However, Esther’s experience is precisely the opposite: New York, “[r]ather than shape her life (...) nearly ends it;” (Wagner, 56). As can be read in the first chapter of the novel: “I was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of other college girls just like me all over America (...) everybody would think I must be having a real whirl” (2). In contrast to this, what Esther expected of New York and her life has by no means materialized. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader can see the mental state of Esther and that she is not satisfied with her life. She cannot but expect some kind of change that will make her life a bit better, namely, “simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other” (4). Esther is thus portrayed as lost and without motivation, and this thought is a desperate one; she cannot possibly believe that it is a man that will bring happiness to her. Yet, this contributes to bringing to the fore the ideal of womanhood in the 50s: a man will improve a woman’s life, all the more so in a big city like New York. Esther feels rather depressed:

The silence depressed me. It wasn’t the silence of silence. It was my own silence. I knew perfectly well the cars were making noise, and the people in them and behind the lit windows of the buildings were making a noise, and the river was making a noise, but I couldn’t hear a thing. The city hung in my window, flat as a poster,

glittering and blinking, but it might just as well not have been there at all, for all the good it did me. (17)

It is her own isolation and silence that depress her. In fact, the repetition of the word “silence” and the contrast between silence and noise shows that she is not apparently there, that she is not conscious of her own senses. She hears but, in a way, she does not process what she is hearing since she is immersed and trapped in her own silence. Besides, it could be said that she is trapped in New York, an antagonistic metropolis, as this city is what makes her dissociate from her reality and prevent her from accomplishing her quest. The city, New York, is compared to a poster, as all the life that this city shows seems to be unreal and unrelated to Esther. Esther’s boss goes as far as saying to her: ““Don’t let the wicked city let you down”” (36). Once again, New York is presented as a harmful city. And, as the reader will soon discover, it will let her down. To quote Noriko Mizuta:

If the city is a prison, so is life, as Esther comes to realize, with one’s mind locked in a bell jar. The horror of the real world, visible through the glass, is transparent, but she has no words, no way to communicate her vision of the terror of the real world. She is confined in a terrifyingly silent space within the bell jar. (77)

New York is a bell jar for Esther and, consequently, she is locked in there. As was stated before, silence is important to understand the protagonist as she cannot express what she feels. For all these reasons, New York can be considered to be an antagonist element to the protagonist’s development, because it deviates her from her goal to reach maturity and stability. New York shapes Esther, but also detaches her from her own persona.

## **MEN AND SEXUALITY**

Men should also be considered to be antagonists in Esther’s quest, yet another enemy that the heroine has to fight against in order to accomplish her journey. To give but an example,

Buddy Willard, Esther's college boyfriend, may be considered as the ideal man of the 50s. Although he should encourage and support Esther, he does not understand her passions: "Do you know what a poem is, Esther?" "No, what?" I said. 'A piece of dust.'" (52). In other words, he believes that a poem is nothing. To make matters worse, Esther does not tell him what she thinks and believes his words, which leads her not to believe in herself and abandon her dreams and ambitions: "My trouble was I took everything Buddy Willard told me as the honest-to-God truth" (53). However, Esther eventually realizes that he was a hypocrite. "I didn't know he was a hypocrite at first. I thought he was the most wonderful boy I'd ever seen (49-50). The image that she had of him clashes with reality: "Now I saw he had only been pretending all this time to be so innocent" (66). Buddy had a facade of being innocent and pure, the type of person he was not. It should be highlighted that what most annoys Esther is his hypocrisy and that he was not completely honest with her about sex. As is well known, at that time women were expected to preserve their virginity until marriage. At one point in the novel, Esther reads an article titled 'In Defence of Chastity', which states what follows:

a girl shouldn't sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married. (...) This woman lawyer said the best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren't pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex. Of course they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men and they would end up by making her life miserable. (76-77)

Women, unlike men, were not expected to have sex before marriage. Esther did not agree to these ideas. Actually, she thinks: "It might be nice to be pure and then to marry a pure man, but what if he suddenly confessed he wasn't pure after we were married, the way Buddy Willard had? I 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). In the aforementioned lines, Esther expresses what she believes: these sexual expectations are unfair. If the idea of having sex was approved by society, then it should be accepted for both men and women. And, as she said, Buddy had a double life, he pretended to be pure, but he was not. In fact, it may be argued that he said that in order to persuade Esther to have sex with him before marriage.

### **SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS**

Social expectations also affected her in many aspects of her life. As can be seen in this quotation:

The one thing I was good at was winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end. (...) I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. 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 beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (72-73)

Using the metaphor of the fig tree, she explains the frustration that she felt when she had to choose a path, and choosing one meant rejecting the others. If she wanted to have a family, she would have to refuse to become a poet and vice versa. Clearly, her identity and future would depend on which path she chose to follow, which caused her a tremendous amount of anxiety. Esther rejects the idea that women should become submissive wives with no ambition: “after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it

was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (81). Esther casts aside the idea of having children, as that would mean not writing anymore; having children would deprive her of her dreams. As Davidson (1995) argues:

*The Bell Jar* reveal[s] the extreme psychological consequences of the pressures and contradictions of female adolescence, which sometimes result in a descent into madness. (...) For some nineteenth-century writers, the onset of adolescence seemed so dangerous because it signified the dreaded advent of sexuality, which clashed with the middle-class Victorian values of female purity, and they killed off their heroines to preserve that purity, (...) glimpses of female adolescents who were able to transcend the restrictions of women’s culture to achieve individuation and success in traditionally male modes. (11)

As *The Bell Jar* denounces, the society of the time exerted much pressure upon women, which often dovetailed into depression and madness.

## **HER MOTHER**

Another figure that prevents Esther from reaching a balanced maturity, and can therefore be regarded as yet another antagonist, is her own mother. In the novel, Esther makes it clear that, if she had a mother like Jay Cee, she would know what to do (36). In fact, she believed that her “own mother wasn’t much help” (36); she should have supported her but never did. A significant moment is when her mother visits her and gives her roses: “My mother was the worst. (...) That afternoon my mother had brought me the roses. ‘Save them for my funeral,’ I’d said. (...) ‘But Esther, don’t you remember what day it is today?’ ‘No.’ (...) ‘It’s your birthday.’ And that was when I had dumped the roses in the waste-basket. (...) ‘I hate her,’ I said” (194-95). Not only does Esther reject her visits, but also her presents. Esther somehow feels she is neither dead nor alive. As Wagner explains: “It is not surprising that she throws away the roses her mother has brought for her birthday, discounting that biological event in

favor of the second birth, the rebirth, to be accomplished when she leaves the asylum, with Doctor Nolan as her guide” (64). It is when she leaves the asylum that she should be given flowers, as it then that she is actually becoming her true self. In addition to what has been stated before, a series of circumstances make the reader think that Mrs Greenwood does not understand her daughter nor support her. At the end of the novel, for example, her mother undervalues Esther’s depression, as is clearly seen in what follows: “We’ll act as if all this were a bad dream” (227). For Mrs Greenwood this was just a bad dream, which reflects her lack of support and understanding. To quote Wagner’s words, Esther “finds particularly hateful the fact that her tortuous experience of madness, which has brought her finally to a new stage of development, be written off by her mother as illusory, a bad dream” (64). Esther, for her part, says that she “remembered everything. (...) they were part of me. They were my landscape” (227). She remembers everything that she has lived, and these memories are part of herself and what define her and the person that she will become. Saying that that it was nothing but a bad dream implies denying Esther’s intense suffering.

### **3. FORCES THAT HELP ESTHER IN HER PROCESS OF MATURATION AND GROWTH**

Esther seems to be a little matryoshka doll, trapped by bigger matryoshkas, as she has many bell jars that impede her to mature. Indeed, “the bell jar presents no choices, no alternatives, except death” (Wagner, 62). If Esther does not want to end up suffocated, she must lift every bell jar to finish up her quest. And, in order to do so, there are also forces that will help and guide her to be able to recover and be born again.

**JOAN**

Joan, a companion in the mental hospital, can be seen as a reflection of Esther. In fact, Esther states:

Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own. Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose. (209-10)

What is more, Esther feels that she may need Joan to remind her of whom she actually is. They have been through similar crises and experiences, so she sees Joan as a helping force, some kind of mirror. As a matter of fact, Esther wonders at Joan's funeral: "I wondered what I thought I was burying" (232). As Sakane (1998) explains: "[t]his can be seen as a ritual of rebirth. Esther buries her divided selves with Joan and decides to come to terms with herself. She says to herself, 'I am, I am, I am'" (199). Here she claims her own self, not through negative identification, but rather through positive assertion of what she is. Esther is somehow born again at Joan's funeral since it is then that she buries, metaphorically, the diseased part of herself, thus becoming a new person. As a consequence, after the funeral she utters "I am" repeatedly. The new self is created and the heroine's quest is about to finish.

**DR NOLAN**

Dr Nolan is the psychiatrist who helps Esther in the private hospital. The following quotation shows how much this helps the protagonist: "So isolating her from the outside world, making her focus on the asylum world, which is a means of making her focus on herself, is good strategy" (Wagner-Martin, 43). As is shown here, being in the asylum makes Esther focus on herself and stop worrying about the outside world, which is what mainly oppressed her.

Moreover, it is said that “as she removes her attention from her mother, Esther transfers it to Dr Nolan” (Wagner-Martin, 43). Dr Nolan thus becomes a mother figure for Esther, helping her to recover. Esther feels Dr Nolan’s gestures as affectionate and motherly, as is expressed in the following quotation: “Doctor Nolan put her arm around me and hugged me like a mother” (203). Dr Nolan hugged her as a good mother would. In addition, “[t]he most effective characterization of Dr Nolan is her great difference from Esther’s mother. (...) Nolan is the soul of sanity. (...) She is herself. She is confident in her profession, and she does not need any external accolades for the fact that she has helped Esther regain her health” (Wagner-Martin, 45). While Mrs Greenwood does not support her daughter, Dr Nolan helps her in her maturation and growth process. Hence, it can be concluded that Dr Nolan aids Esther in her heroine quest, lifting the bell jars. Moreover, as was implied before, Dr Nolan is quite confident about herself, which leads Esther to want to start feeling just as confident. In other words, Dr Nolan becomes a role model for the protagonist. On the last pages of the novel, Esther is momentarily lost and frightened of her new self when going out of the asylum. Notwithstanding this, Dr Nolan’s presence reassures her:

There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice - patched, retreated and approved for the road, I was trying to think of an appropriate one when Doctor Nolan appeared from nowhere and touched me on the shoulder.

‘All right, Esther.’

I rose and followed her to the open door. (...)

The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room. (233-34)

Esther feels lost as she does not know how to act now that she has been born again. While she thinks of the “road” that she should follow, Dr Nolan appears and, by touching her on the shoulder and saying her three words, “All right, Esther”, Esther knows that everything is going to be okay, that she is strong enough to carry on. It might be concluded that not only

was she born again in a physical way, but above all in a metaphorical one. Saying that the door was open suggests all the experiences that the new Esther could undergo now. When Esther “stepped into the room” she stepped into a new life, full of new possibilities. Dr Nolan has therefore been an important force in Esther’s process of recovery and maturity. As Wagner-Martin states:

[w]ithout interfering with Esther’s own thought processes, Nolan gives her time – and context – to make her own decisions. Her listening is non-judgmental. Even though Esther is institutionalized, for one of the first periods of her life, she feels independent, in control. (...) As *The Bell Jar* charts their relationship, Dr Nolan is with Esther for the major events of her rehabilitation: her treatment brings Esther privacy, calm, the possibility of sexual experience, and freedom. (43-44)

Dr Nolan supports Esther without judging her, she is patient and gives her power and freedom, essential for Esther’s growth and self-confidence.

## **HERSELF**

Esther herself can be said to be the main positive force in her quest, because she is the one that has experienced all of these ups and downs and overcome obstacles in the end. At the beginning of the novel, Esther explains the importance that a hot bath has for her:

There must be quite a few things a hot bath won’t cure, but I don’t know many of them. Whenever I’m sad I’m going to die, or so nervous I can’t sleep, or in love with somebody I won’t be seeing for a week (...) I meditate in the bath. (...) I never feel so much myself as when I’m in a hot bath. (...) I felt myself growing pure again. (...) I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water. (18-19)

She feels that a bath heals all her wounds; this allows her to relax and overcome her anxiety.

In fact, all her problems dissolve when she is in the bath:

I said to myself: 'Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. (...) I felt pure and sweet as a new baby. (19)

As is shown here, taking a bath is a ritual for her, after which she feels purer and reborn. It helps her to connect with herself and her desires, and to disconnect from what deviates her from her journey. Although sometimes she is her own enemy, she sometimes also becomes her best ally. As she once says: "I was my own woman" (213), which means that she is what she needs, her own support. After this rebirth, she appreciates her new persona. Moreover, she has no fears anymore and starts to feel free: "I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person" (213). As all the bell jars disappear, she feels free and about to finish up her quest. As "fear purged itself", she "felt surprisingly at peace", and "[t]he bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air" (206). Hence, not only does the bell jar vanish, but also all the antagonists and negative forces that prevented her from making progress. She feels the air, again, she feels free. The freedom she feels now can also be seen in the way she perceives the outside world: "The sun, emerged from its gray shrouds of clouds, shone with a summer brilliance on the untouched slopes" (228). Like the sun, Esther also emerged from her "gray shrouds of clouds", her adversity, and shone similarly. Later on, she feels "as if the usual order of the world had shifted slightly, and entered a new phase" (228). As she has entered a new phase, she feels that the world has done so too. Esther's rebirth can be said to be her new phase, her new life. As was argued before, when Esther utters the words "I am", she is making a substantial change in her character. To quote Eleni Reid (2015): "Esther's 'I am' offers no future assurance other than the fact that she exists, and will continue to exist, moment by moment. She is not 'finished,' but Plath portrays her as undergoing the painful but necessary continuity of change, the continual process of becoming by overcoming struggle" (65). Reid

implies that Esther's new self has been born, but this new self is not complete yet. Being born again does not guarantee stability and happiness, as new adversities arise. Yet, the heroine will now be prepared to face up to them. Moreover, as was implied before, the fact that Esther follows Dr Nolan to an "open door" (234) shows that a new quest is about to begin.

#### 4. RELEVANCE AND IMPACT

The *Bell Jar* has had relevant impact, not only on readers, but also on literature and popular culture. To give but one example, Fitzpatrick, a teacher, explains how *The Bell Jar* resonates with her students:

Much of the novel's appeal and relevance stems from the fact that the most attention-grabbing of all topics—sexuality and vocation—are central to the experience of both Esther Greenwood (the novel's protagonist) and most every college-age student of any decade. In addition, the novel also allows for students' urgent wish to talk through where the personal and the intellectual intersect. (125)

The experiences and struggles that Esther goes through, not only encapsulate what life was like in the 50s, but they also appeal to students of any decade. As Fitzpatrick explains:

[students] face the daunting task of mapping out their adult life before it has even begun and contend with the earth-shattering feeling that they don't know what they want. Asking (...) [them] (...) results in a collective blank stare. (...) [T]hey see all the options that are available. (...) While contemporary students are not limited by what society tells them they can or cannot do (...) they read [the] excerpt [of the fig tree] as an affirmation of the struggle to define their vocation in the midst of an unending list of choices. At the same time, they feel strongly the perceived need to master one skill quickly in order to compete in today's dizzying job market. Like Esther, they are both

privileged and burdened with many options, not necessarily because of economic status, gender, or intellectual capacity, but because of the time and place in which they live. (126-28)

Nowadays, it is said that students feel anxious about the number of possibilities that they may have regarding their professional future. Moreover, they are urged to know very early, in an age of uncertainty and immediacy, what they want for their future. To quote Fitzpatrick again, “[f]or both Esther and these students, an added stress to the already expensive search for a vocation is the feeling that they must choose a career soon, they must love it, and they must learn (quickly) to excel at it” (128-29). As a consequence, pressure and anxiety increase, which makes it more difficult to choose a path. Besides, this may be perceived as an universal problem. For this reason, students from different decades may feel identified with Esther Greenwood. However, it is true that students and young adults in the 2020s are rather different, as they have other models to follow and be inspired by. As Dunkle states:

When Esther looks to the choices made by the women she knows in her life, she cannot find an acceptable model. Women she encounters embrace the role society encourages them to take as passive mothers, betraying themselves in the process. Examples of such characters include Esther’s mother; Buddy’s mother, Mrs. Willard; Esther’s suburban housewife neighbour, Dodo; and her Ladies’ Day intern colleague Betsy. Others, who follow their dreams to pursue careers at the expense of their femininity, include the Ladies’ Day editor, Jay Cee; the unnamed visiting poet at Esther’s college; and another intern colleague, Doreen. (70-1)

Esther does not know any women that conflate the two types of womanhood. The women around her are either one thing or another. She would like to be something in between, to be several things at the same time but, in the world she lives in, this is not possible. To quote Dunkle’s words:

While women’s choices have evolved over the past few decades, the effects that the choice of motherhood can have on a woman’s pursuit of a career and her life in general continue to constitute an important issue. Because of the relevance of these

themes in today's society and Plath's thematic structure, tying prevalent cultural events with a personal coming-of-age story, *The Bell Jar* remains a powerful, iconic text avidly read by a variety of audiences. (72-73)

It is true that combining maternity with a professional life is still a problem. However, nowadays they are not incompatible, and it is possible to be a mother and a successful writer or journalist or doctor or engineer or teacher at the same time. It may be said that *The Bell Jar* still resonates with readers due to the fact that it "stands as a vivid portrayal of one woman's struggle within such a society and her attempt to assert control over her life" (Dunkle, 69).

Galo feels identified with Esther:

As a literature student, and recent grad, I am more interested and captivated by Plath's portrait of a young woman on the verge of adulthood, who is unsure of her place. In that light, I see much of myself, and friends, in Esther's struggle to self-hood. (...) Like Esther, I am discontent with settling, but unsure of where to begin. I find myself mirroring Esther's list of "inadequacies." While Plath is writing in the context of the gender-boxing 50s and 60s, I still feel lost, in the 21st century (...). [T]he options are before me, and I have my pick; I am twenty-two with a degree and work experience. Or, I should have my pick, but the choice is paralyzing. Or, I should have my pick, but there are thousands like me, and the job market is not promising. (...) Plath shows her readers the universality of feeling unsure of oneself. (...) The relevance of her work carries through today. While Plath's writing may not offer any answers as to overcoming this "bell jar" of anxiety, readers may be relieved to find they are not alone in this struggle. (MIC)

The problems that Esther experiences in *The Bell Jar* are universal, and Galo confronts them too. Many women, especially in their 20s, feel identified with Esther. They feel understood and less alone when facing these problems. Additionally, Đurđević states:

Esther Greenwood, just like Sylvia Plath, is an extraordinary woman whose mindset and talents simply do not allow her to stay trapped in the box, and that is exactly what the 1950s and 1960s were trying to do, to fit women into boxes and pick their fig(s) for them. (...) [T]he problems Sylvia Plath exposed remain pertinent to our situation. It is true that the position of women has improved immensely since the times of the feminine mystique, but it is likewise true that patriarchal society is still in power, the

mere fact that we are now witnessing the workings of third-wave feminism tells us that women's issue is far from being settled. Esthers of the 21st century suffer oppression at home and in the workplace, they are told more often than not that having a family would compromise their career and vice versa, that they cannot at the same time be both good CEOs and good mothers; they are, unlike their men, still expected and instructed to abandon their ambitions if need be, to be the ones who make sacrifices, and finally they are faced with a choice where there should be no choice at all – they should simply be free to pick all the figs they can get. (122)

We may say that the 21st century tries to trap women in boxes too. However, these boxes are different, as women have managed to escape from some of them; women's conditions have changed and improved. Nonetheless, many other new problems and expectations have arisen; women are still fighting to be free to pick all the figs that they want. It should also be noted that, as Dunkle says, *The Bell Jar* was adapted into film in 1979 and 2012, and the book has also appeared in many films and series as a prop, for example, in *The Simpsons* or in *Family Guy*. As Dunkle states, “when the novel appears in American films and television series, it stands in as a symbol for teenage angst, often on the part of a female protagonist.” (63). The appearance of the novel in these TV series simply shows how much their characters identify with the novel's protagonist. In short, the problems that the novel addresses are still there.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This dissertation has tried to show how Esther's evolution can be analysed as a heroine's quest during which many antagonist forces will strive to prevent her from achieving her ultimate goal. As was explained before, these antagonists are New York, men and sexuality, social expectations and her own mother. As a matter of fact, these forces can be seen as a wonderful reflection of the society of the 50s. In contrast to this, other positive forces try to help her to

bring her quest to an end, namely, Joan, Dr Nolan and herself. Esther can be seen as the embodiment of the so many problems that women such as Sylvia Plath herself had to overcome in this period. The ending of *The Bell Jar* can be seen as open: Esther has finished up her quest, but this will only lead her to start yet another one. Moreover, *The Bell Jar* can be seen as an universal and timeless novel, as it addresses problems that people, and women from different backgrounds in particular, can relate to.

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