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SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*:  
THE EFFECTS OF WRITING THERAPY

**Grado en Estudios Ingleses**

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**ANEXO 2**

**Yo, Julia Florenti Gálvez, con DNI**

**DECLARO**

**Que, el TFG titulado “SYLVIA PLATH’S *THE BELL JAR*: THE EFFECTS OF WRITING THERAPY” es una obra original y que he citado debidamente todas las fuentes utilizadas.**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This end of degree project aims to study what the outcome of using writing therapy may be for a person who suffers from mental illnesses such as depression. The matter at hand points out to Sylvia Plath's work, and more specifically to the *The Bell Jar*, the last novel written before the writer's death. Firstly, the aim of the research lies on the importance of understanding the context of psychological practice back on the United States of the 1950s. Moreover, the relevance is located within the abidance of a long-standing tradition *status quo* when taking women's mental health under consideration. In the second place, it is essential to mention the importance of a gender perspective on what it entailed to meet the femininity standards for women at the time. Furthermore, there is a strong bond between the author and confessional poetry that needs to be acknowledged in order to get to the therapeutical property of writing. Alongside these questions, research is carried out on scriptotherapy and its effects on the diagnosed patients, particularly, the way this therapy indirectly influenced Sylvia Plath.

Sylvia Plath's reputation as a major American poet rests to a great extent upon the status of her psychological vulnerability. Much has been said about the issue of Plath's mental health, especially when talking about her last novel *The Bell Jar*, the one that has been selected as an object of analysis for this end of degree project. With these pages I intend to cast aside the sensationalistic tendency towards her condition. Instead, this study offers a revision of the therapeutic role that writing played in the author's journey. Sylvia Plath's reputation has always been on the spotlight, establishing her as a victimised character. For that reason, this analysis is intended to explore the persona within her confessional poetry. More specifically, the main subject matter of this project will be the exploration of the therapeutic qualities of poetry writing in Plath's work.

This end of degree project examines the power of indirect art therapy, which helps to open the discussion about consolidation of faith in the self, and ordering of a mental turmoil. Moreover, it analyses the therapeutic point of view of writing as a tool connected to the confrontation that Plath had to undergo as a female writer. There is an intellectual distancing from the emotions when translating them into confessions. Furthermore, this project gives a new approach to the relation between the abusive electroshock therapy

that both the author and the character suffer, and the actual therapy that it is for the author to write about it.

This end of degree project also analyses the synchronicity between Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood. Esther is the protagonist and narrator in *The Bell Jar*, the one who provokes the *roman à clef*, a literary genre in which the representation of reality appears overlaid with a *façade* of fiction. “The trouble was that I hate the idea of serving men in any way” (Plath, 2022, p.84) is the core of the whole novel. Greenwood is not an ordinary character for the United States of those decades, refusing ideas of femininity and gender roles, the young girl ends up as a hospitalised victim, naturally with no diagnosis. The perpetuation of the dichotomy of the female patient and the male doctor, and the unequal power relation between the two. Plath gives voice to an already loud woman, depicting descension into madness, mental institutions, losing control and wanting the pain to perish.

The question in *The Bell Jar* is to what extent women see themselves failing to satisfy their desire for agency and power, after being converted into neglected subjects within the 1950s society of the United States. As fiction that cannot escape from being read partly as autobiography, Plath admitted writing the novel as a work to free herself from the past. The story not only covers the mental breakdown and recovery of a young college girl, yet it mirrors the author’s own breakdown and hospitalisation in 1953 as well. It is during that time that women in the States experience the contradiction of a community that invites them to expand their opportunities through university and workspaces, and yet reinforcing the important role of housewives. Considering that writing this novel was one of the greatest causes of pain before taking her own life, this end of degree project attempts to offer evidence on the possible effects of writing therapy before Sylvia Plath’s death.

## **2. STATE OF THE ART**

### **2.1. SYLVIA PLATH**

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston in 1932. She published one collection of poems in her lifetime called *The Colossus* (1960), a novel, titled *The Bell Jar* (1963), and *Ariel*, another poetry collection, which was published posthumously in 1965. Her *Collected Poems*,

which contains her poetry written from 1956 until her death in 1963, was published in 1981 and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

Plath was very talented in high school, which led her to graduate and obtain various scholarships. The first one takes the author to Smith College in Massachusetts in 1951, and the second is a Fulbright scholarship to study at Newnham College in Cambridge in 1955, where Plath will later be an instructor in 1957-58. After one year in Cambridge, she meets the promising British poet Ted Huges and marries him. They spend their life together in between the USA and the English countryside, together with their two babies. During that time Plath works as a promoter, not having any time to be a writer, while Huges does work as a poet. Plath is known as a perfectionist, aspiring to be the perfect housewife, while being the perfect writer.

In the summer of 1962, Huges commits adultery, and Plath separates and moves to England with the babies. That same winter is very cold, she has no heat, the babies are sick and always crying, Plath never has time for her own occupation. Doctors tell Plath to either go to the hospital or with her mother. At that time the author is suffering from severe depression, feeling betrayed and alone, refusing pills and having failed with *The Bell Jar*, which only stops being criticised after her death. It is in 1963 when Plath commits suicide, under the carbon monoxide effects coming from her oven, only after taking prudent care of her babies not to suffer the same fate.

After Plath's death the world develops a sudden great admiration to her work, while Huges becomes the antagonist of her story. Huges is the one in charge of publishing some of Plath's works posthumously, which turns absolutely controversial, especially among her feminist readers. The British poet publishes *Ariel* after Plath's death, known as one of the most important books of poetry of the twentieth century, opening discussion among many critiques. Huges has been widely accused for having changed the order and some of the content of the collection, what changes Plath's original storyline towards a more pessimistic one. Regardless, the couple of writers are known for engaging in their work together, and what is more, taking criticism seriously and help on each other's work. Assia Wevill, Huges's beloved and mother of his third daughter, ends up taking her own life and her daughter's in 1969, in the same way as Plath after the long shadow of her death.

There is a necessary bond that must be mentioned any time one of the two authors are addressed, and that originates in 1950s Boston, when Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton meet for the first time. The two are emerging poets and dreadfully ambitious women in a cultural moment that requires strong willingness for that. Both realise that to pursue their desire to be writers compels determination, energy, and resilience, in order to operate within the status quo of their discipline. Plath and Sexton grow up in Wellesley, a suburb of Boston, however the two never meet during their teenage years. Plath is 26 and Sexton is 30 when their paths finally cross. Their meeting happens under well-known poet Robert Lowell's writing workshop at Boston University. The two come from very different economic backgrounds, and still have very similar relationships with their demanding mothers. (Crowther, 2021). From a young age, the two authors' thinking and acting is regarded as unusual for women at that time, both are ambitious in an unconventional gendered way. Neither accept the double standards regarding relationships, marriage, children, and careers, and the two authors can only cope with domestic and social expectations giving priority to their own time and ambitions. As Gail Crowther raises in her *Three-Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath & Anne Sexton*: "Women were not supposed to even think this in 1950s America, nor were they supposed to leave their husbands waiting for them at home while they went out to drink martinis with friends and lovers in the middle of the afternoon." (Crowther, 2021, p.17).

## **2.2. CONFESSIONAL POETRY**

Confessional poetry is the poetry of the personal or the "I." It emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s and is associated with poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W. D. Snodgrass. The confessional poets of the aforementioned decades pioneer a type of writing that will reshape the framework of American poetry. The tradition of confessional poetry has become a major influence on generations of writers that continues to this day. (Academy of American Poets, 2014).

Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, T.S. Eliot, Edward Estlin Cummings, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, are some of the most important names in the history of poetry tied to the city of Boston, hence the label "Boston Poets". An obvious reason for Boston's draw lies in the plethora of universities which can be found in the town. Greater Boston is the birthplace of two major



poetic movements: the Transcendentalist movement and the Confessional movement. For the formation of the latter, Boston University played a crucial role.

Pulitzer Prize winning poet Robert Lowell was a writing professor at the time in the university and the Confessionals were born out of arguably the most famous classroom of poetry's history. They all are well-known for holding an internal and deeply personal environment within their poems and not the external, literal setting in which they lived. Lowell's work, *Life Studies*, is regarded as a collection that forever changed the landscape of modern poetry, much as T.S Elliot did three decades before with *The Waste Land*. Considered by many to be the one of the most important poets in English of the second half of the twentieth century, both Plath and Sexton had the privilege to be students in Lowell's seminar and noted that his work influenced their own writing.

The confessional poetry of the mid-twentieth century concerns a subject matter that had not been object of debate before within American poetry. This type of poetry tackles real uncanny private experiences, feelings about death, depression, trauma, and relationships, from a predominant autobiographical perspective. The confessional poets were not simply journalising their emotions on paper; the pathway, construction and technique were of great importance to their work. These poets could withhold a high level of craftsmanship through their careful attention to and use of prosody, while treating the poetic self in such ground-breaking manner that could only but shock their readers. (Academy of American Poets, 2014).

Notwithstanding, Plath is not regarded as part of any specific genre or even writing style, the author is eventually related to the aforementioned one. Plath is a well-known educated writer, whose records touch from Smith College in Massachusetts in 1951, where the author would later become an instructor (1957-58), to Newnham College in Cambridge in 1955, both on account of scholarships. With this extensive curriculum behind her, the writer denotes to be widely knowledgeable about different writing styles.

### **2.3. SCRIPTOTHERAPY**

A term coined by Suzzette A. Henke in her work *Shattered Subjects*, "scriptotherapy" explores the idea of writing for therapeutic purposes. The concept examines whether writing about traumatic events might have a positive effect on one's physical and mental health. (Henke, 1998).

Several theories derived from the clinical literature have argued that adverse reactions to trauma provide a historical background for writing intervention. In “Scriptotherapy: The effects of writing about traumatic events” (2000), two main categories are selected as examples, namely: (a) abreaction theories, which are explained as adverse reactions to trauma from repression of emotional reactions to this kind of traumatic memories, and (b) psychodynamic-cognitive processing theories, in which those adverse reactions to trauma are set in a broader context of personality dynamics and developmental issues. (Smyth & Greenberg, 2000).

These theories not only conceptualise the need to release repressed emotions, but they also develop treatment for post-traumatic symptoms as requiring further elements. Evidence regarding scriptotherapy support the conclusion that written expression about stressful or traumatic events benefits both somatic and psychological health. (McCardle & Byrt, 2003). Freud already wrote about the cathartic effects of literature: “Our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions [...] enabling us [...] to enjoy our own daydreams without self-reproach or shame.” (Freud, 1985, p. 141). For Freudian theory, confessional poets’ indebtedness has in turn given rise to psychoanalytical and biographical interpretations. As Lurene de Vernaux reinterprets in her “The Freudian Muse: Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Self-Revelation in Sylvia Plath’s ‘Daddy’ and ‘Medusa’,” Plath’s work has particularly influenced the appearance of countless readings along the line of psychoanalytical interpretation. Plath herself uses psychoanalysis both as a tool of self-analysis and as a literary device, resulting in a highly theatrical psychodrama that forms a discourse about the self, in which autobiography and fiction are closely hybridised. (De Nervaux, 2007).

#### **2.4. AMERICAN HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND FEMALE PATIENTS**

The medicalisation that mental illness endures over the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century is something that merits attention. However, it is the period from 1900 to the 1950s that develops different theories as the basis for psychiatric practice. This has been considered in different occasions as “darkest era of American psychology.” (Sweat, 2018, p. 6). These years witness the appearance of new scientific theories such as Darwin’s “survival of the fittest”. Unleashing movements which, together with the cultural attitudes prompted by eugenics, will later use the thesis as justification for the mass sterilisation of those whom the society of the United States

deemed “unfit to breed”. Under this term, individuals outside of the field of mental healthcare would judge lower class, disabled, and mentally ill individuals. The last decade of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century saw gynaecological surgeries often used as treatment for mental illness in women. Many surgeons begin to remove the uterus or ovaries of women deemed mentally ill. (Sweat, 2018). American physician Carl Whitaker (2022) explains that those techniques injure and even kill patients and cause permanent damage to the structures of the brain. Whitaker (2022) continues explaining that success in such treatments encouraged the introduction of electroshock therapy and prefrontal lobotomies. Such procedures are notorious for inducing the state of catatonia, aphasia and impair cognitive skills in patients, rendering them more docile and complacent.

In Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* (1961) there is a presentation of the way in which madness serves society in the understanding of the 19th and 20th centuries. Under the social construct, “evilness” is a moral related disease, mad equals bad, and the latter must be punished, confined, separated from the “normal” sane people, otherwise madness can be spread and contaminate the “normal”. There is the necessity to avoid for it to become a negative influence in society. Foucault continues saying that mental institutions are places for the sake of order, to correct the different, controlled by the government. Moreover, the philosopher continues describing these as places where patients are violently treated as animals, and this issue needs to be understood under the mould of a patriarchal society. By this time, the traditional mentally related discourses enact that women are naturally more likely to fall into madness, what is more, that women are biologically inclined to lunacy.

In *Mental Illness and Psychology* (1962), Foucault develops the concept of madness as a social and cultural construction. The work illustrates that different historical periods with specific values result in having different conceptions of madness. Moreover, Foucault describes the negative effects on society caused by the conceptualization of psychopathology and its treatments. Throughout his career, the French philosopher critiques psychiatry as an institutional discourse that pigeonhole people with mental illnesses as patients, therefore incapable of productivity, and therefore, subhuman. Through this text the reader can deconstruct the approach towards women’s diseases regarding different historical periods. Foucault (1967) argues that madness stands in

opposition to reason, and irrationality is presumed when an individual is identified as mad. Rather they are typically judgements, as psychiatrists themselves have argued, of the way in which beliefs, ideas and actions are grounded.

Furthermore, Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady* (1985) unfolds the clinical treatments of female patients in mental institutions: lobotomies, insulin injections, Electroshock Therapy (ETC). By the time, doctors were male and these methods were justified on the consideration that the patients were women: they needed their brains less than men did. This is, in a nutshell, a period which considers that women do not need the same intellectual use of memory as men, scientifically speaking. ETC is commonly used as a method of destroying part of the brain. This electric stimulation is used on the brain to induce electroshock to treat mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or severe depression. Even though it requires anaesthesia, it is not always given. Plath herself does not receive it. The treatment is indeed a controversial therapy during the 40s and 50s; films, literature and newspapers do not agree with its use, still it is done under the surface. The American Psychiatric Association still recognises its effectiveness today. This technique destroys one's identity, rebelliousness, and the brain dies, making the patient docile, obedient, easy to control and to be manipulated. A technique criticised by scholars as the aforementioned ones for being used upon the internalised patients to become part of the uniformity of the collective group.

## **2.5. FEMINIST AUTHORS AND MADNESS**

In her book *The Female Malady* (1985), Showalter illustrates the link between female madness and the marginalisation of women in society. Showalter (1985) concludes that madness is one of the wrongs of woman, and that, the essential feminine nature uncovers itself before scientific male rationality. (Sweat, 2018). This notion cannot be separated from womanhood, bearing in mind that over the last two hundred years it has been reinforced by the treatment of women's mental illness. Taking Showalter's examinations, it is during the nineteenth century when a clear elevation of the male philosophers and scientists can be seen along with the fall of "female healers." (Sweat, 2018). Translating male scientists as the ones dominating the power of diagnosis. This moment witnesses the decline of women owning madhouses and asylums, and the recruitment of male psychiatric experts encourages. This leads to a change where women who are used to seek care or advice from other trusted females from their communities, turns to male mental

health experts for any problems they might have. The consequence for this shifting is the admission of great numbers of women to asylums and hospitals, where gender-specific disorders begin to be used with women who do not fit into their given societal role. (Sweat, 2018).

In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan discloses the persuasive dissatisfaction among women in mainstream United States society in the post-war world. The term “feminine mystique” is coined to describe the societal assumption that women can find fulfilment through housework, marriage, sexual passivity, and lonely childbearing. The concept symbolises the widespread unhappiness among the States suburban housewives during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. These decades see a regression from the first wave feminism and is most characterised for an earlier average of marriages, higher birth rates, a change in women’s education. Women do not behave as the feminists from the beginning of the century anymore. (Churchill, 2023).

Friedan’s book supports three main ideas. Firstly, it is against the conception that “anatomy is destiny” which becomes widespread during the second half of the century, especially after Sigmund Freud’s studies. Freud is the first to write about the misinterpretation towards the frustrations of a mother, and everyone else’s resentments. In the second place, Friedan defies the idea that women are different and therefore needing different kind of fulfilment, one that occurs with their sexual role of wives. With the third idea Friedan vindicates that the feminine mystique hurts women both personally and professionally. Furthermore, identity for both men and women is cultivated through the sense of personal achievement, which comes from a professional career. As US psychologist Abraham Maslow describes in his “Hierarchy of needs” in 1943, there is a pyramid of stages for human needs i.e.: basic needs, covered by psychological safety, psychological needs, related to belonging, love, and accomplishment, and in the third position self-fulfilment needs, connected to self-actualisation, and creative activities. These for Maslow are considered essential for people’s physical survival. Friedan’s text professes that prevailing attitudes in “truly feminine” women provoke having no desire for higher education, careers, or political life, since the complete fulfilment is found in the domestic sphere. (Churchill, 2023). Friedan (1963) notices that many housewives felt wrong when trying to articulate their feelings, stating it as having everything they could wish, therefore they could not properly complain. Women who do not understand their

unhappiness, due to their inability to live up to the feminine mystique. In the first part of the work, there is an explanation for the destiny of US women during the 1950s as suburban housewives, as “mystique”, it is only a decade later when the problem becomes explicit. In the second part, Friedan points to more personal views for the problem characterised by tiredness, routine, chin, trap, education, depression, desperation, emptiness, crying or anger, out of others. Friedan claims that these women have their basic needs completely satisfied, and that “they had hunger that food could not fill.” (1963: 24).

British writer awarded Nobel Prize Doris Lessing stated in 2007 that women’s search for personal identity could only be obtained through the discard of social trappings. In her short story “To room nineteenth” (1978), Lessing addresses the problem of the house as a prison, the lack of freedom, and the way these inevitably lead to a state of *catatonia*, known as the psychic death. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir portrays what to be the “Other” means, the role of the betrayed wife, the one who feels herself as the other. De Beauvoir interprets that “She” is differentiated when comparing her to a man, and at the same time, “He” will never be in relation to her. The French philosopher presents the dichotomy between “She,” being the inessential in front of “He,” the essential. “He” is the one to be the Subject; “He” is the Absolute. Hence, “She” can only be the “Other.” (de Beauvoir, 1949). De Beauvoir clarifies that to accept such role is accepting to be an object, and consequently to deny the subject self. A woman needs to discard otherness, immanence, reach for transcendence and subjectivity, instead of engaging the perpetual lie, the self-sacrifice.

Susan, the protagonist in Lessing’s story, depicts the matter that all of the aforementioned works share: captivity does not only occur inside the house but within herself too. Captivity is her own understanding of what to be a woman is. Susan knows her identity as mother and wife, but when losing that captivity her identity is lost too. Therefore, the character ask herself whether freedom can only be found in death for her. “Constructing Identities in an around Organizations” (2012) attempts to question established notions of identity as “essence,” “entity,” or “thing”. Understanding identity’s significance by conceptualising it as a “process”, meaning it is continually being under construction. Therefore, if the discussion is focused on the loss of the self, the question that needs to be answered is no other but “what is the self”. Moreover, the question lies

in whether a woman can be a self without defining herself in terms of men, or children. Or else if a woman can be defined if not in terms of something else. (Schultz et al., 2012).

“To room nineteenth” provides three possible scenarios for the one who takes her own life. In first one there is the conception of suicide as defeat, suggesting that the woman could have killed *the angel in the house* instead. The second one is suicide as triumph, one becomes subject, taking full control over her life, and she can only do it by ending it, as a source empowerment. In this reading, rather than being annihilated, she annihilates herself. The final conception is that of suicide as rebellion, where the woman refuses to conform to her socially constructed self, having no energy to stay, she decides to end her life to set her free. Suicide is thus presented as the only possible ending, when there is no place in the world, her true self must disappear.

### **3. CASE STUDY**

#### **3.1. SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL**

This end of degree project focuses on *The Bell Jar*, a novel written by Sylvia Plath, a fictional text widely distinguished by its semi-autobiographical character. The work is first published in January 1963 under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas, to prevent Olivia Plath from reading it. It is only posthumously when the book is published under Sylvia Plath’s real name.

*The Bell Jar* is a coming-of-age novel. It addresses the way a girl becomes a woman within the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s for young intellectual women. A time when these are expected to give up everything only to become housewives. The title is chosen to capture a symbolic definition of a mental asylum. It is an attempt to describe this place as an invisible tribunal, watching the patients from the outside as if it were a prison. Only the patients ignore what “crime” have they committed to deserve such cruel punishment, while unfolding trauma for both the physical and mental pain. Besides, it pictures the idea of being in some sort of incomprehensible dream, the protagonist sends a message herself: “To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream.” (Plath, 2022, p.259). The novel is set both in New York City and the Boston suburbs, and touches upon themes such as the growth through pain and rebirth, with the jeopardise consequences of psychiatric medicine. Esther Greenwood is

the protagonist and narrator of the novel, portrayed as an attractive, talented, and lucky young girl, who on the other hand, carries the burden of despondency.

Boston suburbs of the 1950s are her birthplace, where Greenwood grows up with her mother and brother and lacking the presence of a father, who dies when she is a child. Greenwood has just finished her junior year of college and is now initiating a career in the world of fashion. With a clear number of possibilities unfolding before her, the future that seems to be expected for her, concerning marriage, and domestic pursuits, Greenwood becomes hesitant about it. Yet, this resembles a mental trap with the character of a mental incapacity. The novel already starts presenting that Esther is neither satisfied with her surroundings nor with herself. In this sense the protagonist muses “I knew something was wrong with me that summer [...] I was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America [...] I guess I should have been excited the way most of other girls were, but I couldn’t get myself to react.” (Plath, 2022, p.2). Inside the novel, the reader is initially led to see a selfish behaviour in Esther, who does not reckon the effect her longing for death causes on the ones that surround her. Nonetheless, once giving her the role of the victim is easier to understand that it is her own terrifying world what drives her to these types of conducts. Plath expresses affection towards her protagonist.

Mrs. Greenwood is Esther’s mother, a woman that loses her husband, is left together with two young children, and struggles to make a living by teaching typing and shorthand. Another of the parallelisms both the author and the protagonist share: “Then I remembered that I had never cried for my father’s death. My mother hadn’t cried either.” (Plath, 2022, p.185). A traditional housewife who demonstrates loving her daughter and worries about her future. A mother that finds a stonewall trying to understand her daughter. Esther’s mother is the main figure of authority in her life. With her Esther finds this first contradiction where she must be an A Student, only to later realise that education for women is closely tied to conformity and obedience. The reader can already find the parallelism with Olivia Plath, who represents the same figure for Sylvia during her young years. Despite this, it is well-known that Olivia and Sylvia Plath shared a close relationship, in which her mother would always help with the guidance the author needed. Plath wants to represent the important breakthrough that it is for Esther to blame her mother for her madness, what is done through the character of Doctor Nolan. The moment



that Esther admits hating her mother, Nolan reacts with satisfaction, as if that acknowledgment explains Esther's condition and opens a shortcut in her recovery. Doctor Nolan gains her trust and love, being progressive and encouraging Esther's unconventional thinking.

It is also important to know about Buddy Willard, Esther's college boyfriend. Buddy represents everything that is expected to be every young girl's desire, athletic, handsome, attending church and thriving in medical school. Both protagonist and author adopt some estrangement, some emotional distancing from Buddy, when he is unfaithful to Esther. Moreover, the moment there is a physical separation since they move to different universities, the young boy believes that is the time to make her a completely unromantic marriage proposal. She would no longer be Esther to become "Mrs. Buddy Willard". In that moment Greenwood understands she will not become a submissive wife and mother to shelve her artistic ambitions. It is interesting to see the way both share similar experiences, showing great promise in their futures, and eventually falling into medical complications that ruin those expectations. Once she is far from her mother's authority, and after Buddy's affair, Esther becomes desperate to have her first sexual intercourse experience to any other man but him. Esther convinces herself that is the only means of proving gender equality. Virginity is another of the main burdens in Esther's life and she wants to terminate it. It is an obstacle in the rite of passage to become an adult woman. The moment Esther comes to the final loss of her virginity, she is at the mental hospital and is having one of her temporary leaves. The young girl has some complications and a strange unstoppable bleeding, still when she ends up injured, Esther feels fulfilled with the freedom of adulthood.

*Ladies Day* is the magazine Esther works for, the means from which she is supposed to abandon home and start chasing her dreams. This is another parallelism with Sylvia Plath, since the author has a similar experience as guest-editor in a women's magazine called *Mademoiselle*. However, it is the way Greenwood casts aside from her comfort zone and endures a clash in her expectations. To start feeling more insecure, lacking experience and the feeling of not belonging. Through the magazine, Esther encounters the inescapable moment of comparing herself to other women, attempting to find a referent in them. Previously, Esther's referents are as baffling as Mrs. Greenwood and Mrs Willard, who blindly follow femininity roles. These women make Esther believe that the opposite to the traditional lifestyle leads to a single path that can only end up in

spinsterhood and marginalisation, at least until the protagonist meets her boss, Jay Cee: “I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I’d know what to do. My own mother wasn’t of much help.” (Plath, 2022, p.43). Greenwood’s boss is a strong, determinate woman, who is not dependent on anyone, and is clear about what she wants and how to achieve it. Doreen is Esther’s companion in New York, a blond, beautiful southern girl. Doreen makes Esther envious with her nonchalance in social situations, which put Greenwood in the spectator position. Esther admires this character for her rebellion against societal convention. The two share a critical perspective as guest editors for a fashion magazine. Betsy, on the other hand, is another colleague at the magazine that becomes Esther’s friend. Even if they have many aspects in common, the colleague is so much optimistic that Esther cannot but reject her companionship, since it does not fit her own melancholy. Despite the new perspectives Esther gets from these women, they do not meet her expectations as referents: “I don’t see what women see in other women.” (Plath, 2022, p.239).

Freudian legacy in Friedan’s work helps to illustrate the way women of the American society of the 1950s are doomed by the super-ego, which only flourishes to perpetuate the past. Women who are forced into the abandonment of their awe towards education and intellectual fulfilment, only to be neglected and kept from the questioning of the feminine mystique. Friedan’s will to remind women of the decade to come back to this criticism can be read in the words of Plath’s protagonist. Esther is the one who cannot help herself from becoming frustrated with the nonsense of this society. A period that pretends to open the way for women, to later understand the education for the female subjects is only a new written law to undertake the role of a wife. Greenwood cannot comprehend the limitations she is imposed with, what ends up in this mental turmoil of the self.

“I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that 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 afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.” (Plath, 2022, p.95). The fact that Greenwood does not profess the idea of the truly feminine is what makes her a dissident character that cannot be satisfied within such reasoning. Nonetheless, Esther is forced into the feminine mystique when she has

no authority nor authorisation to live as she desires. Greenwood feels a disturbing sense of unreality, caused by the nameless dissatisfaction so common to women in this period.

### 3.2. INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCES

Friedan's problematic is captured in the Fig Tree metaphor, which depicts the incompatibility between marriage and self-realisation as options for the future of a woman from the decade. The protagonist meditates: "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." (Plath, 2022, p.85). Esther as a young, intelligent girl needs activity, stimuli, wider horizons beyond social expectations. A richer life is the opposite to domesticity. The tree symbolises the choices that a woman is faced with during her lifetime. When trying to picture the future, Esther sees a husband. However, she is "starving" and the figs are ripe, available. There are not so many, still she wants them all, all of the choices. Esther does not know which one to pick, since choosing one means losing all the rest, and that is only one life choice. In the end, the figs fall, overripe, and she cannot eat them anymore. She remains paralysed, not being able to decide what to choose, and now it is too late, she has nothing in the end.

Further to this, Foucault's criticism towards institutional discourse and the necessity to deconstruct the approach given to women's diseases is seen throughout the whole novel and is the core of Plath's philosophy. Greenwood is the characterization of this act of social exclusion the French philosopher unfolds in his work. (Bracken, 2015). The reader sees this portrayal of mental institutions when separating the girl from reality and treating her as "subhuman", the passive entity with no rights to take decisions over herself.

The protagonist of the novel has a cathartic moment in the mental hospital in which she thinks to herself: "Downstairs, in the hall, I had tried to ask him what the shock treatment would be like, but when I opened my mouth no words came out, my eyes only widened and stared at the smiling, familiar face that floated before me like a plate full of assurances." (Plath, 2022, p.156). Moreover, the text shows the authoritarian confinement that both Plath and her protagonist are submitted to, together with the social exclusion the two sustain, even from the ones who are supposed to be their confidantes. Everyone

around the two women castigate them into some sort of stigma, which resembles the famous diagnosis from the so-called 19<sup>th</sup> century term “hysteria”. Additionally, Showalter talks about the archetype of the mad woman. The American writer transforms the picture of the dominating discourse into a new concept of madness as an evaluative, socially constructed category with fluid, imprecise boundaries.

In *The Female Malady*, Showalter further on elaborates her claims as to the strong links between women and madness in the period 1830 through to 1950. The focus given to the nineteenth century very much applies to the subsequent period too. Coming back to *The Bell Jar*, one can see the clear materialisation through Plath’s lines of what Showalter will later write about. Therefore, if there is a questioning whether is there a real success in this treatment, the answer lies in the dichotomy between how both Plath and Greenwood start the journey about to graduate from high school and finish the same about to abandon the mental institution. Both Foucault and Showalter share the idea that madness is socially constructed, and that patients are passive subjects who are not given correct diagnosis by psychiatrists of the time. “I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done.” (Plath, 2022, p.158), Greenwood continually demonstrates she is not aware of what her condition is, nor why is she receiving such horrid treatment. Even if the protagonist is not well-fitted enough to see what is happening to her, the reader can see a brainwashing, a fragmentation of the self, the entire fall of the promising young girl into passivity and depersonalisation.

Important figures to feminism such as Doris Lessing and Simone de Beauvoir also discuss the condemned housewives. This figure is what Greenwood is constantly attempting to escape, the sense of entrapment, societal roles that damage women’s prospects. When the protagonist is not able to see through and understand what the real issue is, it is other characters who help her to become aware of it: “Of course, the famous woman poet at my college lived with another woman [...] And when I had told the poet I might well get married and have a pack of children some day, she stared at me in horror. ‘But what about your *career*?’ she had cried.” (Plath, 2022, p. 240). The French philosopher considers that to make oneself a lack of being means to make something out of nothing. (Weiss, 2001). Gail Weiss (2001) continues picturing de Beauvoir’s idea, in which the emphasis is placed on the making, the activity as a positive act of self-creation that should likewise proffer creative possibilities to others. These acts of self-creation de

Beauvoir describes are characterised as ways of choosing oneself, a self the philosopher considers as fluid insofar as it encompasses the “I was, I am, I will become self.” (Weiss, 2001, p.9). The subject matter of the French feminist lies on the idea that without freedom, one cannot choose, and because one has freedom, they have no choice but to choose. In the novel, Esther Greenwood is overwhelmed by the idea of having to take decisions, since the young girl realises her options are too limited.

### **3.3. WRITING AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL**

Ghandeharion (2016) claims that Esther is in between two wars, not knowing whether to follow her aspirations of becoming an independent free woman or choosing her desire to be a wife and a mother. The professor continues explaining that problem is the protagonist has been led to believe these are mutually exclusive choices. Besides, Anne Wilkinson (2007) describes the way Lessing puts the housewife’s disease as the female plight. This disease is described as an initial tension or pressure the wife experiences when having to complete mundane tasks, and yet develops into a much greater sentiment of gender inequality. This attitude, Wilkinson continues, “results in resentment toward men regarding the traditional duality in which women exist to serve and men exist to be served.” (Wilkinson, 2007, p. 48). Such interpretation brings the question back to the core of Plath’s belief though Esther words “The trouble was that I hate the idea of serving men in any way.” (Plath, 2022, p.84). Lessing critiques the ideas of the cult of domesticity, understood as the happy suburban wife who is sentenced to live an emotional life, within an intellectual marriage. This concept is the perfect representation for the problem that has no name, from loving wife to imbued woman with sense of spiritual sterility and despair. Eventually, this is the destiny Esther is led to. An intelligent, introspective woman, that is aware of her crisis, and madness, who ends up feeling depressed.

Greenwood gradually understands the “problem”, the enemy, and acts. As she gets increasingly aware of her life status, she simultaneously falls, what induces her into the idea of committing suicide. Bringing back the question whether Sylvia Plath can be an example of the effects on the use of scriptotherapy, different research on psychotherapy, such as Albert Ellis’ conducted research (1955), claim that writing therapy had positive health benefits for patients. Janella Moy (2017) determines that both bibliotherapy and scriptotherapy are likely to remain instrumental therapeutic tools for clinicians and individuals.

Writing therapy holds a growing position in healthcare as a non-invasive tool for providing individuals with improved health. (Mugerwa, & Holden, 2012). Gillie Bolton (1999) dedicates the subject of her research for the therapeutic and developmental power of creative writing. Bolton expresses that the process of writing required of the poets takes them into hitherto unexpressed and unexplored areas of experience. And continues explaining such understanding can only be carried out by very skilled psychotherapy/analysis or the other known arts therapies. Bolton exemplifies that even Anne Sexton was encouraged by her psychiatrist to write poetry. Patricia Stanley (2006) explains the journal “Psychosomatic Medicine” that in 2001 published the results of a computer-generated analysis of word usage in a total of 291 poems. Those poems were written by eighteen American, British, and Russian poets, nine of whom have committed suicide. Stanley illustrates that investigators found that the suicidal poets used more words indicating their detachment from other people and preoccupation with themselves, including many more instances of “I,” “me,” and “my”. Sylvia Plath was one of the poets included in the survey “the first-person singular is her consistent poetic voice.” (Stanley, 2006, p.400). Though it is true that Plath has been the example of the study of scholars such as Stanley since writing was not enough to avoid her to take her own life, there are other factors that need to be considered.

Henke claims that for one to implement the kind of healing [scriptotherapy], the public inscription of personal testimony is necessary, thus Plath could have found the solution. (Haas, 2006). Ghandeharion (2016) interprets that for Plath it is not just a personal issue, yet her frustration is the outcome of sociocultural factors. “The lack of role models and the contradictory messages sent by the media lead to her anxiety, disillusionment, and uncertainty.” (Ghandeharion, 2016, p.1). As Plath’s protagonist unravels in the novel: “The main point of the article was that a man’s world is different from a woman’s world and a man’s emotions are different from a woman’s emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds and the two different sets of emotions together. [...] Now the one thing this article didn’t seem to me to consider was how a girl felt.” (Plath, 2022, p.91).

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

This end of degree project has aimed to identify the effectiveness of writing therapy on Sylvia Plath’s condition, through her novel *The Bell Jar*. The research has been conducted

within the context of the United States' society during the 1950s pointing out the treatments applied to women in the field of mental illness.

The investigation carried out in this end of degree project has shown a research gap addressing the study of writing therapy around Sylvia Plath's work. One can find multiple literature around Plath's death. The myth that creates a whole universe around a female writer suffering from mental health issues and its portrayal upon the author's narratives and poems. Therefore, the present investigation raises an issue that has not been object of study before. Plath touches upon a large range of topics and motifs along her work, but one focus of her writing is to give voice to women's anger and unconformity. Considered one of the voices of the Second Wave Feminism, Plath has the honesty to write about the difficulties in parent-child relationships, about societal expectations, about frustration that leads to the longing for death, about the death in the world, about extermination, out of others. On the other hand, Plath's themes point out morality, nature, love, innocence, identity; in essence, her work puts forward the fragility of life. We celebrate this woman today for having the courage to express those emotions within the 1950s' western countries, in a post-war world.

In connection to the novel, this end of degree project illustrates a summary on the history of mental institutions within the 1950s United States, for the reader to understand that both Esther Greenwood and Sylvia Plath's circumstances cannot be detached from the context. It is essential to understand the scientific approach given first to general hospitalised subjects during those days, and later towards female mental illnesses. The mention of Michel Foucault's work is key on the philosophical shelter of institutionalised subjects such as Plath's case. New theories in the early twentieth century such as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic principles, reinforce the raise of the mind which pigeonhole women as particularly disadvantaged. It is in the second half of the last century when important figures to feminism start to rewrite history on the expectations placed on women.

For the foundation of this end of degree project, the following authors have been selected to support the themes that help drafting a gender perspective. Feminists such as Betty Friedan, who steps forward on Freud's psychoanalysis with her work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) to interpret "the problem that has no name". Elaine Showalter with *The Female Malady* (1985), in which the American writer depicts the connection between

womanhood and madness that is so commonly rooted on societal values. Doris Lessing with “To room nineteenth” (1978). A short story with which the British Nobel prize asserts the problem of identity that leads to the psychic death, found among many housewives of the decade. In connection to the latter, Simone de Beauvoir raises the whole concept of *The Second Sex* (1949) and deconstructs the role of a housewife to cast aside the idea of the passive subject lacking the freedom to choose.

The focus of this end of degree project has been established around the concept of the healing process as one of the specific qualities of poetry. This motion is substantiated on scientific evidence that present medical aid through the therapeutic condition of writing. Additionally, this research is conducted to remind that the author did not have the necessary material conditions for this therapy to be applied. Plath is in that moment left as a single mother who already suffers from depression, carrying the trauma from ETC, and the burden of a role the author still carried to serve and meet societal expectations imposed by her mother and a literary world that criticised her work.

Confessional writing is considered a subgenre of autobiographical writing. Bearing in mind that this poetry is used by both male and female authors, it is the second group the one to use it as a medium to expose their psyche and seek self-definition. (Jahan, 2015). Nowadays, we can acknowledge that literature for male writers has always been universal, in the sense that these never confronted limits with the choice of themes. On the contrary, female authors found in this genre a means of expressing their emotions while exploring women’s experience and gender identity. For this reason, the object of study of this end of degree project lies on the outcome this novel entails for Sylvia Plath, in connection to the use of scriptotherapy. Suzzette A Henke coined the term to prove writing’s positive effects for therapeutic purposes. Unfortunately, there is no possibility of getting to know Sylvia Plath’s mind today. Thus, I would like to conclude with a quote from Esther Greenwood’s character, which in my opinion illustrates this subject matter: “Then I decided I would spend that summer writing a novel. That would fix a lot of people.” (Plath, 2022, p.133).

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