Life Narrative in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Master thesis

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# Table of contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 4  
Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 5  
Motivation ......................................................................................................................................... 5  
Problem formulation ....................................................................................................................... 5  
Method ............................................................................................................................................... 6  
Theory ............................................................................................................................................... 7  

Chapter One: Baby-boomers of 1950s – Gender Roles in Clash of both Post-Victorian and Post-War Society .................................................................................................................. 13  
1.1. Suburbia’s Domestic Divas of 1950s and the Politics of Domestic Containment ......................................................................................................................... 14  
1.2. Repressive Hypothesis - Social Obsession with Purity vs. Echoes of Roaring Twenties Female Freedom .................................................................................................................. 17  
1.2.1. The Repressive Hypothesis or “Don’t talk about sex” ...................................................... 19  
1.3. Drastic Results of Household Containment and Repressive Hypothesis – Mental Illnesses and Suicidology of 1950s Housewives ......................................................................... 21  
1.3.1. Treatment or Torment – American Attitude towards Depression and Mental Illness in 1950s ................................................................................................................................. 25  

Chapter Two: Sylvia Plath – the Portrait of Life under a Cracking Jar ......................... 29  
2.1. Under the Atomic Dome – Plath’s writing in view of the 1950s politics ............... 31  
2.2. The Soul’s Containment – Plath’s female perspective .............................................. 33  
2.3. The year The Bell Jar cracked ...................................................................................... 36  

Chapter Three The Two Bell Jars – The interwoven stories of Plath and Esther in the Cold War reality ........................................................................................................................................ 51  
3.1. Politics of containment and purity of life through Esther’s eyes ............................ 53  
3.2. Male-dominant society and Esther’s true dilemma ................................................ 55  
3.3. Plath and Esther’s mother-daughter relationship in view of fear of motherhood .......................................................................................................................... 57  
3.4. Isolative and perfectionist nature as source of Esther/ Plath’s depression ...... 59  
3.5. ECT as Esther’s Catastrophic Treatment vs. Esther’s Cleansing Treatment . 61  
Discussion .......................................................................................................................................... 65
The Idea ................................................................................................................. 65
The Questions .................................................................................................... 65
The end-point ...................................................................................................... 67
Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 68
References ......................................................................................................... 70
Abstract

*The Bell Jar* was chosen as a primary source for the following dissertation, as it presents a unique period in American history with regards to female gender identity as well as consumer identity – both highly interwoven. Equally important is that the novel implies how the politics of containment during the Eisenhower years of power led to an ideology of repression and in that way crashed the women’s spirits and to some extent their health, especially the mental one.

As readers of *The Bell Jar* will know, this novel, frequently described as the autobiography is a recollection of the breakdown, and concluding recovery of Esther Greenwood, a white, middle-class young woman, living her life in the middle of Eisenhower’s era in America. Esther, just like Sylvia Plath went to the point in her life where she needed to negotiate the sexual and social contract of the 1950s: a contract which in the early pages of the novel seems hopelessly weighted in terms of male agendas and interests but gradually shifts towards the possibility of female autonomy and agency. The setting of Esther’s attempts for self-determination in a surrounding society which is obsessively domesticated and sexually correct in terms of its national identity and politics foreshadows an inevitable dramatics. Coming-of-age amongst marriage-oriented and ecstatically child-rearing women must have been immensely difficult for a young woman searching for her own identity and trying to establish her own needs.

Thanks to the form of the narrative, which is referred to as ‘life narrative’, the readers are supposed to feel more connected with the main characters of the story. We do actually feel more close to Plath while consciously reading her novel, due to the fact that we have strong proofs that the author mirrored her own emotions.
Introduction

Motivation

The fact is that the inspiration drawn from any autobiography as a category of study is that it connects together many different disciplines, such as literature, history, sociology, and obviously – cultural studies. In addition, feminism offers a distinctive spin from which one can view some concerns, connected with the described facts, highlighting the gendered constructions of the ‘self’ they typically assume. And also there are the ethical or even political consequences of such assumptions. The women – authors and the women – characters of the autobiographies or quasi-autobiographical novels are even more difficult to frame into a singular area of discussion.

Therefore, when choosing *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, I was well aware of the numerous assumptions already made and widely discussed by various critics and the notable authors. Accordingly, the immediate requirement was to be able to sieve through the available criticism and offer something worthy delving deeper, which was not to this date sufficiently analyzed.

Problem formulation

*The Bell Jar* is the first and only novel written by Sylvia Plath, and was published under the fictional name Victoria Lucas not a long time before she committed suicide in 1963. The book is always viewed as being heavily semi-biographical and gives the reader actually an insight into the author’s own life as she fought with her own clinical depression. What is more, the biographical descriptions of Plath’s life, give an uncanny feeling that whatever thought and feeling Plath speaks through Esther – the main protagonist of the novel, are actually her owns. That are the aspects which drew my attention – the mirrored lives of two women – the fictional one and the one who created her, gave her the life.

Diane S. Bonds provides a good opening to the thoughts that prevailed my concerns regarding an interesting and insightful assumption regarding this thesis, stating that: “Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* offers a brilliant evocation of the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and the soul-destroying effect this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high-minded young women like Plath” (Bonds, 1990, p. 49).
Accordingly, in the view of the above thoughts, this thesis tries to show that as creative as she was, Plath struggled with her deepening clinical depression in the period of history when women were still reduced to the world of domesticity and that atmosphere, combined with her personal life were enough of the mixture to be fatal. I also claim that *The Bell Jar* mirrors Plath’s desire to be re-born afresh and to be able to rid herself of stifling etiquettes of the 1950’s and become individual who is able to become an autonomous entity.

The only presumption that comes to mind is that given that Plath was mentally stable, she would be capable of dealing with loss of the man she loved and would move on to creating further with more personal experience and possibly – the approach of a fully developed mature person.

*The Bell Jar* was chosen as a primary source for the following dissertation, as it presents a unique period in American history with regards to female gender identity as well as consumer identity – both highly interwoven. Equally important is that the novel implies how the politics of containment during the Eisenhower years of power led to an ideology of repression and in that way crashed the women’s spirits and to some extent their health, especially the mental one.

**Method**

The methods or rather ways in which I plan on using in order to demonstrate the above claims, involve in-depth analysis of particular concepts. There are several key concepts that I intend to employ in this thesis. These will be based on the theoretical works and biographical sources that were chosen as the secondary sources which help to shape the full picture of the problems to be discussed, and the questions which will be postulated.

There will also be involved the pursue within the inquiry in the context of feminist theories and criticisms. I will make use of this theory to examine how Esther Greenwood’s female identity and performances are restricted and shaped by the Cold War era, presented through McCarthyism and referred to by Esther in the novel’s introduction by the Rosenberg’s execution. In addition, the prominent feminist scholars such as Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury et al., as well as Mary Ann Doane will be quoted to bring the discussion of self-policing, amongst various other aspects, further, so that the thesis will be also able to focus on the idea of so-called ‘the male gaze’. Although
offering separate, and sometimes opposing arguments, both authors claim that the women and female characters throughout the literary history (and not only literary, but history in general) were perceived as an object, while the men, the ones who bore ‘the look’, were always considered to hold the position of the subject.

Therefore, the following postulated question at that point are:

“How and if does Esther oppose this statement?”

“How does Esther Greenwood reconciles the fifties roles of gender with regards to her own contradictions on the subject of sexuality and gender roles?”

Accordingly, the next question I will try to find answer to is “What were the factors in Plath’s life, that combined with the fifties denigrated role of female gender led to suicide?”

In order not only to answer these questions but also to clash them with the feminist point of view and repressed sexuality, so vital in The Bell Jar, with Plath herself, I chose to support these views by work of another scholar – Robin Peel, whose Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics ideally refers to the shaping of Plath’s ideas and its influence on her literary output.

**Theory**

The early writings show the process of Plath’s coming into a period in which her initial idealism faded as she began to identify with the role of an creator, the writer, and especially, the aesthete. Although she was still a student at that stage, her construction of identity became more complicated and complex due to the nurturing questions of gender and sexuality. Peel claims that “she passes through periods when she accuses herself of penis envy and of having an inferiority complex. All of this points to the influence of her reading on her behavior and writing, not just for the ideas and theories that the reading supplies (Freud being an obvious influence in 1953), but for explanations and models which are variously encouraging and depressing.” (Peel, 2002, p. 102). That ‘penis envy’ so strongly suggests influence of the era in which she came to be born and raised – her world was still the one of men and it belonged to them, as well as freedom of sexuality.

It is also worth including, with regards to the aspect of feminism, some references from Foucault’s The History of Sexuality, who questions so-called ‘repressive hypothesis’. The author bitterly opens his book by stating that: “For a long
time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today. Thus the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality” (Foucault, 1978, p. 3).

The problem of gender roles is also extensively discussed in another bibliographical position written by Adrienne Rich and titled *Compulsory heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. Here the author presents how the society actually pursue a threatening politics by the simple “male right of physical, economical, and emotional access” (Rich, 2003, p. 26).

Numerous previous scholars have exhaustively studied *The Bell Jar* not only from feminist but also psychological point of view, providing valuable insights into such aspects as: feminism of Esther or mental illness, of both the character and the author of the novel.

All of them will be used in my thesis and to discuss the aforementioned themes. Nevertheless, hardly any of the scholarly articles and books I have located on *The Bell Jar* have touched upon the relationship between Esther’s diminished health and freedom of behavior, which I argue in my thesis is caused by the domestic values of the fifties, fear of Communism and “the enemy within” in connection with Foucault’s theory on the Panopticon and the self-policing society.

Yet, Elaine Tyler May and Deborah Nelson reveal that the culture of the fifties displayed contradictory views on certain issues concerning ideas about “citizen and state, self and society”, which led to the politics of containment (further elucidated in Chapter One). Nelson discusses in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* in which ways privacy trapped woman in particular. While the term privacy presumably indicated self-sufficiency, it came to symbolize “isolation, loneliness, domination and routine” for many confessional writers, linking Sylvia Plath as a confessional writer to the Foucauldian hypothesis, and arguing that confession does not lead to freedom, as the private is already penetrated by power (Nelson, 2002, p. xiii).

That isolation and actual loneliness of numerous women often led to suicides. In that matter, the thesis will provide quotation and estimates from Ronald W. Maris; Alan L. Berman’s book titled *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology*, in which authors strongly suggest that “Suicides do not usually happen out of the blue, solely as the product of intolerable acute stressors. Almost all suicides have relevant bio psychosocial life histories that make them variously vulnerable to or protected from suicidal crises.” (Maris, Berman and Silverman, 2000, p. 38).
Another point, which needs to be briefly mentioned as an introductory note, is that the thesis will focus also on form of narration within *The Bell Jar*, as it is one of the main aspects that throughout the years after the novel’s publishing made it so close to the reader’s heart. It is often repeated that *The Bell Jar* reads like a message from one’s closest friend – it is witty but never pretentious, often funny without trying too hard and finally sarcastic but not mean.

That is why it worth taking a closer look at the way the style is formulated, because the novel does such a splendid job taking the reader straight into Esther’s bothered mind that the effect seems natural. As it will be discussed in broader terms in the final Chapter, here is only the glimpse and a note – there is nothing more natural about any novel like having a first-person narrator. That technique is used in *The Bell Jar* with a great success. There are obviously the limitation of such form of narration, to mention but one – the subjective point of view of not only the character of Esther but also the other characters and situations.

Regarding the narrating techniques John Mullan simply states that “One basic distinction is between first-person narration and third-person narration. Novelists are themselves often conscious of this as a choice to be made when they sit down to a new work.” (Mullan, 2006, p. 40). That holds the truth, while Plath on purpose chose first-person form, however, Susan Snaider Lanser has characterized the voices of female narrators as ‘a site of crisis, contradiction, or challenge’ (Wexman, 2001). And here, one can also observe the accordance with the quoted author – Plath’s only novel does challenge the perception of women in 1950’s because at the same time it presents the crisis in one person’s life and it also delves deep into numerous contradictions in Esther’s life which lead to her mental breakdown.

The final introductory reference that I would like to make refers to the genre characteristics. The most literary critics assume that because of the similarities which can be traced between Esther and Plath this novel is nothing more but autobiographical fiction. Nevertheless, the autobiographical elements can be further defined, due to the fact that like many post-modern writers, Plath was best known for her confessional writing (Phillips, 1973, p. 28). The fact is, that scholars who have studied and analyzed her output often focused on the ‘self’ and her use of it in her consecutive writing. Throughout the years of her writing career she was known to write to express the situations and feelings she experienced, or to rid herself of negative feelings following
some traumatizing events. Even her own mother, mentioned that Plath believed in power of self-healing through written words (Kottler, 2006, p. 24).

In her only novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath depicted Esther Greenwood and her life-defining summer, which in fact, is the portrait of herself and her personal breakdown during the summer of 1953. However, her inward writing is different from the other confessional writings due to the fact that here she employed another – more witty style and tone in comparison with what Plath used to write in. Not only by that, but also through the fact that she decided to pen the novel under the pseudonym. In addition, Plath did not make herself the central character of the novel, while her confessional-styled peers made it the point of creating such literary form of fiction, which would could be best described as resembling a diary or a personal journal (Reyna, 2012, p. 8).

Another label, pinned to *The Bell Jar* is that of being the bildungsroman – the novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character. Accordingly, if it one decides to interpret it as a bildungsroman, one must narrow down the scope of the story to these fact which focus on telling the story of “Esther’s experiences of fifties America and her development and construction of sexual and social identity” (Bærevar, 2007, p. 60). As such, that would slightly defect from the complexity of the story, due to the fact that in some part, the novel is being narrated from the adult Esther’s point of view. But still, an acknowledge Plath scholar, Linda Wagner-Martin, says that the book is “in structure and intent a highly traditional bildungsroman” and then continues explaining that “*The Bell Jar* as a Female Bildungsroman, […] characteristic of bildungsromane, the story centers around Esther Greenwood’s maturation, with each character and scene added solely to contribute to Esther’s development. Moreover, the book discusses themes like identity and sexuality, which are prevalent in the bildungsroman genre” (Wagner-Martin, 1986, p. 55).

That could be all true, if not one aspect – in a traditional bildungsroman, the main protagonist evolves, develops from something like an ugly duckling into a mature, self-aware character. *The Bell Jar* has a dual form, with prevailing one which suggest the exact opposite – someone beautiful, aware of values and having some point of view degrades, falls virtually apart. Therefore, more appropriate notion would be that of Janet McCann says that “the book is really an ‘unbildungsroman,’ tracing Esther’s change from apparent knowledge and self-confidence to ignorance and uncertainty as the apparently open horizon shrinks to a point” (McCann, 2012, p. 9).
This thesis asserts that Esther Greenwood’s female identity parallels with the cultural context of 1950’s and as such it is under a constant influence of male oppression and a general social context in which she lives – that those factors not only define her but also fatally wound her psyche. Having said that, my aim is to present the clear parallels between the fictional broken woman – Esther and the one who created her – Plath in the mirror of the world that is their point in time.

In order to achieve the assumed aim, the following paper is organized into three chapters. The first chapter is a specific theoretical chapter, having in its scope the theory behind not only The Bell Jar with its protagonist – Esther, but mainly the author of the novel – Sylvia Plath. That is why, it presents the historical background to the era of The Bell Jar, as well as formative years of its author – Sylvia Plath – the 1950’s. Accordingly, it discusses the relationship between women and the impact this period had on their lives. It emphasizes that the Cold War’s rhetoric and America’s quest for national security created a kind of fear that also affected and formed the female identity in the fifties, resulting in their isolation, loneliness and suicidal risk. The chapter’s subsections try to outline some other vital subjects, such as analyzing key works which bear typical sense of feminism from the 1950’s, and also the genre which can be defined as the one typical for Plath’s literary output. The chapter also seeks to depict the early writings of the author and pin-point those of the aspects which may prove that her writing reflects the political situation and its influence on feminist perspective. Here, there are also included the psychological questions and reflections, regarding the typical treatment of schizophrenic patients in 1950’s. Through that, I will attempt at explain that with appropriate psychiatric medical help, which that period had lacked, most of the suicide victims amongst women of 1950’s could have been prevented. To achieve that goal, I will frequently refer to the Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath. That biographical position is the very one, where the reader can have an actual – real-life glimpse into Plath’s mind regarding her and the women’s in general position in so-called patriarchal, male dominated society.

The second chapter discusses the relationship between Plath’s personal experiences and the resulting writings. It tries to present the power of emotion and feelings which throughout the poet’s productive years consumed her to the point where she did in fact experience a creative outburst and reached the levels of mastery, but at the same time that it burnt her to the ash – mentally and eventually led her to death. As such, the chapter aims to show that in case of Plath, her marital problems – being
mistreated by her husband, cheated and finally abandoned, did have an extremely devastating effect. Although Plath was adult she was not mature – that is the leading thought of this chapter and as such it will be presenting various bibliographical proofs.

The final chapter is fully devoted to finding the answers to the postulated above questions. Therefore, as such, it analysis Esther’s feminine as well as sexual fulfillments in *The Bell Jar*. The chapter in particular raises questions concerning Esther’s ability to adapt to 1950’s customs of femininity. Through its three subsections I address the following questions: “How and if does Esther oppose this statement?” Secondly, “How does Esther Greenwood reconcile the fifties roles of gender with regards to her own contradictions on the subject of sexuality and gender roles?” And eventually, “What were the factors in Plath’s life, that combined with the fifties denigrated role of female gender led to suicide?” As such, this sub-part ultimately seeks to answer the question whether *The Bell Jar* can be perceived as quasi-autobiographical and bildungsroman.
Chapter One

Baby-boomers of 1950s – Gender Roles in Clash of both Post-Victorian and Post-War Society

If you were a woman reading this magazine 40 years ago, the odds were good that your husband provided the money to buy it. That you voted the same way he did. That if you got breast cancer, he might be asked to sign the form authorizing a mastectomy. That your son was heading to college but not your daughter. That your boss, if you had a job, could explain that he was paying you less because, after all, you were probably working just for pocket money (Gibbs, 2009 online).

Susan Levine, in her book Degrees of Equality: The American Association of University Women and the Challenge of Twentieth-Century Feminism claims that “by most accounts, the women’s movement died during the 1950s. Described by some as ‘the doldrums’ and by others as an era in which the search for security after two decades of depression and war led American women to focus on family life to the exclusion of public concerns, the 1950s appears to be a decade of passivity and domesticity” (Levine, 1995 p. 67).

That can be true, purely from the organizational point of view. However, there is the weighing political force which actually caused such situation and it would be short-sighted to say that the women were actually the ones that shaped the world around them to become safely stuck in suburban houses domestic divas of 1950s. In reality American social culture at the time was entirely based on the family. In that respect, the social organization relied on the traditional notions of the male and female role in the family: it was a model of community based on stereotypes.

In this chapter I intend to present the American society in the 1950s, with special focus on the women’s situation in that era. In order to achieve this, I will at first discuss how the development of the contemporaries’ dream – living in suburbia, led to the phenomenon of the domestic containment. Next, I will focus on the social obsession with purity, which was dictated by the political situation of this period. With that, I would like to stress how loneliness in suburbia, combined with politically warped morality influenced the psyche of the American women. I will explain the issue of the
‘repressive hypothesis’, as well as the problem of Valium-like substances abuse by the housewives. The final aspect which I will deal with is the 1950s’ attitude towards mental breakdowns and illnesses, which, due to previously mentioned issues, were common among the American women.

1.1. Suburbia’s Domestic Divas of 1950s and the Politics of Domestic Containment

Marriage in that period became an unbelievable powerful institution; young people were not concerned if they were going to get married, but when and with whom? Young women were not supposed to doubt whether having babies is fine with them, but only how many babies they were going to have. According to Harvey, the Americans were getting married earlier than ever and “the median marriage age dropped from 24.3 to 22.6 for men and from 21.5 to 20.4 for women” (Harvey, 2002 p. 69).

Most young couples had children as soon as they got married and Lambs states that women had “an average of 3.2 children before their late twenties” (Lambs, 2011, p. 9). The author of The 1950’s and 1960’s and the American Woman: the transition from the “housewife” to the feminist makes it clear that in contrast to common beliefs, large percentage of the housewives were actually highly educated women, nevertheless the widespread social perception that “family and books don’t mix” was still extremely rooted in people (Lambs, 2011 p. 10). One can ask, what were the factors that were behind this frenzy rush into domesticity? It seems important to realize that after the war, which was the time of difficulties and deprivation, young people simply were attempting to rebuild a normalcy, have lives immersed in the new post-war prosperity. However, there was more than that which was in fact making the Americans early couples with bunch of children; “it was a general attempt to elevate family and domesticity into a national obsession, as Lambs claims” (2011 p. 10).

There is also the reasonable question ‘Why did the young Americans agreed to those marriages and parenthood with such enthusiasm and dedication?’ The fact is that scholars and observers of the postwar era often point out to the connections between the cold war politics, suburban development, race relations, and the domestic ideal. Accordingly, the context of the cold war refers to earlier unnoticed link between political and familial values. According to Elaine T. May “Political opportunists like Senator Joseph McCarthy preyed upon these anticommunist sentiments. McCarthyism targeted perceived internal dangers, not external threats. […] Anticommunist crusaders
called on Americans to strengthen their moral fiber in order to preserve their freedom and their security. A society weakened by luxury and decadence would be vulnerable to subversion from within” (May, 2008 p. 12-13).

From that, there were only minute steps towards re-shaping the political containment into domestic containment in which there was only one type of ‘casualty’ – women, locked out in the new surrounding of comfortable suburbs.

Jane De Hart has explored the theme of domestic containment more fully in several essays that explore gender relations and national identity during the Cold War. She also is certain that in times of national crisis “formative configurations of gender, sexuality and nationhood” are “often reasserted, sometimes coercively, in constructions of national identity” (De Hart, 2001 p. 143). Domestic containment operated in the 1950s at a time when “fear of communism permeated American life” and policymakers believed that “stable family life [was] necessary for personal and national security as well as supremacy over the Soviet Union” (125).

Referring to 1950’s “dream come true”, which was by all standards living in the suburbs, G. Matthews says that: “Critics of suburbanization point to a number of problems they believe it created. For a housewife in the1950s, a suburb was frequently lonely and isolating in those years before women went out to work in large numbers” (2000, p. 304).

On the other hand, during her research for actual references regarding the lifestyle and feminine feelings in the 1950’s, B. Harvey describes some women’s reflections on finally getting a house for their families: “The house was surrounded by a lake of mud. But I was thrilled – it was a very exciting thing to have a house of your own. And everything you dreamed about was there, everything was working, brand-new, no cockroaches. You got a beautiful stainless steel sink with two drains, cabinets, drawers, a three-burner General Electric stove with oven, a Bendix washing machine. The only thing I had to buy for the house when we moved in was a fluorescent tube over the kitchen sink- the fixture was even there!” (Harvey, 2002 p. 113)

With that picture in mind – new house, new appliances, everything ‘cookie-cutter’ pretty, the life in the suburbs looked encouraging, if not tempting. It is obvious that people were relatively further from the city centers but all job opportunities were still available, families lived in comfortable houses, had nice, big gardens and the social life was blooming between all of those who moved there. As Lambs presents it:
“Barbecues, associations, cocktail parties and different types of popular activities were a part of everyday life for these families” (Lambs, 2011 p. 5).

Furthermore, many people believed that their children would receive a better education in suburban schools (Matthews, 2000 p. 305).

In this society driven by the need to reproduce as much as one could – just to fight back the Communists, children were the obvious center of the suburban life, as well as the reason why so many families decided to leave big cities and transfer to these areas where the feeling of safety and community were dominant. Lambs quotes Carol Freeman’s recollection of suburban life in 1950s: “It was a warm, boring, completely child-centered little culture. We sat around in each other’s kitchens and backyards and drank a lot of coffee and smoked a million cigarettes and talked about our children” (Lambs, 2011, p. 6). In the early years, the suburbs were not connected with the cities by means of public transportation and still not many people owned cars. That actually made neighbors even closer, when they helped each other and shared cars to transport their children. Accordingly, women were forming tight groups which mutually helped and supported each other.

But isolation was there, ever-slightly looming, creeping to all those women left for hours in the suburbs, with their brand new TV sets booming scary information regarding the potential communistic threat. And, to add to this isolation, there was another aspect which bound the women of 1950s to become nearly schizophrenic – they were supposed to remain pure morally, stick to submissive role of wives eagerly awaiting their husbands arrival from work.

It is the fact that, the role of the women in the 1950 – a unique template of perfection was created for the purpose of all society that all women had to identify with. Women needed to be ideal mothers, caring wives and smart homemakers. However, this perfection was deeply connected with social standards, due to the fact that raising of the new generation was extremely important at this time, therefore the women worked diligently to make it happen and to make it successfully.

Such model of the society, stemming from the striking division between the masculine and feminine roles was, as it was explained above, created by the government but it was cleverly propagated by the means of communication such as TV, magazines or radio programs. The verbalism of this model, nicknamed by B. Friedan as “feminine mystique”, was one of the main missions as far as the women’s magazines of the 1950’s are concerned. In her renowned work, B. Friedan writes:
The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and female; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home. The magazine surely does not leave out sex; the only passion, the only pursuit, the only goal has woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man. It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit? In the magazine image, women do no work except housework and work to keep their bodies beautiful and to get and keep a man (Friedan, 1997 p. 82).

In order to support the opinion, that media had its huge role in solidifying the image of ‘domestic diva’, N. Walker explains the importance of feminine magazines in the construction of a national definition on women’s role in society and the standards of middle-class: “A survey of the magazines’ contents from 1940 until the late 1950’s shows both an expanding definition of the domestic – to include national holydays and psychological adjustment- and an increased emphasis on the possibility of improvement in all areas of life” (Walker, 2000 p. 31).

In 1950’s Home Economics textbook intended for the high school girls, taught how to prepare for married life. In accordance with it, women had the sole purpose of creating the heavenly port for their husbands, where everything was working perfectly and was centered around breadwinner – husband.

And so – although contained in their suburban realms and living both the dream life of wife in modern house and a scared woman in the nuclear threat era, 1950’s housewives had another aspect to be aware of – the moral standards they had to keep up.

1.2. Repressive Hypothesis - Social Obsession with Purity vs. Echoes of Roaring Twenties Female Freedom

In The Bell Jar, those echoes of social trend and need for purity is well presented in Buddy's fall from grace which comes after his confession that he had slept with another woman. Realizing that he was not pure in reality, devastates her. Later in the novel, the probable cause of her obsession is hinted at: “All I’d heard about, really, was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for” (Plath, p.68). Here we can understand, that what caused her desire for her own purity, which seemed as almost obsession was not a religious standard, or not even the crashing influence of an authoritarian father or moral mother, but it was the general social ethos of 1950’s America.
As it was already widely discussed above, it was the social desire to form the unified front of purity, moral values and the image of family which would be strong enough to overpower lurking threat of Communism. However, the shape it took, the determination of those involved in the whole process, cannot solely be ascribed to fascist-like approach of Joseph McCarthy to sexuality and purity in general.

As this chapter’s main title suggest, not only the situation of women came to limbo because of the return of GI after the World War II. It was also shifted of its path by the reverse changes after the freedom experienced in numerous areas, which women had during the Roaring Twenties. That Victorian society in 1920’s was something that differed drastically from the situation in 1950’s. As Freedman explains: “By the 1920s, the Victorian ideal of innate female purity had disintegrated. Stimulated by Freudian ideas, a critique of “civilized morality” infiltrated American culture. Meanwhile, working-class youths, blacks, immigrants, and white bohemians had created visible urban alternatives to the old sexual order. They engaged in a sexually explicit nightlife, used birth control, and accepted sexuality outside marriage. Even for the middle classes, a recognition of female sexual desire and the legitimacy of its satisfaction – preferably in marriage but not necessarily for procreation – came to dominate sexual advice literature by the 1920s. As birth control, companionate marriage, and female sexual desire became more acceptable, female purity lost its symbolic power to regulate sexual behavior” (Freedman, 2006, p. 123).

I am pretty certain that those children, those women raised by the generation of parents shaped by the Roaring Twenties were involuntarily taught that women do have right to be rid of male dominance and decide about herself, at least to some extent. And with the Russian threat, connected with the shift in the perception of morality, that knowledge was distorted. On one hand there were freedoms offered by the achievements from 1920’s and on the other there were blaring TVs dictating to become modest, family-oriented female citizen in the fight against Communistic threat.

What is also interesting, that paradise of the dreams come true – the life in the suburbs was not for everyone. G. Matthews remarks that “Federal Housing Authority policies discriminated against single women and people of color as homeowners” (Matthews, 2000, p. 304).

That attitude was probably strongly based on the actual political situation, which dictated that Deviations from the norms of appropriate sexual and familial behavior might lead to social disorder and national vulnerability” (May, 2008 p. 13).
That is why, first of all, this challenge prompted Americans to create a family-centered culture that was more than the internal reverberation of foreign policy (28). Secondly, May points out to the fact that such pure and moral society needed to condemn any forms of improper, not only politically but also sexually tendencies. That is why: “the most severe censure was reserved not only for those suspected of ties to the Communist Party, but also for gay men and lesbians, who faced harsh repression and official homophobia. As anticommunist crusaders launched investigations to root out “perverts” in the government, homosexuality itself became a mark of potential subversive activity, grounds for dismissal from jobs, and justification for persecution” (May, 2008 p. 27-28). In fact, what came to be known as the ‘lavender scare’ – homophobic reaction, actually bigger number of people lost their jobs than those who were fired due to being suspected as communist sympathizers.

Accordingly, with the onset of frantic red and lavender scare, the family became the center of all of the unease, and conveniently, domestic ideology that was just being shaped provided an ideal response to that. In May’s words: “The legendary white middle-class family of the 1950s, located in the suburbs, complete with appliances, station wagons, backyard barbecues, and tricycles scattered on the sidewalks, represented something new” (2008 p. 13).

Sandra Lee Bartky provides an interesting perception of Foucault’s view on so-called ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1979: 138), according to which people of their own free will commit the act of self-policing in order to obey the rules and sustain the required cultural norms and standards. She showed how women control their bodies and discipline themselves to match up to the “men’s ideas of correct female appearance” (Bartky, 2003 p. 36). The aspect of ‘self-policing’ will be further discussed in the following chapter, however, it was necessary to point out that in the 1950s women felt obliged not only to play the role of the perfect wife, mother, citizen, but it seems that they also forced themselves to ‘think no evil’ and remained pure both in deeds and in words. It can well be ascribed to so-called ‘repressive hypothesis’.

1.2.1. The Repressive Hypothesis or “Don’t talk about sex”

In reference to the repressive hypothesis power was used to ban discussion of sex and with that, the discourse on sexuality. Foucaults claims that: “Through the political economy of population there was formed a whole grid of observations
regarding sex. There emerged the analysis of the modes of sexual conduct, their determinations and their effects, at the boundary line of the biological and the economic domains. There also appeared those systematic campaigns which, going beyond the traditional means-moral and religious exhortations, fiscal measures-tried to transform the sexual conduct of couples into a concerted economic and political behavior” (Foucaults, 1978 p. 27).

The institution of marriage become the only one with the complete power of what is and is not said about sexuality, that is why anything outside the confines of marriage was not supposed to be discussed. Foucault easily explained why repressive marriage could possess the sole rights to discuss the sexuality. The repressive hypothesis connects sexual repression with the emergence of the bourgeoisie. Opposite to the aristocracy which came before it, the bourgeoisie gained richness through their own hard work. And as such, this class would value ethic, and would not involve itself in anything that could be described as ‘frivolous pursuits’. This was the taboo that constituted the difference, or at least the manner in which the taboo was applied and the rigor with which it was imposed. It was here that the theory of repression – which was gradually expanded to cover the entire deployment of sexuality, so that the latter came to be explained in terms of a generalized taboo” (Foucaults, 1978 p. 128). Therefore, sex for mere pleasure became disapproved as an unproductive waste of energy (114).

Freedom of speech is one of the core aspect associated with America, that is why it comes as shocking that there was – not so long ago – the period when some discourses were frowned upon or even banned by those yielding the power. In Foucault’s opinion, knowledge and power to cut people from it are interlinked. With blooming red and lavender scare it seems that those in power felt obliged to control what and how would be available to be told about sex. And, as it was mentioned above – purity was highly important in the society of 1950s, there was no place for facetiousness and there was no point in laxing the morals through improper literature.

Adrienne Rich in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality” points out that “male empowerment in heterosexual relationships throughout social institutions has been violating women’s psychic and physical confines on the grounds of male needs, male fantasies about women, and male interests in controlling women- particularly in the realms of sexuality and motherhood- fused with the requirement of industrial capitalism” (Rich, 2003: 14).
On the other hand, it cannot be omitted that in 1948 and 1953, the United States was shocked to its very core by the publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, commonly known as the Kinsey Reports. Those two extensive sex surveys, researched by zoologist Alfred Kinsey and his team of researchers, visually presented the results of conducted interviews amongst American men and women. The provided information included for example, the age of first sexual intercourse, number of partners, occurrence of premarital or extramarital sex, possible homosexual and lesbian affairs plus numerous other sexual statistics. Kinsey Reports’ findings were shocking not only for experts but mostly, to the general public. As Reumann stresses: “Kinsey demonstrated that much of Americans’ sexual activity took place outside of marriage, and that the majority of the nation’s citizens had violated accepted moral standards as well as state and federal laws in their pursuit of sexual pleasure” (Reumann, 2005 p. 1).

What is more, W. Breines states that girls growing up in the 1950’s were the part of a immensely contradictory culture: “They balanced precariously on the edge between two cultures… this generation was inverting an emergent culture, one in which new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships were continually being created in contrast to a residual culture effectively formed in the past, but still active in the cultural process” (Breines, 1992 p. 88).

That is why, it is not difficult to understand that modern suburban home with all its amenities was not, in fact, enough to fulfill most women of this generation. Beneath the illusion of happiness, women wanted more – more power, more control over their lives and above everything – more autonomy. But it was all forbidden and what is even worse – it was stuffed between the warped morality of 1950s and social standard empowered by the government, where male dominance resurfaced as if it were reborn in the pure form of Victorian society. It inevitably caused the collateral damage – some women, similar to Esther from *The Bell Jar* were not able to follow the social trend and found themselves entrapped in their psyche.

### 1.3. Drastic Results of Household Containment and Repressive Hypothesis – Mental Illnesses and Suicidology of 1950s Housewives

The dissatisfaction that women started to feel at the end of the 1950’s became a national issue, summarized in the catch phrase “There is something missing”, deeply felt by a great many women. According to Lamb “Most certainly women were put
under an immense pressure to return to their traditional role as mothers and housewives, completely dedicated to their children and dependent on their husbands. Some women felt the government was going too far when it started to promote the idea that women should be happy washing dishes, preparing meals, cleaning the house and be the “ideal” woman” (Lamb, 2011 p. 1).

In fact, the relationship of women, sexuality, and nationalism, postwar ideologies of American womanhood were far more complex than a focus solely on purity would suggest and as such had drastically deeper results on the feminine psyche. 1950s with its Cold War, propaganda of building fallout shelters in the backyards, constant ‘red’ threat and strained moral standards found its way under the mental surface of the Americans’ subconscious, where it remained as a chronic anxiety – especially, in women’s minds.

Maris and Berman, the co-authors of Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology provide data which suggest that generally, “women are diagnosed with mental disorders more frequently than men are. Some significant gender differences in specific disorders are also evident. Depressive illness (actually several distinct disorders), the disorder most often associated with suicidality, is more common among adult women than among men [...] presents twice as frequently with a secondary anxiety disorder among women [...] and is three times as frequent in chemically dependent female adolescents (Maris, Berman, & Silverman, 2000, p. 155). These are data which were easily applicable to the American 1950s due to the fact that the authors enumerate depression and anxiety as most common reasons for suicides. They also stress that “female completed suicide rates peak in midlife (in the United States), particularly in the menopausal years. Whether this observation may be explained by the biological changes inherent in menopause, by life experience losses incurred during these years (e.g., the ‘empty nest’), or by (more likely) combinations of these or yet other factors cannot be said, as this phenomenon has received no serious research attention” (Maris, Berman, & Silverman, 2000, p. 156).

Ida Kodrlová remarks one very important factor, regarding the risk of suicide, which smoothly covers with the realm of suburban women in 1950s – “Stigma associated with help-seeking behavior; Barriers to accessing health care, especially mental health and substance abuse treatment” (Kodrlová, 2006 p. 5-6). It can be easily imagined, that the women destined to live in that era were not supposed to show any signs of weakness due to the super-imposed necessity to be strong and perfect in a
society in constant threat of being potentially attacked by the Russians. Based on my previous findings, I would even venture the statement that *if* and *when* some woman would admit to feeling anxiety or over-bearing stress, she would be simply institutionalized, due to being socially unadapt and as such – too ‘soft’ to protect the image of America.

That is why the influential feminist writers of the time openly criticized the institution of psychiatry and they argued that it was one of the main ways in which society tried to repress and control women. Such attitude was caused by the fact that women who did not behave ‘properly’ risked being closed in the psychiatric care. Accordingly, feminist writers opposed the practice of psychoanalysis, the ever-present in 1950s approach in psychiatry. Another psychiatric therapy that drew feminist attention was the class of drugs called ‘minor tranquilizers’ (Tomes, 1994, pp. 348-349).

Guise-Richardson, the author of an extensive paper *Protecting mental health in the Age of Anxiety: The context of Valium’s development, synthesis, and discovery in the United States, to 1963* assumes that the widespread Valium use was a product of its time. The ways of understanding mental health, medicine, and the interaction of body and mind, all play into justifying widespread use of minor tranquilizers, such as Valium (Guise-Richardson, 2009 p. 213). The author also draws a tricky comparison between June Cleaver – mother from the popular 1950s and 1960s television show *Leave it to Beaver* – stuck forever in a perfect home, raising a perfect family, always perfectly calm with the abuse of Valium and its consequent ill-fame based not only on clinical trials but also infamous song by Rolling Stones ‘Mother’s Little Helper’ (Guise-Richardson, 2009 p. 2). Although the song appeared as late as 1966, it has a strong reference to the sense of feminism in 1950s.:

“Kids are different today,
I hear every mother say.

Mother needs something to calm her down,
and though she’s not really ill, there’s a little yellow pill.

She goes running for the shelter of a mother’s little helper,
and gets helps her on her way, gets her through her busy day” (Guise-Richardson, 2009 p. 2).

The identity crisis of the “housewife” in the late 1950’s is the best described by B. Friedan who bitterly confesses:
I’ve tried everything women are supposed to do – hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning, being very social with my neighbors, joining committees, running PTA teas. I can do it all, and I like it, but it doesn’t leave you anything to think about- any feeling of who you are. I never had any career ambitions. All I wanted was to get married and have four children. I love the kids and Bob and my house. There’s no problem you can even put a name to. But I’m desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I’m a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bed maker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I? […]I seem to sleep so much. I don’t know why I should be so tired. This house isn’t nearly so hard to clean as the cold-water flat we had when I was working. The children are at school all day. It’s not the work. I just don’t feel alive (Friedan, 1997 pp. 64-65).

The symptoms described by the renowned author and feminist are typical of clinical depression. Such symptoms were probably prevalent in the lives of the suburban women in the 1950s when isolation and constant anxieties – not only regarding the political situation, but also those centered on sustaining the perfect standards of housewife, were at hand day by day in an unchanging scenery.

The consequences of this American dream “golden cage” were felt all over the country. An increasing number of frustrated and overpowered women were a threat to the image of perfection that this social ideology wanted to impose. Lamb explains that “The distinction between the image promoted by the time’s ideology and the feminine reality of the 1950’s was so sharp that women started to think that they themselves were the problem, that they were trapped into something that they couldn’t identify” (Lamb, 2011 p. 31). The author also points out that “On the growing number of women that were getting regular psychiatric help, the married ones were reported unhappy and unsatisfied, the unmarried ones were suffering from anxiety and depression. Strangely, a number of psychiatrists admitted that unmarried women were happier then married ones” (32).

The impact of the suburban isolation on women’s lives was broadly analyzed and described by the feminist researchers and their findings were unanimous – all those ostensibly perfect and happy housewives were trying to find the outlet for their growing frustrations. Some of them were able to fulfill themselves in creative hobbies but the remaining group was comprised of the women who simply found the escape route in increasing abuse of tranquilizers, such as Dexedrine, and later Dexamil (Harvey, 2002 p. 125).
That is why, in the late 1950’s, psychiatrists and analysts described so-called ‘housewife’s syndrome’ which had serious pathological syndromes such as: “fatigue, nervousness, sleeping troubles, heart attacks, suicides, bleeding ulcers, hypertension and other serious diseases” (Lamb, 2011 p. 44). Friedan simply states that at one point “women have outgrown the housewife role, they couldn’t go back into their limited and isolated world” (Friedan, 1997 p. 425).

1.3.1. Treatment or Torment – American Attitude towards Depression and Mental Illness in 1950s

From the perspective of our time, the clinical care provided to women in 1950s would most probably be considered as highly inefficient, but from the perspective of the first half of the last century and the 1950s, it might have been perceived as perfectly appropriate (Kodrlová, 2006 pp. 1-2). Although modern psychopharmacology was not highly-developed and therefore the drugs to dampen the depression were not sophisticated enough but the new methods in psychotherapy were being developed. Therefore, when we look at The Journals, we can see that Plath had relatively good access to psychotherapy. After her first suicide attempt in 1953 she met her therapist Dr. Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse Beuscher, with whom, as Paul Alexander wrote, she stayed in seemingly constant contact from September 1953 until February 1963 either by mail or by telephone (Alexander, 1999 p. 100).

Hirshbein presents rather striking image in her article titled Science, Gender, and the Emergence of Depression in American Psychiatry, 1952–1980 when she states that “in the early 1950s in the United States and in Europe, physicians began to work in collaboration with pharmaceutical companies to test a wide range of medications on a variety of patients. […] pharmaceutical companies also worked with physicians who were employed in mental hospitals to test their products there. […] the hospital environment for psychiatric patients at mid-century could be chaotic, with disordered persons and overcrowded conditions. In this setting, psychiatrists who used the new medications measured success by whether the patients appeared to be improved, particularly in measures such as the lessened need for ECT or whether the patients could be advanced toward discharge” (Hirshbein, 2006 p. 194). What is more, “by the 1950s and 1960s the hospital population had shifted toward younger, more neurotic women” (196).
As it was mentioned, the psychiatry was slowly developing into its appropriate form at the time so sadly, social science researchers began leaning towards the idea that there might be something connected with women’s social environments that would explain their obviously higher tendency to become depressed only by the end of 1960s (Gove, 1972 p. 38). Although there were still psychiatric researchers focusing on former assumptions regarding the women’s role and their nature in society when they described women’s depression, luckily, there were from time to time those, who were far more compassionate towards women and recognized the importance of treating women for depression (Abernethy, 1976 p. 657).

In the early 1950s, psychiatrists tended merely to diagnose or rather describe the depression which women experienced as ‘endogenous’ – depression type that seemed to come out of nowhere, and ‘exogenous’ or ‘reactive’ which could have been developed due to a life stress (Hirshbein, 2006 p. 204).

What is even worse, in the first half of the twentieth century there were only two possibilities for patients fighting with mental illness – the asylum or psychoanalysis. In 1955 the future of psychiatric treatment drastically changed when scientists discovered that psychiatric drugs could change brain chemistry. The revolution in treatment that this discovery and the development of drugs and other advancements such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) sparked was only an emerging discourse in the late fifties.

Interestingly, in reference to the above mentioned aspect of abuse of tranquilizers, A. Tone, the author of The age of anxiety: a history of America’s turbulent affair with tranquilizers (2009) stresses that:

In 1950s American culture, anxiety was viewed less as a serious psychiatric disorder than as a badge of achievement: an emblem of struggle, but also of success. [...] This can-do mentality also underlay the belief that Americans not only could accomplish anything but were entitled to do so with minimum discomfort and inconvenience. In this cultural tableau, tranquilizers were welcomed as a means of personal fulfillment with the same fervor as credit cards, electric refrigerators, television dinners, and cosmetics (xvi-xvii).

It becomes obvious, that in such world suburban housewife addicted to prescription tranquilizers was nothing serious and as such was not supposed to obtain clinical help. There was nothing wrong with mothers reaching out to family doctors for such medicines. What comes as maybe not a shock, but rather curious astonishment is
that the American society went so far in their blindness to reality, that in 1956, Tiffany jewelers reported amazing increase in sale of “ruby and diamond-studded pill coiffers for those who wished to glorify their new-found happiness” (59).

When eventually, anxiety became recognized as a legitimate mental illness, tranquilizers finally stopped being treated as the harmless ‘peace pills’ (xix).

At the time when Plath struggled with her depression, on the verge of writing The Bell Jar the dominant psychiatric perception of the depressed was that “they were crazy, so thoroughly one with their disease that they were doomed to spend their lives in asylums” (Shorter, 1997 p. 238).

In 1950’s psychoanalysis was understood as “a therapy suitable for the needs of wealthy people desiring self-insight, but not for really psychiatric illnesses” (190). With the rather high cost of psychoanalysis and the general understanding that those suffering from any firm of mental illness were harmful to society, the only available and physical treatment was institutionalized care. That is why, so many women from former suburban paradises, especially those of lower economic standing, ended up in the state asylums. With such attitude and asylums slowly, but inevitably overcrowding, the doctors stopped focusing on treatment and concentrated on institutionalization.

To fully understand the Americans attitude towards those who could not find their place mentally in their lives, for example the Los Angeles Times in 1953 published an article titled “Don’t Let Mental Illness Scare You”, inclining that Americans were afraid of ‘the insane’ – and the insane being individuals who “lost their sanity and ability to think and act rationally, and therefore has lost precisely those faculties that defined him or her as human” (Selwyn, 1953 p. 17).

The taint that was caused by the mental illness was so great that it could destroy the entire image of given family, so accordingly, the need to keep up appearances and making the disease seem like an invention of the ill member were common. Also the attitude that the depressed wife or mother could actually (or rather should) ‘snap out of it’ or ‘toughen up’ (Warner 2009, p. 23).

With such social attitude and so restricted medical help, the women of 1950’s were doomed to loneliness and overwhelming sense of even-deeper isolation and alienation. Luckily, with the female social unhappiness and the desire to become more active in the deciding sphere of their lives, the feminist movement began strengthening and with that the researches and discourses devoted to feminine needs.
In such period – of both the political and household containment, threat and anxiety for not only the ‘Reds’ but also the immoral ‘lavenders’ and in a constant battle for her own identity was raised and shaped culturally Sylvia Plath. For her, the world surrounding her was merely the everyday reality, however, from my point of view, all of those factors supposedly influenced her and her writing which I aim to prove in the following chapter.
Chapter Two
Sylvia Plath – the Portrait of Life under a Cracking Jar

Although Sylvia Plath lived a very short life, leaving her most forceful impressions for posthumous interpretation, she nevertheless became an icon for the representation of female selfhood in poetry. Her work was barely available in print at the time of her suicide, with only one collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) published. Her great prose work, the novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) was published under a pseudonym, but its readership increased when it was republished posthumously (Shuman, 2002, p. 1213).

The aim of this paper is to focus on Plath as an author and voice behind the bitter-sweet tone of *The Bell Jar*. For that reason, the structure of this second chapter requires to recall and empower those facts which were introduced in Chapter One – those referring to the overwhelming state of the society’s collective mind in 1950s. As such, the chapter will not revel in the novel *The Bell Jar* as of yet, leaving it for Chapter Three.

In this chapter I intend to show, how the everyday existence in the American 1950s might have an impact on Plath’s psyche, as well as her literary output. With the politics of containment, translated into domestic containment, mixed with the fats-paced style of life which was at one point thrown at Plath, it comes hardly as a surprise that the woman of her fragility remained sane and sound for such a long time. Her own *Journals* reveal in very early years that she was feeling the nation-dictated loneliness and claustrophobia of her own thoughts: “Tonight, for a moment, all was at peace inside. I came out of the house – across the street a little before twelve, sick with unfulfilled longing, alone, self – reviling (Plath, Kukil 1999 p. 18).

To support my thesis, I researched Nelson, who outlines in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War American* what were the ways of trapping women’s privacy in particular. The general understanding of the term ‘privacy’ indicates self-sufficiency, however, under the terror of Joseph McCarthy’s Red Scare and the domestic values of the fifties, it started to actually symbolize ‘isolation, loneliness, domination and routine’. Accordingly, that was a leading theme for many confessional writers, linking Sylvia Plath as a confessional writer to the Foucauldian hypothesis, briefly mentioned in
previous chapter, and claiming that “confession does not lead to freedom, as the private is already penetrated by power” (Nelson, 2002: xiii).

Kottler, who devoted his book Divine Madness – Ten Stories of Creative Struggle to analysis of the phenomenon of the famous people suffering from various forms of mental illnesses, when describing Plath, states that she discovered relatively early in her life – during college years, that her own creative expression “helped her cope with depressions that were becoming both more frequent and more intense” (Kottler, 2006 p. 14). He also explains that it was her mentor and scholarship sponsor, Olive Higgins Prouty, who actually suggested that she should focus on writing about her own experiences as much as possible and as her literary output shows, “This became the signature theme of her writing career” (14).

In such form of expression, we can trace the above mentioned confessional writing. For Plath, it was freeing experience – to create, however, commonly “shame – in large part due to the religious origin of the form – has been a central aspect of the conventional confession”, as Cooke, the author of Confessional Politics: Women's Sexual Self- Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media (1999) estimates (67). Lerner goes even further when he argues that “Confession is something that causes shame. Real confession will cause shame because we have done wrong, confessional poetry deals with experience that is deeply painful to bring into public, not because it is disgusting, nor because it is sinful, but because it is intensively private” (Lerner, 1987 p. 64).

For Bawer, nevertheless, Plath’s writing had nothing to do with privacy and rather opposing – with the almost perverse need to expose herself. In his opinion, her writing became a way of asserting herself, or even getting upper hand over her deficient sense of identity (Bawer, 1991 p. 20). He quotes Stevenson, who notes: “Haunted by a fear of her own disintegration, Plath kept herself together by defining herself, writing constantly about herself, so that everyone could see her there, fighting and conquering an outside world that forever threatened her frail being” (1998 p. 23). Therefore it is not strange, that Edward Butscher observed in his biography Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness, “getting published was not merely important [for Sylvia], it was everything: for her, seeing one’s name in print was the ultimate proof not merely of acceptance but of existence” (2003 p. 91).

The following chapter will present Plath from various perspective – at first as the citizen of the America under the threat of the ‘Red Scare’, secondly, as a woman who
was born and who grew up in 1950s just to be dropped psychologically into moral turmoil of the 1960s and finally – as the obsessively in-love woman who was scorned and abandoned by her husband. All those images, intend to pave the way for the comparative analysis of Plath’s life and her novel *The Bell Jar* in the next chapter.

### 2.1. Under the Atomic Dome – Plath’s writing in view of the 1950s politics

As an introduction to this chapter, it is worth recalling Evans, one of the co-authors of *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* who argues that: “As is widely known, Sylvia Plath’s own history involved a complex rejection of the USA. She condemned the dirt and the decay of Great Britain in the 1950s and was appalled, as generations of visitors from the USA have been, by the absence of domestic comfort and ease. Plath’s flight from the USA (and her refusal at the end of her life to return there) was obviously related to […] explicit politics, but that flight – fuelled as it probably was by personal circumstance – was also articulated through a critique of the cultural and political values of the USA” (Evans, 2000, p. 77).

Luke Ferreter lies a solid background, regarding the available biographical sources, which already aimed at showing Plath’s works connection or complete lack of interest with the politics. He even states with some awe that “It is surprising for how long critics have been arguing, against a tendency to interpret Plath’s work in personal or psychological terms, that Plath was a politically engaged thinker and writer” (Ferreter, 2010 p. 90).

For example, Tracy Brain argued, that ‘the conventional personal readings to which [Plath’s writing] is customarily subjected’, is in fact completely wrong due to the fact that Plath’s work is “deeply, politically engaged with [the] world” (Brain, 2001 pp. 36-37).

Furthermore, an influential critic Sandra Gilbert claimed that Plath “did not have an explicitly political imagination” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1994 p. 297), but the more recent studies were successful in proving that Plath was constantly thinking and writing about the political discourses and events with which she was surrounded, from the time she went to Smith College to the end of her life (Ferreter, 2010 p. 90).

Al Strangeways, as one of the more balanced voices amongst the critics, has raised the opinion that “Plath’s work articulates a complex intellectual, emotional and
aesthetic investment in contemporary history and politics” (Strangeways, 1998 pp. 77-131).

Finally, the author whose work greatly influenced my perception of Plath’s attitude towards surrounding her reality – Robin Peel has demonstrated how systematically Plath’s thoughts and works are soaked by the political aspects, from philosophy books and lectures to magazines and radio programs (Peel, 2002 p. 16).

It is not surprising, that the events which were playing out on the screens of television had also an impact on Plath. She was not immune to the political threats and for example, when studying at Smith College in Massachusetts, in 1953, she wrote to her brother Warren that she just hoped, the world was not destroyed by war before both of them were able to enjoy the fruits of their labors (Wilson, 2013 p. 1). Furthermore, Ferretter argues that “Plath’s politics developed in a complex ideological world, in which militant anti–Communism was politically dominant, but in which many dissenting voices, although more faint than the clamour of this discourse, were also to be heard” (Ferretter, 2010, p. 91).

It is the biographical fact that Plath grew up with a very strong belief in both the rights and the responsibilities of the individual. Her father, for example, strongly believed in pacifism. Her mother broke with the Church when she was a college student because of its ‘repressive and controlling ideology’ and she brought up her children to believe, as she and her husband had done, in ‘directing one’s life toward an idealistic goal in order to build a strong inner life’. She also shared with them the pacifism in which she and her husband believed Wagner-Martin, (1987 p. 19).

Accordingly, living the life of contemporary American, at the age of only seventeen, Plath was able to capture with unique skill the sense of sinister shadow the lives of ordinary Americans felt, as the Korean War was about to begin. Plath’s letters with Chicago student Eddie Cohen are full of references to her constant state of fear concerning the war and the atomic bomb. She could never entirely suppress this fear in the superficial diversions of college life, she wrote, so deeply disturbed was she by the possibility of atomic war (Ferretter, 2010, p. 93).

The life of fear and experiencing the beauty of the surrounding world during August 1950 in complex emotionally literary outburst. ‘Bitter Strawberries’, is a poem she originally wanted to title ‘Swords into Plowshares’ where a ‘little girl with blond braids’ hearing the discussion of bombing the Russians into nothingness, pleads, ‘Don’t’, and her ‘blue eyes’ swim with ‘vague terror’ (Plath, 1981 pp. 299–300).
Much later poem, “The Arrival of the Bee Box”, raises the issue, which was discussed in the first chapter – that, of the power and control, so very much prevailing subject of everyday life in Cold War America. It can be analyzed, as it was many times – as the reference to Plath talks about death as not an end but as a chance to be reborn (Kamel in Bloom, 2001 p. 31).

That control can be with ease translated into Plath’s feeling of entrapment – both mentally, but for the purpose of this chapter – more socially, as it had its place with the contemporary women. What adds to this Cold War’s period strength of voice, is the image of paper to describe the self of the poet which, as Annas claims “is used consistently in the post-Colossus poems” (Annas, 1988, p. 111). The author recalls for example poem Crossing the Water, in which “two black cut-paper people” seem to be less substantial and less real than the solidity and powerfulness of the nature surrounding them. She also mentions the play Three Women, where the Secretary says of the men in her office: “There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it” (111). She sees her own infertility as directly related to her complicity in a bureaucratic, impersonal, patriarchal society. Annas states that “Paper is symbolic of the socioeconomic reality with its characteristic bureaucratic paper-shuffling labor. It stands for insubstantiality; the paper model of something is clearly less real than the thing itself, though in ‘developed’ economies it seems to be the office machines, and objects which have vitality, purpose, and emotion, while the people are literally colorless, objectified, and atrophied” (112).

2.2. The Soul’s Containment – Plath’s female perspective

Plath’s critics and biographers are unanimous in one thing, that there was no time in Plath’s life, from the time she was a teenager, during which she was not writing fiction. Therefore, it is only obvious to conclude, that such a learned, intelligent young woman, would not refer to the situation of her own gender in her literary output.

When looking from the female perspective, and in the context of the first chapter aspects, Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, as Evans points out “is such an important, indeed undervalued text, precisely because it is through this text that Sylvia Plath explores the limits of women's autonomy and the secure first-person singular” (Evans, 2000 p. 79).

Indeed, Plath’s writing cannot be dissected and divided into separate, easily-recognizable parts, as it was suggested above. There is always an undertone of peculiar
duality and therefore, when referring to that problem, Pamela J. Annas, the author of *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* stresses that: “This dual consciousness of self, the perception of self as both subject and object, is characteristic of the literature of marginalized or oppressed classes” (Annas, 1988, p. 109). The author continues pointing out to the fact that “Sylvia Plath has this dialectical awareness of self as both subject and object in particular relation to the society in which she lived. The problem for her, and this is perhaps the problem of Cold War America, is in the second aspect of a dialectical consciousness: an awareness of oneself in significant relation to past and future” (109).

Such duality can be observed in numerous places throughout the *Journal* where she either proclaims her awareness about the society’s carnal trifles, like for example, when she writes about a friend’s job: “[…] her job with John Crosby on the Herald Tribune sounds ‘thrilling’ and dangerous - I should think he’d want to have an affair with her, but except for idle curiosity to hear about how these queer people live - lesbians & homosexuals – I couldn’t care less” (Plath, Kukil 1999 p. 277).

What is more, Ferretter directs our attention on the fact that “the majority of Plath’s stories are based on experiences and events in her own life. Fiction is, for Plath, above all a medium in which women’s lives can be portrayed” (Ferretter 2010, p. 152).

It is fairly common to point more feminist tendencies in Plath’s writings, and Peel supports that opinion, stating that the authentic female voice takes shape of the layers and she sheds these layers “in her *Ariel* period are the layers that have been imposed by the patriarchy” (Peel, 2002 p. 17).

The domesticity and having a family did not make Plath fulfilled, as it did not – just like I described in Chapter One, the other women in 1950. The feelings of being trapped or even imprisoned may not only be translated as referring to the house but, as Susan R. Van Dyne claims “in the female body, which is itself the maternal legacy. The problematics of femininity is thus reduced to the problematics of the female body” (Van Dyne, 1993 p. 81).

Plath’s being a mother combined with her own and international tension, were the possible forces behind re-evaluation of the importance of history, politics and institutions. Especially, the comments regarding the Cold War and nuclear warfare, which she read and heard, contributed, in Peels opinion “to the specific language of the *Ariel* sequence in ways about which we cannot be categorical, but which should be admitted” (Peel, 2002, p. 18). Based on her own accounts in the *Journal*, it is clear that
Plath read widely and during her time in England the discourse of the Cold War pervaded serious journalism, television and radio, protest folk songs, and satire, so there is no possible way, that she would not contribute – as a woman – to the voices referring to female opinion on politics.

What is more, at the time a strong group of women, who were social and cultural critics was active during all the decade, to mention but one – Betty Friedan. The words they enclosed in the books they published were making Americans aware of the importance and admiration given to women in other societies (Lambs, 2011 p. 14). These women were successful in showing that, according to Kaledin, “an important value […] was their acceptance of femininity as a positive force in the world” (Kaledin 1984, p. 22) and that women’s role as mothers and housewives was not only negative and depressing. Shirley Jackson showed the hard reality of mothers but at the same time the marvels of motherhood and stressed that even Sylvia Plath left aside her bitter writing to talk about her love for her son Nick (Lamb, 2011 p. 14).

Her Journals give the testimony to this contained world of satisfying motherhood even better, where we can read “How odd, men don’t interest me at all now, only women and women talk. […] Must read some Sociology, Spock on babies. All questions answered” (Plath, Kukil 1999 p. 349).

Nevertheless, Ferretter is certain that: “Several of Plath’s women characters have a violent complex of suppressed emotions just beneath the surface of their outward femininity, which she portrays as a direct effect of their experiences in patriarchal society” (Ferretter, 2010, p. 169). That Plath struggled in her married life with the dominant husband and his oppressive personality is not a secret and therefore, it is not surprising that being the author who willingly wrote semi-biographical literature, her characters were portrayed as having such complex. It is even less surprising in light of Kottler’s opinion, that says: “Sylvia Plath was a complicated person, living during a transitional time for women. As much as she wanted a career, she also wanted to find love with the right man. She had been told all her life that it was OK to have poetry as a hobby, but her real purpose was to settle down, raise a family, and make a good home for her husband” (Kottler, 2006 p. 19).

It is at this point, necessary to see what were the aspects of Plath’s personal life that made her give up the life and abandon her small children, similarly to so many women in the American reality of 1950s and 1960s.
2.3. The year *The Bell Jar* cracked

Having analyzed the political factors behind Plath’s literary output, it is natural to shift towards matters closer to the author and her personal, domestic life, in order to see the cascade-like events that led to both – the writing of *The Bell Jar* and Plath’s tragic end. Curiously, Evans points out that “The instability of the self in the twentieth century is presented in *The Bell Jar* as an inevitable consequence of the increasing choice of ‘person’ which is open to women in the latter part of the twentieth century” (Evans, 2000, p. 79).

As it was mentioned above, Plath always felt she had to get marry, and the only aspect she might dwell upon was to whom. Her biographers frequently recall the fact that her first lover raped her – some seeing it as a defining moment which broke her mentally (Wilson, 2012 pp. 3-4) and some, such as Kottler, as predisposition towards ‘manly’ men, just like her husband. In Kottler’s opinion: “If her first lover raped and abused her, then perhaps it is not surprising that she picked a future husband who, although a brilliant poet on the verge of recognition, was also a noted philanderer. Hughes was tall, dark, handsome, and charismatic. He also seemed to exude a kind of dangerous violence and unpredictability that Plath found both alluring and a little frightening. It was an inauspicious start to their relationship that Hughes roughed up Plath during their first lovemaking leaving her bruised and battered as she later described in her journal” (Kottler, 2006 p. 19).

The *Journals* make it plain and obvious that Hughes was extremely important to her – not only as her dangerous lover, with whom she frequently had “Good lovemaking today, morning & afternoon, all hot and hard and lovely” (Plath, Kukil, 1999 p. 277), but also the critic of her writing: “I sometimes feel a paralysis come over me: his opinion is so important to me” (349).

Reading the *Journals* makes it painfully visible, how Plath adored her husband and how she made herself belief that her world was only complete since the moment Hughes appeared in it. That is why, showing how her illusions were brutally shattered, is necessary to fully embrace the meaning behind *The Bell Jar* and to be able to further analyze it with also that perspective in mind.

1962 was a year in which a lot happened in Plath’s life and for that reason, some claim that it led her to a breakdown and suicide. As Shuman writes: “[…] she moved with her family to Devon, in Southwestern England. Early in 1962, a boy, Nicholas, was
born. Shortly thereafter, the marriage began to crumble. Hughes began an affair and
moved back to London, leaving Plath alone to manage the house and children (Shuman,
2002, p. 12)

The above mentioned breakdown of marriage was initiated by the visit in May of
that year, of the Hughes’s friends David and Assia Wevill. Yehuda Kore (2006), the
author of A Lover of Unreason presented that visit and its aftermath in vivid details,
picturing Plath as a shadowy and deeply wounded part in that scenario which unfolded
in front of her eyes. The first day-and-a-half of the visit is described from David
Wevill’s point of view, who spend the seemingly uneventful morning with Plath, while
his wife Assia was in the kitchen with Ted, supposedly preparing the salad (Kore, 2006,
p. 97). The fragment presented below is the recollection of David from that day:

“We could hear Assia and Ted’s muffled voices, and suddenly Sylvia
went very still. She touched me on the knee and said, ‘I’ll be back.’ She
jumped from her chair and ran into the kitchen as if she
remembered that she had left some fire burning.” David waited, but
Sylvia did not return, and at lunch she was very quiet, “as if a door
had slammed down on her”. […] “When we were alone in the cabin, I
said to Assia, ‘What happened to Sylvia? She changed completely, she
was so friendly before.’ And Assia answered, ‘Ted kissed me in the
kitchen, and Sylvia saw it.’” (Kore, 2006, p. 98).

On the other hand, Harlod Bloom (2001), claims that “Plath later learned of an
attraction between her husband and Assia” (Bloom, 2001 p. 12).

Whether anything actually happened in the kitchen of the Plaths and if Plath in
fact observed it or only had an instinctive feeling that something was going on, had
actually no immediate effect on any of the four people who met in Devon that spring.
But, in Kore’s opinion, due to the fact that Ted enjoyed the thrill of sexual conquests by
nature, he made his move five weeks later, when he was on some business in London.
When he was unable to meet with Assia, he left with the receptionist a note which read:
“I have come to see you, despite all marriages” (Kore, 2006 p. 76).

Ted’s being oriented on romanticizing women around him has its support in
Plath’s own journal, which was published posthumously. On April 18th Plath noted that
her husband returned from tea after seven and while she was tired and napping with a
baby, two voices woken her up. “Nicola & Ted standing at opposite sides of the path
under the bare laburnum like kids back from the date, she posed & coy” (Kukil, 1999 p.
480). It seems that Ted was either tired with the demanding and occasionally unstable
wife or he simply was natural-born female hunter. What is more, the author of *Divine Madness*, Jeffrey A. Kottler (2006), does not refrain from voicing his opinion that Hughes was having a reputation of a womanizer, and managed to juggle numerous affairs about which Plath was probably vaguely aware of but decided to ignore to the point where she could. The author says: “Plath realized that she was being lied to, and she stopped being able to trust her husband. She became more angry and resentful in direct ways, and all the while she entered her darkest and deepest depression yet” (Kottler, 2006 p. 23).

Supposedly, the affair between Ted and Assia progressed from the moment he was trying to contact her in London, the details – probably appropriately censored for her husband’s needs – were shared by Assia herself with David, probably to make him jealous of her.

Hugh’s own mood can be extracted and decoded from a letter that he sent to his sister, Olwyn, in the late summer. The “prolonged distractions” of the past nine months actually drained his bank account and also influenced radically bad on his own ability to create anything. The problem, as he indicates in a letter, had been the “awful intimate interference that marriage is” (Rollyson, 2013, 185).

July 9 was the day that changed everything. Plath picked up receiver of the ringing phone in Court Green, in their Devon house and the voice on the other end appeared to be a woman trying to disguise herself as being of a man and that person requested speaking with Ted. In a bitter desperation, Plath ripped the phone line out of the wall and according to Bloom, run to bedroom and Ted went after her. Her mother, Aurelia who was visiting them at that time could do nothing but observe her son-in-law ran after her.

The slightly different story is told by Connie Ann Kirk who claims that after destroying the phone line, Ted and Plath did not lock out in their bedroom but instead, she left house with little Nick, leaving Frieda under her mother’s supervision and drove to her friend, Elizabeth Compton. supposedly, it was there, at her friend’s house where hysterical writer called her husband with famous expression ‘little man’ (Kirk, 2004 p. 92).

Nevertheless, after several, Plath constructed a bonfire in the yard to which she threw Ted’s letters and manuscripts, together with her manuscript for a second novel that contained many elements about her romance and marriage to Hughes and let all of them burn in flames (Bloom, 2001 p. 12). As Luke Ferretter, the author of *Sylvia*
Plath’s Fiction: Critical Study puts it: “On 10 July 1962, the day after Plath intercepted Hughes’ lover Assia Wevill’s telephone call, Aurelia wrote, she saw her daughter burn the manuscript of the novel in the courtyard of Court Green” (Ferretter, 2010 p. 13).

Ironically, due to her resentment and anger because of this phone call she enabled the fresh and not developed romance to bloom. She requested Ted to move away immediately from Devon so he went to London and arranged himself up for the time being in a friend’s additional room, explaining to him that he was going to divorce Sylvia and that he found a new love.

In consequence, late in August she wrote to her mother: “I hope you will not be too surprised or shocked when I say I am going to try to get a legal separation from Ted.” She also added that, although she did not believe in divorce but she simply was not able to continue leading the “degraded and agonized life” that Ted forced her to live which was explainable by the fact that since Aurelia’s return to home, Ted kept seeing with Assia. Alexander explains that almost all August he spent in London and Plath was sure that he was spending all of their savings to please his mistress. And although she felt betrayed and humiliated she was voicing her opinion that if Ted preferred this other woman, he could have her, but not without paying a price – literally. One reason Plath wanted a legal separation, she told her mother, was to force Ted to pay the children’s support (Alexander, 1999 p. 213).

That situation lasted until the early days of September, when Plath decided that she should at least try and rebuild her marriage. On 11th September they left on a train to Ireland to spend some time away from people who might influence them and arranged staying with their friend in Ireland – poet Richard Murphy. He drove them to Ballylee, where Yeats had lived and they all climbed the spiral staircase in Yeats’s abandoned tower. At the top, Plath was overcome by joy and later explained in a letter to her mother that it was almost a mystical religious experience of being filled with Yeats’s spirit – she felt in complete harmony with it.

Her exhalation did not last long due to the fact that soon her husband experienced his own ghostly encounter in the halls of Murphy’s cottage “when he saw the face of a portrait suddenly change. He read this paranormal transformation as a sign that he should leave the cottage – indeed Cleggan – at once. Three days before he and Sylvia had planned to go back to England […]” (Alexander, 1999 p. 215).

Plath left soon afterwards and as she returned back home at Court Green, she found a telegram from Dr. Bamhouse awaiting her. As if predicting her emotional state,
he was urging her for her own health not to sustain Ted’s immaturity and disloyalty, and especially – not to wait for him to realize his mistakes and become adult being but to file for a divorce from him immediately and begin leaving a fresh life (Kirk, 2004 p. 94). In accordance with the doctor’s advice, on September 25, 1962, Plath went to London for the meeting with her lawyer. The following day, she penned a touching poem, “For a Fatherless Son”. What is more, when Ted arrived unannounced in the late September to Court Green, as he explained ‘to remove his things’, Plath was so furious for his behavior that she demanded his leaving at once and to find another – appropriate for her – time to remove his stuff, without crossing her path.

With every passing day, the separation was becoming more and more real to her and she began making plans for her life alone with children and what is more, she opened to other people and started telling them what was happening with her marriage and what she was going to do. She also began writing her poetry again, in spite of everything bad happening around her. Kottler points out that while in previously incident of depression she would suffer especially in the area of her creative capacity, “this time she crossed some sort of line where her artistic output became not diminished but enhanced. She was somehow able to write her heart out throughout all the sleepless nights and early mornings, preoccupied with dark thoughts” (Kottler, 2006 p. 22). Nevertheless, in one of her last poems “Elm”, she wrote about her feelings of abandonment by her husband and the terror gathering inside her at the mere thought of going on alone with her life and all the responsibilities that it was associated with. The second stanza speaks volumes about her fear:

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity (qtd. in Kottler, 2006 p. 24).

One day in late autumn 1962, when she was walking to doctor Horder’s office Plath noticed a sign “Flat for Let” outside a house situated on 23 Fitzroy Road. She also spotted a blue plaque which informed about historic value of the building and this one read ‘William Butler Yeats 1865-1939 Irish Poet and Dramatist Lived Here’. Plath was overcome by joy and memories of amazing feelings that enveloped her on her visit to Ireland not so long ago. Therefore she pleaded the construction workers refreshing the house to be able to walk through the two flats available for rent. With their agreement, she went inside and instantaneously fell in love with the flat on top of the building. It
consisted of three bedrooms upstairs and a kitchen, living room and bath downstairs, and as such it looked ideal for her and the children. What added charm was an access to terrace garden, which seemed perfect to spend time during nice weather.

Plath found out that the flat’s agency was called Morton Smith and Sons and immediately went to their offices where, without hesitation, she made an offer. Although the agents accepted her bid, they warned her that there was another person, similarly enamored by the apartment and he placed his bid earlier. However, her future downstairs neighbor, Trevor Thomas, could not secure quickly enough the sum of requested 180 pounds, while Plath was willing to pay even fifty pounds more and offered to sign five-year lease. That, together with obtained from her mother reference signed ‘Professor A. S. Plath’ did the trick and soon, in the final week of November, Plath got a lease agreement and a move-in date – 17th December (Alexander, 1999 p. 225). In the Foreword to The Bell Jar there is a lovely mention of Plath’s state of positive emotions boiling through her at that time:

[…] a small miracle happened – I’d been to Yeats’ tower at Ballylea while in Ireland & thought it the most beautiful & peaceful place in the world; then, walking desolately around my beloved Primrose Hill in London and brooding on the hopelessness of everfinding a flat… I passed Yeats’ house, with its blue plaque “Yeats lived here” which I’d often passed & longed to live in. A sign board was up – flats to rent, I flew to the agent. By a miracle you can only know if you’ve ever tried to flat hunt in London, I was first to apply… I am here on a five year lease & it is utter heaven… and it’s Yeats’ house, which right now means a lot to me (Plath, Ames 1972 p. 134).

Immediately, after obtaining the fixed date for her taking quarters in Fitzroy street, Plath began packing her Devon life and disposing of unnecessary things. She sold her bees, ordered moving company and arranged her friend to take care of her cats. Soon, she was travelling with her children in her tiny Morris filled to the roof with their personal baggage. As soon as they arrived, everything seemed not to be working as it was supposed to be – first of all, the gas was not cooker installed and what is more, the electricity was not connected. Strangely, that obstacles did not dampen her mood and she was still busy arranging her new life. Even when she locked herself out during the move-in and her neighbor did not attempt to help her, she merrily found another way to solve her problem. From Thomas’s point of view – the neighbor who felt cheated from the apartment, ‘Mrs. Hughes’ was the most self-centered person and he did not feel any desire to help her. The best example is a situation described by Malcolm, in her book
The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes, where the author says that when Plath, on the day of her arrival, accidentally locked herself and the crying children out of the flat and applied to Thomas for help, “I had to dash her hopes about the keys, as I had only those for my flat. The last thing I wanted was to become involved, so I advised her to phone the police, and I went on my way” (Malcolm, 1994 p. 196). With her newfound energy and optimism, Plath decided not to push the matter any further but instead, she went to the gas board to request them to install the stove that day. With help of one of the ‘gas boys’, who climbed along the back roof, pried open a window, and unlocked the door she was able to come inside her new home. another comedy of error for her was the fact that when Devon mover delivered her belongings and she had to unpack them by the candlelight, she decided to complain to the electric board so long that eventually someone had to show up and connect the power so that she finally had light (Alexander, 1999 p. 229).

In the following weeks, Plath tried to accustom herself to the new place, to being back in London, as well as to the fact that she was again in the big city, instead of the quaint countryside. As Kirk states, by Christmas, she did a lot of things to beautify her new apartment, starting with the walls which she painted white. She also covered the floors with mats, installed pine hook-shelves, and bought a small glass-toped table (Kirk, 2004 p. 99).

Alexander details her work done on the apartment, as he is the one who got his information straight from Plath’s mother and she was always the first to hear the news of each upgrade in her daughter’s life:

In her early days at Fitzroy Road, Sylvia tried to order her life. By December 21, she had finished decorating the living area, painting walls white and covering the floors with rush matting. For furniture, she bought pine bookcases, straw Hong Kong chairs, a small glass-topped table, and a large container in which she could arrange flowers. The decor, pleasing as it was, lacked warmth, which more than one guest remarked (Alexander, 1999 p. 230).

For Plath, however, it did not matter whether people enjoyed her décor or not and all of that was enough to become satisfied and enveloped in her writing world again. From career point of view, the following months in a new apartment, those last ones of her life, were extremely prolific which can be seen by the simple comparison that while in an average year, she used to write twenty, or even thirty, poems, but in this
time she was able to produce more than fifty. There would appear a new poem every single day, and what is important – these were probably the best works in her writing career. It seemed that she lost herself in her work and operated at maximum level of creativeness. “I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name,” Plath wrote to her mother, and critics would agree completely years later as they read the work. “Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me,” Plath was stating in her correspondence with home (Bloom, 2001 p. 14).

Nevertheless, with the raging inspiration, she began step-by-step descending into madness, she also lost grip on reality and her mentality started slipping away from her. She became shut-in, from time to time even delusional, and more and more strange. Her doctor, John Horder, was that much afraid about her safety that he hired a professional nurse to watch over her, he also was trying to find a place in a hospital to arrange her short treatment in hospital surrounding.

While Hughes moved out by this time and was living with Assia, who was pregnant with his child, Plath was so depressed that she did not seem to care about anything. She was confessing in a letter to her mother that she was aware of the fact that Ted wanted her to kill herself so she would finally be out of his head. Her only concern were actually her children and their uncertain faith if she were gone.

To make matters worse, January 1963 in London was extremely cold one, some say that it was the coldest in over hundred years. Londoners all over the city struggled to keep warm and healthy and to have enough energy to cook their food and enough light to muddle through the night which was falling early, as always that time of year. Plath’s was not the only apartment where the heat went off due to pipes which froze, and the electricity kept flickering or even coming on and going off. However, this happened often enough in her flat that both children became ill with colds, and she suffered with flu. As Alexander puts it: “In the first days of January, Plath sought treatment from Dr. Horder, who, worried about the twenty pounds she had lost over the summer and the high fevers she ran in October, prescribed a tonic to help her gain weight and X-rayed her chest to rule out anything more serious than the flu” (Alexander, 1999 p. 232).

Somewhere during the winter depressing weather, Plath wrote to her mother, admitting that she felt exhausted because of her flu but she also claimed that she was pulling out of it. Plath was very honest with Aurelia when admitting that she “lost her identity under the steamroller of decisions and responsibilities of this last half year, with
the babies a constant demand. How awful to realize that she was starting from scratch in this ‘first year’ of her new life. Time was running out. But I need time [...]” Plath told her mother (Rollyson, 2013 p. 299).

What’s more, her telephone was still not installed, although she was in a queue to be connected, therefore, whenever she necessarily needed to make a phone call, she had to go out in the freezing temperatures and make a call from a pay phone on the corner of the street. The children, too young to understand what was happening, reacted to their parents’ break up by having emotional breakdowns whenever Ted came to visit, and afterwards left again. Plath wrote brokenhearted to her friend Marcia Brown that she was feeling “utterly flattened” by the last six months of life without Ted, she was feeling very lonely and like a “desperate mother” (Rollyson, 2013 p. 301).

Also in January, The Bell Jar was published in England, under her literary pseudonym – Victoria Lucas and the initial reviews were good. For example, Lawrence Lerner from the Listener wrote, “There are criticisms of America that the neurotic can make as well as anyone, perhaps better, and Miss Lucas makes them brilliantly.” The Times Literary Supplement claimed that the author “can certainly write,” and went on to suggest that “if she can learn to shape as well as she imagines, she may write an extremely good book.” Finally, Robert Taubman praised it as “the first feminine novel I’ve read in the Salinger mode” (qtd. in Plath, Ames 1972 p. 134).

Plath, however, was disappointed that they seemed oblivious to the main focus on the leading character’s recovery and rebirth – just like the Phoenix’s miraculous rebirth from the ashes and seeming destruction. She was not only dissatisfied but she was struggling with her own, poisonous mind – she seemed not to be able to cope with Ted’s coming to visit children and going and as her disoriented children, she was slowly loosing herself. On Thursday, a week before Plath’s death, au pair who took care of Frieda and Nick reported that Plath attacked her physically, and so she abruptly quit. There are different stories surrounding au pair’s fairing and Plath’s violent outburst, one of them is that she found a girl in bed with some man (Rollyson, 2013 p. 289) and the other is more complex. According to Alexander, on this particular day, Plath’s mental health began sharp decrease and she found herself near the breaking point:

In the afternoon, she and the au pair got into a disagreement. According to the au pair, Sylvia, in a bad mood and sick, attacked her. According to Sylvia, who told two separate stories, the au pair either quit for no reason, or was fired by Sylvia because Sylvia discovered
that she had left the children alone. Whatever really happened, when the au pair asked for the money Sylvia owed her, Sylvia did assault her; pushing and hitting her, she demanded that she go at once. Frightened, the au pair left without being paid (Alexander, 1999 p. 236).

The following part of Plath’s several days of life is usually based on a first-hand account of the writer’s actions of her friend Jillian Becker. Her short story titled Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath is an emotional read which presents deeply broken woman, barely holding on to her life.

The event of quarrel with an au pair led to another hysterical outburst of Plath, during which she called to Jillian, asking whether she could come over with children because she did not want to be home.

First hours at the Beckers Plath seemed totally depressed and asked if she could have a nap because she felt completely unable to do anything. And when she woke up, although she ate well, unfortunately, the night to come was terrible. Due to the fact that Jillian invited her to stay with them and Plath asked her to bring some of her stuff from Fitzroy Street, the hostess could take care of administering pills at the required intervals. But still, she wished Jillian to stay with her and talk. As Kirk states “Sylvia told her that the early hours of the morning were the worst for her” (Kirk, 2004 p. 101).

Dr. Horder, who was the father of Jillian’s daughter’s best school friend, called to see how she was. He made it clear to Jillian that it is vitally important to make sure Plath took her medicines at fixed time and also that she Plath was constantly reminded how important she is for her children. However, it was getting more and more difficult to keep her engaged, while she was not able to force herself to do anything – she was not feeding, could not force herself to wash them. Jillian was the one who actually did it instead of her (Becker, 2003 pp. 13-14).

On Sunday, fourth day of this lengthy visit, Plath seemed to becoming less tensed and she was again eating well. That is why, as Jillian says, there was nothing that would indicate she was going to hurt herself and that she has just made up her mind about it that calm Sunday afternoon.

What Jillian did not know is that when her friend left their house for several hours on Friday evening, she met with Ted at Fitzroy Street – the visit to which she prepared herself by putting very nice dress and curling her hair. Whatever happened is not possible to be proven because firstly Ted denied meeting his estranged wife and later claimed that Plath was in a hurry so their meeting was very brief. Alexander
speculates, that probably that very day Ted informed her about Assia’s pregnancy, which in fact his mistress aborted two weeks later. Such news would most certainly push struggling Plath even further into feelings of complete lost and meaninglessness of her life (Alexander, 1999 p. 237). Kirk provides slightly different scenario of this meeting, claiming that:

Ted Hughes claimed that the two were discussing reconciliation, especially when he had seen how well she had done without him in Devon and then early on in establishing herself back in London. By January, he could see that she had been ill and depressed, and he was trying to suggest that they go away together to work on their relationship. However, Sylvia was hot and cold in her response to his advances (Kirk, 2004 p. 101).

The author based her assumptions probably on Hughes’ controversial quasi-memoire, or rather Plath’s biography titled Bitter Fame, penned by Anne Stevenson. That biography keeps on being criticized for creating such biting and harsh picture of struggling author. Malcolm goes even that far to highlight the strangeness of this book that she states: “Anne Stevenson draws a portrait of Plath as a highly self-involved and confused, unstable, driven, perfectionistic, rather humorless young woman, whose suicide remains a mystery, as does the source of her art, and who doesn't add up” (Malcolm, 1994, p. 17).

Nevertheless, that is why, when on Sunday, Plath announced to the Beckers that she wanted to return home, Jillian was hopeful only that her friend was feeling better and starting to get a grip of herself. Jillian’s husband, Gerry, drove her and the children home in an old cab he was using as his car. When they arrived to the apartment, he heard her crying and the children were beginning to cry too. Seeing her in such state, Gerry tried several times to talk her into coming back to their house with him. He assured her that they would be glad to have her and that there was nothing stopping her from staying with them as long as she needed. But Plath kept refusing, insisting that she had important work to do and that a nurse was coming first thing in the morning. She also reminded him that she promised his wife that she would take her pills. Gerry came inside with her and the children upstairs, carried up their things, and once again asked her to call on them if she needed anything. After seeing that she made herself back home and fed children, about 7 o’clock he went back home (Becker, 2003 p. 21).
Somewhere around that time, Dr. Horder came by to check how she was doing and when she seemed to be coping and again – this time to him – promise to have her pills taken before sleep, he left.

The next – and this time the last – eyewitness of final hours of Sylvia Plath was her reluctant neighbor, Trevor Thomas from downstairs. His were two ‘encounters’ as he called them with distraught Plath. In the first, which took place around 8 p.m. on a Sunday, only an hour after Gerry left her and not long before her death, she came down and knocked on his door and she looked and behaved so distressed that even he was concerned:

She stood there with red, swollen eyes, the tears running down her face, and with voice shaken by sobs she said: “I am going to die ... and who will take care of my children?” I did not quite know what to do. I reached out and took her arm. “You’d better come in and sit down. I’ll get you a drink” (Malcolm, 1994, p. 197)

Plath’s mood during her visit with Thomas changed in a matter of several minutes from teary, when she told him that she was so happy when “that awful woman” stole her husband to angry, even furious when she called her husband’s mistress “evil woman, a scarlet woman, the Jezebel” (Ibid.). At some point between her tantrums, she announced that she was the Sylvia Plath, and then she opened his newspaper and showed him a poem of Ted’s there and then turned to a review of The Bell Jar and showed it to him, saying that it was written by her. Kirk comments on this fact that Thomas was so far never able to “put the two together […] to realize who Mrs. Hughes was” (Kirk, 2004 p. 100).

The second time, at 11:45, she came again to his door, this time to ask for selling her few airmail stamps to America for her letters which she intended to send that night. Thomas obviously gave her the stamps, and when she wanted to reimburse him he told her not to worry, but Plath exclaimed: “Oh! But I must pay you or I won’t be right with my conscience before God, will I?” (Malcolm, 1994 p. 198). When he came back to his apartment, the light in the hall kept on being lit on and when an hour later he went outside to leave the crate for morning milk, Plath was still standing there – in the middle of the hall, with her had raised up, as if she was looking at something beautiful. When he asked whether he could call Dr. Horder – whom he knew as the rest of the people living in this street, she replied that everything was fine, she did not need the doctor’s help and that she was just “having a marvelous dream, a most wonderful vision” (Ibid.).
Thomas assumed that, in addition to whatever she was doing while he heard her walking up and down about the apartment upstairs, she must also have taken some kind of medicine, because she looked drugged and disconnected from the reality. Because he was getting up early for his work in art gallery, he had to go back to bed, so he left her where she was.

Jillian’s Becker’s brief memoire serves one more time as the saddening opening of the finality of Sylvia Plath’s life. She remembers that: “It was Dr. Horder to tell me that Plath had killed herself. She had done it at the time when she always felt worst, just before day began with its noises and duties and human contacts and small consolations. She had not taken her morning pills. Instead, she had given up living. Dr. Horder told me how she’d done it, gassing herself in her kitchen oven. About an hour earlier the nurse had found her, and a note saying he was to be called” (Becker, 2013 p. 22).

The more detail encounters of Plath’s final moments are recorded by the numerous biographies, based on witnesses’ statements, especially Dr. Horder’s, who examined her body on arrival.

Thomas could still hear her footsteps until he drifted off to sleep at five, as Malcolm’s book claims. It was probably exactly around that hour when her early-morning depression, the one that was hardest to stand up to, used to struck her causing sleeplessness, that she took the steps that finished in her death. She wrote a note which read “Please call Dr. Horder” with his telephone number and taped it to Nick’s push-pram, standing right inside the building’s front door. What is interesting, the note was written in two different pens. It seems that she had to find the number of the doctor and later returned back to finish it (Kirk, 2004 p. 103).

It is worth reminding at this point that a week earlier, on February 4 she wrote to her mother: “I have been feeling a bit grim—the upheaval over, I am seeing the finality of it all, and being catapulted from the cowlike happiness of maternity into loneliness and grim problems is no fun” (Kirk, 2004 p. 100).

She also prepared a plate of bread and butter and mugs of milk, which she arranged by Frieda’s and Nicholas’s beds. It is obvious that she was no longer thinking clearly, forgetting that small Nickolas was only one and would not be able to feed himself from mug and eat sandwiches. But still – she opened wide the window in the children’s room, then, going into the hall, sealed the room behind her by stuffing towels into the crack at the sill jamb and taping up the top and two sides. Afterwards, Plath went downstairs and sealed herself in the kitchen to seal her fate. Kottler, in his Devine
Madness remarks that there is even evidence in Plath’s last poem titled “Edge”, that she was thinking about taking her children with her alongside in her final travel of total self-destruction, because she is clearly mentioning “dead children coiled at empty breasts” (Kottler, 2006 p. 11).

Luckily, differently from her rival for Ted’s love, she decided to spare her children (Assia committed suicide, poisoning also hers and Ted’s daughter Shura five years later). Plath made sure her children were safe even when she tightly pushed towels under the door, and taped over any cracks in the kitchen door. Finally, in the heart of the so-called by the psychiatrists ‘blue hour’: “She turned the new gas oven she had purchased with her Aunt Dot’s life savings on high. Similar to taking the blanket with her into the crawlspace under her mother’s house, that morning she knelt down, folded a towel under her cheek and lay her head deep into the oven. The oven did not get hot, but soon the gas filled the chamber and fumes radiated out into the room” (Kirk, 2004 p. 103).

It seems obvious by her final actions – for example asking Thomas what time does he usually go to work, or taping in most prominent place note asking to call her doctor, to the coming nurse, that she did want to be found, that she did want to rise from the ashes just like her heroine from The Bell Jar. But she did not. The situation changed when the gas fumes from her kitchen were pushed down to Trevor’s apartment and he also was struck by their lethal properties. He did not die eventually, but was knocked down so much that he got to work after 5 p.m. and his boss, seeing that he was in really bad physical shape, ordered him to come back home and rest (Malcolm, 1994 p. 198).

The nurse Plath was supposed to be visited by on Dr. Horder’s orders, arrived at nine o’clock but because the house’s front door was locked, Mrs. Norris could not get into the building. As the supposed patient – Mrs. Plat did not answer the doorbell, the nurse was not sure whether she was at the correct address. So she rang the neighbor’s bell and again, there was no answer. Therefore, she decided to phone her agency in order to confirm the patient’s name and address which appeared to be correct. On her return to the building, Norris thought about walking from the back of the building and then she saw the two small children crying in a window. She was now so concerned, that she run and found a workman, Charles Langridge, who managed to help her to get inside the building. On the entrance to the upstairs flat they both felt the scent of deadly gas. The construction worker broke down the door and when they forced their way in they found Plath laying on the floor, with her head in the fuming oven. As soon as they
could, they shut off the gas and opened the windows as wide as it was possible around all apartment. Then they moved her body into the living room, where nurse Norris tried artificial respiration and Langridge went to call the police from the phone box on the corner (Alexander, 1999 p. 239).

Soon, the children upstairs were extracted from their secured but cold room and when they were carried down to the ambulance, someone saw the note taped on the pram with Dr. Horder’s phone number. Very quickly he arrived with a visiting friend, a doctor from America and they both examined Plath’s unresponsive body. Horder had to agree with the nurse who was still trying to revive Plath that her condition was hopeless. He pronounced Sylvia Plath’s death at ten-thirty. Soon, the ambulance removed her body from the flat on a stretcher and transported it to University College Hospital. Final words in this part of the chapter are probably the most cold and empty in the face of actual tragedy that took place that morning:

On her death certificate, which was registered on the 16th, Plath was described as being dead when she arrived at the hospital. Listing her occupation as “an authoress […] wife of Edward James Hughes an author,” the certificate documented her cause of death as “Carbon monoxide poisoning (domestic gas) while suffering from depression. Did kill herself” (Ibid.)
Chapter Three

The Two Bell Jars – The interwoven stories of Plath and Esther in the Cold War reality

‘I look down into the warm,
earthly world. . . and feel apart, enclosed in a wall of glass’ (Journals, p. 384).

Plath’s literary output has often been read from a feminist perspective. If we allow ourselves to interpret Esther’s depression as a case of disillusionment with the limited role which the women in the American society of the 1950s ‘enjoyed’, we should recall Phyllis Chesler remarks, who says that for Plath, “madness and confinement were both an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to reject and overcome this state” (Chesler, p. 76).

When referring to the aspect of mental illness in The Bell Jar Marjorie Perloff, a critic working on the contemporary poetry’s appearance in the media, observes that Plath’s focus “is not on mental illness per se, but on the relationship of Esther’s private psychosis to her larger social situation. Indeed, her dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject” (Perloff, ‘A Ritual for Being Born Twice’, p. 511).

In reading Sylvia Plath’s novel through a historical perspective one cannot neglect its author’s cultural setting and her overwhelming personal experiences as the person coming-of-age in the American 1950s.

What is more, we should also bear in mind, that Plath took to putting her thoughts into a form of journal and ‘healing herself’ through the process of writing, it was at the encouragement of her therapist, as well as her own – we could even say exhibitionistic – need to bare her soul and emotions. Such form of narrative, as it can be found in The Bell Jar is what we describe as an autobiography as disguised as fiction. Through that narrative form, we are supposed to feel closer to the subject of the story, we feel more connected to Plath through her novel, because we have strong proofs that the author reflects her own emotions. Especially that: “She began working intently on The Bell Jar, a novel that contains much autobiographical detail about her near-suicide at age twenty” (Bloom, 2001 p. 12).
On the other hand, there is also the possibility to describe The Bell Jar’s narrative as a more recently defined form, called ‘life narrative’. Dan P. McAdams in Exploring Psychological Themes Through Life-Narrative Accounts postulates that such “approach takes as foundational the propositions that (1) people construct and internalize stories to make sense of their lives, (2) these autobiographical stories have enough psychological meaning and staying power to be told to others as narrative accounts, and (3) these narrative accounts, when told to psychological researchers, can be analyzed for content themes, structural properties, functional attributes, and other categories that speak to their psychological, social, and cultural meanings” (2012 p. 15).

That is why, in this chapter, I explore the similarities and possible differences through Plath’s The Bell Jar, with the reference to her Journals. I will focus on Sylvia Plath’s quasi autobiographical novel, or as Kottler calls it “a thinly disguised version of her experiences in novel form” (2006, p. 16), The Bell Jar and the way in which Plath used the metaphor of the bell jar in order to provide us with an alternative perception of mental illness based on her struggle with depression. As Warner (2009) puts it: “Confronting the conservative social views of the late 1950s and early 1960s that saw psychiatric illness as either so severe it merited lifelong institutionalization or so trivial that it was the patient’s invention, Plath suggests that mental illness is uncontrollable by the patient and exists in a much more varied way than society’s two extreme understandings allow for” (16). From my perspective, from such literature, and in case of this particular thesis’ main focus – The Bell Jar, we learn no longer about the reflections of the traditional elements of the coming-of-age narrative but we have a documented memoire-like descent into mental illness.

I intend to argue that Plath, through the eyes of Esther Greenwood wished to – either consciously or subconsciously, present how indeed the mind of the young woman works when it comes to being clashed with stifling norms and forms that the contemporary society superimposes on her. In Bloom’s opinion it is nothing more but a clever way to depict those strains bearing the women down, in a way that Plath, through her life narrative needed to express. That is why he states that: “These multiple layers of narrative present a mixture of external events and the internal workings of her mind in order to give life to two major themes in the novel: patriarchal society’s pressures on women to conform to an oppressive role and the fragmentation of identity” (Bloom, 2009 p. 19).
I also plan on stressing that the particular picture of woman – mentally ill Esther is a tribute of Plath to her times, a way to shed a light on not only social outlook at the ‘crazy people’ but also on two poles of contemporary approach to illness’ treatment – that of Dr. Gordon and opposing, humane of Dr. Nolan. Bearing in mind the politics of containment during the Eisenhower years which led to the ideology of repression, I will focus on the seemingly fine society which let itself to lockout those women who were not able to behave socially and politically correct any longer, because they were tired and stressed to their endurance.

3.1. Politics of containment and purity of life through Esther’s eyes

Diane S. Bonds quotes in her article Paula Bennett who has written that Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* offers a brilliant evocation of “the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and the soul-destroying effect this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high-minded young women like Plath” (Bennett, 1986 p. 124).

As readers of *The Bell Jar* will know, this novel, frequently described as the autobiography is a recollection of the breakdown, and concluding recovery of Esther Greenwood, a white, middle-class young woman, living her life in the middle of Eisenhower’s era in America. Esther, just like Sylvia Plath went to the point in her life where she needed to negotiate the sexual and social contract of the 1950s: a contract which in the early pages of the novel seems hopelessly weighted in terms of male agendas and interests but gradually shifts towards the possibility of female autonomy and agency. The setting of Esther’s attempts for self-determination in a surrounding society which is obsessively domesticated and sexually correct in terms of its national identity and politics foreshadows an inevitable dramas. Coming-of-age amongst marriage-oriented and ecstatically child-rearing women must have been immensely difficult for a young woman searching for her own identity and trying to establish her own needs.

What is even worse, it seems that throughout the course of her life, Esther began to obsess about that the only good in the world was connected with everything which was clean or pure. Throughout her deeds and simultaneous thoughts, we can clearly see her obsession with the idea of purity. She ascribes almost miraculous cleansing effects of the water, and when she takes bath she feels as though she were scrubbing away all dirt of life – including her friends.: “I never feel so much myself as when I’m in a hot
bath. [...] 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. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure” (Plath, 1972 p. 12).

The above fragment of The Bell Jar can either indicate Esther’s obsessive compulsive neurosis, or subconscious subordination to social conventions. The later theory, can be supported by Luke Ferretter’s reminder that during the 1950s, one of the most popular so-called marriage textbooks was written by Judson and Mary Landis’s and was titled Building a Successful Marriage. In that textbook, the authors vehemently argued against premarital sex providing several supporting reasons. According to them, it can lead to: “mental and emotional conflict in girls; it is a mistake to believe that sexual experimentation prepares a couple for marriage, in fact, the opposite is true: there is a strong possibility that their ability to achieve psychic union as well as physical after marriage will be limited” (Ferretter, 2010, p. 117). It would be easy enough, to assume, that Esther took such advices to her heart. Especially, if she were surrounded by the booming media propaganda, admonishing anything but marriage and childbirth — and only in this succession. Andru Lugo in The Female Predicament in The Bell Jar and St. Mawr claims that “Esther’s values are: keep yourself clean and pure and you may find a man who is also clean and pure and then you will be happy. The value of purity which Esther holds so dearly is shattered when she finds out how impure (in terms of the ideal) he is” (Lugo, 2013 p. 145-146).

The references to purity are also frequent in Plath’s Journals, in one entrance, when describing Myron, her boyfriend, she states: “I find that in respect to the important things (mind, philosophy of life, physical appeal and pureness) he lacks hardly anything, so cool, so rational, I add up the balance slate and the total decides that I just might let myself learn to love him” (Plath, Kukil, 1986 p. 136). We see, that Plath was also vulnerable to the social context and that she was willing to love someone because he was compatible with her ideals.

It is not surprising, therefore, to see Esther’s world falling into pieces when what she perceived as the obvious – purity, appeared to be only the unrealistic dream. As a result, Plath’s alter ego decides to initiate herself, which pushes her even further into the world of absurdity of conventions. Her thoughts, after the initial shock are rather sensible and reveal hot-blooded, independent woman: “Finally I decided that if it was so
difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn't pure either. Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well” (Plath, 1972 p. 43).

If only Esther could remain so resolute and not succumb to overpowering sense of nothingness, everything would go different. Similarly, if Plath remained as independent and strong-minded person, who was able to analyze and mock various aspects connected with men and marriage, she would probably never committed suicide. However, the Journals reveal that she slowly slipped into the state of being submissive and needy wife and could not imagine her world without Hughes. As Kottler reveals: “In spite of her efforts to maintain her own separate identity and writing career, over time Plath grew more and more dependent on her husband” (2006 p. 22). With that, Plath – we may say – became conquered by the social norm of feeble, wall-flower like woman, awaiting attention and appreciation of her husband.

3.2. Male-dominant society and Esther’s true dilemma

The instability of the self in the twentieth century is therefore presented in The Bell Jar as an inevitable consequence of the increasing choice of ‘person’ which is open to women in the latter part of the twentieth century. The human tragedies which The Bell Jar describes are three-fold: the execution of the Rosenbergs with which the novel opens, the horrific medical treatment given to Esther Greenwood and the more general, if less final, situation of many women who are expected to conform to one of two rigid models about women - either the childless executives who terrify (and are satirised by) Esther or the domesticated mothers of the suburbs. When The Bell Jar was first published the changes were only just beginning which suggested that women could be both mothers and independent wage earners (Evans, 2000, p. 79).

The Bell Jar is in the context of the male-dominated society very important, and in Evans opinion “undervalued text”, exactly due to the fact that it is through this very text that Sylvia Plath was able to explore the limits of women’s autonomy and the actual independence of the human individual (79).

Opposing to the way in which adult Sylvia Plath tried to romanticize her early life and make the daily hardships not important, Kottler states that “there is little doubt that her father was one very strange guy. He ran the household with both German efficiency and autocratic control, isolating his wife and the children from others. He was
a selfish and self-centered man who was described as stubborn, controlling, opinionated, and antisocial. He required complete obedience from his wife, and his children” (Kottler, 2006 p. 14). Accordingly, Plath, raised by the mother who wished her daughter to become whatever she was forbidden to, shaped a person with a very strong ideas and attitude towards female’s role.

The novel presents the transformation of Esther Greenwood from a young woman who hates the idea of serving men in any way to such, who appears to earn her exit from the asylum by committing herself, although unwittingly, precisely to that project. In Reflecting on The Bell Jar, Macpherson analyzes Plath’s novel through a lens of social criticism. In his opinion, Esther’s attempted suicide is the embodiment of counteroffensive against suburbia (Macpherson, p. 41), and her final release from the mental hospital, “or her ‘last-passed-test’ is simply a reflection of her ‘social’ and ‘psychic’ maturity (6).

Looking from definitely more feminine perspective, Diane Bonds explains Esther’s depression as an “intolerable psychic conflict produced by trying to meet cultural expectations of women” (57) and following closely in understanding of the problem, Marjorie Perloff describes it as her “human inability to cope with an unlivable situation” (p. 520-21).

Esther’s mother wanted her daughter to learn shorthand, because: “My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand was something else again. Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter” (Plath, 1972 p. 76). But the only idea of taking up such course, depressed Esther even more because in her opinion: “The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way”, as she says (76).

Similarly, politically correct and expected by the society marriage was awfully unappealing to Esther, she explained it in her naïve – mocking way: “This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s, but I knew that’s what marriage was like, because cook, and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard’s mother did from morning till night” (Plath, p. 84).

Plath’s own opinion regarding marriage was at first thrust into a combination of “the prolonged adolescence of our species; the rites of birth, marriage and death; all the primitive, barbaric ceremonies streamlined to modern Times” (Plath-Kukil, 1986 p. 15). As early as 1950, she considered that “After a while I suppose I’ll get used to the idea of
marriage and children. If only it doesn’t swallow up my desires to express myself in a smug, sensuous haze. Sure, marriage is self expression, but if only my art, my writing, isn't just a mere sublimation of my sexual desires which will run dry once I get married” (21). And only a year later she expressed what really bothered her in the institution of marriage: “would marriage sap my creative energy and annihilate my desire for written and pictorial 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?” (48).

Esther’s aim in life is to find a way to remain both feminine and equal, she despises the idea of servitude to men. She wants to be socially accepted as a woman while, which deeply reveals the subject of above discussed matter – male oriented society, as well as the Eisenhower’s policy of containment. At the same time, she wishes to be able to retain her power as an independent individual and a potential professional. Her dilemma is resolved, as Bennett explains “however factitiously, in the final section of the novel through her contact with Dr. Nolan, the ‘good mother’, and through her acquisition of a diaphragm, the contraceptive device that will presumably allow her to exercise her femininity without fear of accidentally falling under the domination of a man by becoming pregnant and therefore dependent, as, in effect, Plath’s mother did” (Bennett, 2009 p. 104).

3.3. Plath and Esther’s mother-daughter relationship in view of fear of motherhood

Elise Bærevar in her Esther Greenwood’s Panopticon claims that “One can easily draw parallels on this supposition to that of Esther’s symbolically divergent views upon motherhood in The Bell Jar, with reference to: Esther’s relationship to her mother, her divergent views upon herself as a future mother, and images presenting motherhood in the text” (Bærevar, 2007 p. 10). That might be truth if viewed from the perspective of fear of repetition. Esther does not want to become like her mother.

However, when we recall the conversation during the therapy when Esther openly admits that she hates her mother: ‘‘I hate her I said’, and waited for the blow to fall. But Dr Nolan just smiled at me as if something had pleased her very, very much, and said, ‘I guess you do’” (Plath, 1972 p.195), we can also draw a more personal reference. Plath had a rather particular contact with her mother. In her Journals she once mentions: “My one want: to do work I enjoy - must keep clear of any confiding in
mother: she is a source of great depression – a beacon of terrible warning” (Plath-Kukil, 1986 p. 298).

What is more, when Plath earned her full scholarship from Smith College, entering in the fall of 1950, she decided to move away from her home, and obviously from her mother, even though she lived within walking distance of another esteemed institution, Wellesley College. It looks obvious, that Plath wanted to begin experiencing bigger independence and “to get away from her mother’s stifling influence” (Kottler, p. 14). Peel supports this theory, by saying that “In starting at Smith, Plath was branching out independently, free of her mother for the first time, though she still would not have had a private room” (Peel, 2002, p. 159).

Esther’s state of depression is definitely misunderstood by her mother, who for a moment, after Esther decides to leave Dr. Gordon’s hospital, is filled with pride and joy, saying: “I knew my baby wasn’t like that…I knew you’d decide to be all right again” (Plath, p. 145-55). She believes in socially accepted standard of the ECT procedure and is not capable of imagining that Esther not simply turning-off the ‘depression switch’ is not her daughter’s choice. It is one of those moments when Esther is not only stigmatized by the society, but by the only person who should stand by her side and offer consolation, understanding and trust – own mother.

It also seems that Esther’s dislike, or even hatred for her mother, is rooted in her personal threat of becoming exactly like her, completely trapped by the politically correct conventional life, learning and later working as typist, just the way she did: “My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen. She was always on to me to learn shorthand after college, so I'd have a practical skill as well as a college degree” (Plath, pp. 21-22).

Esther is unable to communicate with her mother as a result of their differing perceptions regarding the life and important values. Mrs. Greenwood cannot understand her daughter, does not reach that far with her mind to understand Esther’s wishes: “My mother was the worst. She never scolded me, but kept begging me, with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong. She said she was sure the doctors thought she had done something wrong because they asked her a lot of questions about my toilet training, and I had been perfectly trained at a very early age…”(Plath, 1972 p. 195).

Esther is deeply affected by her mother’s and the society’s perception of unqualified people, that her first reaction when she looks at the requirements of her
mother’s college and realizes that she is unqualified is to blame herself. As Stephanie Tsank in *The Bell Jar: A Psychological Case Study* notes, “she turns the situation negatively upon herself. Although the reality at hand is simply that her current university’s curriculum does not match that of the city college nearby, Esther bemoans: ‘Now I saw that the stupidest person at my mother’s college knew more than I did. I saw they wouldn’t even let me in through the door, let alone give me a large scholarship like the one I had at my own college’” (Plath, p. 125 in Tsank, 2013 pp. 172-173).

Mrs. Greenwood has a great confidence in male power and it also influences greatly on Esther’s restricted relationship with her mother. The non-supportive mother figure and lack of support from her site have also effect on Esther’s own perceptions on maternity, and she claims that she “[hates]…the thought of being under a man’s thumb…A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line…Why was I so unmaternal and apart?”(Plath, 1972 p. 212).

Bonds further points out to the fact that: “although Esther’s breakdown may have sources lying buried in the past along with her father, the novel makes it sufficiently clear that she is torn apart by the intolerable conflict between her wish to avoid domesticity, marriage and motherhood, on the one hand, and her inability to conceive of a viable future in which she avoids that fate, on the other” (Bonds, 1990 p. 54).

Although the beginning of the novel shows Esther as a peaceful mother with child, claiming to be “all right again” (Plath, 1972 p.3), there cannot be certainty that she will not end up like Plath – with depression swallowing her, where motherhood and the children are not as important as overwhelming sense of desire to die.

### 3.4. Isolative and perfectionist nature as source of Esther/ Plath’s depression

As it was discussed in the first chapter, the on-and-off use of the word ‘insane’ in order to refer to the depressed person, eventually turned the mental patient’s illness into a specific identity, as Warner calls it “a permanent and indelible self” (Warner, 2009 p. 23). In the 1940s the public discourse of mental illness was that it was irreparable, carrying “enormous social stigma and the morbid dread of potential institutionalization,” a view that continued well into the 1950s.

Plath sought psychiatric care for the first time after a suicide attempt, with limited results. Like most of such types of depressions, the episodes usually were
supposed to appear and disappear of their own accord, often without any stormy or serious event. Due to the fact that this was the time before actually working antidepressant medications were developed, there was little to do but wait for the mood swing to run its course and hope that talking helped, which it usually did not. It definitely did not help much more, that Plath was often perceived by her colleges, and even by her few friends, as “arrogant, aggressive, demanding, volatile, and difficult to get along with” (Kottler p. 15). This only contributed to her sense of isolation. The authors of Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology support the idea of the author’s isolation, by claiming that: “This inability to accept self and others led almost inexorably to social isolation. Plath became intensely, even painfully, critical, compulsive, perfectionistic, and rigid. Unlike Doreen, her roommate during the Mademoiselle adventure described in the early pages of The Bell Jar, Sylvia lacked animal vitality. Often she could not do anything, became virtually paralyzed (Maris, Berman, & Silverman, 2000 p. 41).

Her distinguished mentor and scholarship sponsor, Olive Higgins Prouty, was so much concerned about her protégé that she agreed to cover the bill for the best mental health treatment that could be found. In The Bell Jar, Philomena Guinea, Esther’s patron, is a famous, wealthy, elderly novelist who funds Esther’s scholarship and pays for Esther to go to a private hospital instead of the state institution.

The factor which Aaron T. Beck, psychiatrist, outlines in his research is that is also responsible for later collapsing Esther’s mental state is the notion that “depression-prone individuals spend their childhood setting rigid, perfectionist goals for themselves so that their universe collapses when they confront inevitable disappointments later in life” (Beck, 1974 p.7). We can see in the novel, that Esther’s life before her mental breakdown, was one of a perfectionist’s dream. She describes her life in college as “nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another” (Plath, 1972 p. 29).

Furthermore, Tim Kendall states that: “Esther’s competitive nature and her will to succeed become frustrated, not satisfied, by her conspicuous achievements” (Kendall, 2009 p. 121).

When we look into Plath’s Journals, or any biographical source, we can find out that that was exactly the author’s life. What is more, as Kottler suggests: “Although Otto’s death certainly had a huge emotional impact on the family, Aurelia and the children must have also felt some relief from finally being out from underneath his
complete dominance” (Kottler p. 13). I quoted this fragment here, because it has a direct connection with Plath’s personality, the way she became. Her father, although often romanticized in her adult life, was in fact a very difficult parent – strict and demanding. There was no place for excuses and he required complete obedience. Her mother, who had to endure this relationship for the sake of her children, wished to accomplish herself through Plath. Therefore, “By the time Sylvia was five, she had already written her first poem, and by eight, she was producing rhymes and couplets at a regular rate” (Kottler p. 13). There are numerous evidences that throughout her entire life, from the earliest years and in further education, graduate school, and her own literary work, Plath never stopped in excelling academically at the highest level.

3.5. ECT as Esther’s Catastrophic Treatment vs. Esther’s Cleansing Treatment

Plath’s depressive condition was so grave that the doctors decided to use electroconvulsive shock treatment (ECT). Interestingly, two-thirds of the patients receiving ECT in the 1950’s were women (Bærevar, 2007 p. 37).

MacPherson recalls Carol Warren’s study *Madwives* (1987) in which the author re-examines the medical records and interviews of a group of women in a California hospital in the 1950s, and draws firm connections between the isolation of suburban housewives and depression, and between husbands and hospitals and technology coordinating an oppressive social control of women. Another woman explained the desired result: after shock treatments ‘I wasn’t depressed or despondent. . . Now, I don’t feel anything’ (Warren, 1987 p. 135).

The novel’s setting is that during the peak of the Cold War, and begins with the recollection of Esther regarding the Rosenbergs, who were convicted of spying for the Soviet Union and sentenced to death by electrocution. The opening passage reveals Esther’s fears and her obsession with death and dying: “I’m stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that’s all there was to read about in the papers” (Plath, 1972 p. 1). This terrifying idea resonates further in the novel, when she undergoes electroshock therapy.

For Esther, the electroshock treatment by the unpleasant and unfeeling Dr. Gordon was not only traumatic but mostly unhelpful, and she was left with the ever-present feeling that her body as well as her personal space were invaded. She began questioning what was her fault that she deserved such terrible thing: “Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee,
it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done” (Plath, 1972 p. 76).

Doctor Gordon is the psychiatrist, who decides that ECT will be the best option in Esther’s case. However, his impersonal approach causes her to believe her disease is her own fault. Furthermore, his lack of compassion, impersonal attitude, and lack of communication all leave Esther’s illness unchanged, if not worse. As Bloom puts it: “the mechanical, detached scene depicts the power of doctors over a female patient” (Bloom, 2009 p. 43). Plath presents a disturbing image of Esther as ‘stuck’ both with Dr. Gordon and with a therapy that does nothing but overwhelms her and causes bigger fear. Warner recalls reflections of Esther on her shock therapy experience with Dr. Gordon, and her worries which seem never-ending: “once I was locked up they could use [ECT] on me all the time” (Plath, 1972 p. 159). Warner explains that this fragment reveals Esther’s understanding of “ECT as a punishment and violent act instead of a treatment. Additionally, Esther has incorporated within herself the perception that as a patient with depression, she is in no position to discussing her treatment” (Warner, 2009 p. 34).

An interesting glimpse on the treatment procedure and its potential discontinuation offers Ferreter. In his opinion: “It was not just the submissive and docile elements of the feminine role in the 1950s that were used as criteria for mental health in women. Beauty, grooming and dress were all taken by physicians as signs of a recovery from mental illness (Ferreter, 2010, p. 132). He further explains that when Esther meets Dr. Gordon, and he sends her for ECT treatment and hospitalization it is because of her ambitious intelligence, which drove her to frustration when she did not manage to get to prestigious writing class at Harvard summer school. Such attitude would be typical for a young, self-confident male psychiatrist if he came in contact with young woman, who would, obviously due to her mental illness, rejected her feminine role. Ferreter concludes his thought, stating that “the fact that she had not changed her clothes or washed her hair for three weeks when he first interviewed her would confirm this” (132) and that is why “Esther was judged mentally ill because she was failing to conform to cultural norms of femininity” (133).

Dr. Gordon and his impersonal, almost sterile approach to Esther leaves her dangling, and what is even more sad, is that it fuels her anger, when it should calm her nerves and provide her with a sense of security. “Even at the time of narration, Esther’s
anger towards the man who claimed to be able to treat her, but in fact distressed her even more, remains intense and violent” (135).

While her first experience is awful and painful, when she becomes the patient of Dr. Nolan, her second experience, although not painful and ‘properly’ administered, serves only to start to numb her to everything that was inadequate, and what was in fact, her true independent self. When referring to the second treatment with ECT, Esther states that it was like waking from a “deep, drenched sleep […] All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air” (Plath, 1972 p. 215).

The irony of the novel, is that the same electrical current, which got rid of the nation’s threat – the Rosenbergs, restored Esther to life, as critic Robert Scholes remarks (1971 p. 131).

When we do not just focus on the psychological aspect and put the aspects of the mental illness aside, it is possible for us to embrace the fact, that Plath created a literary novel of true literary merit. The first step in such dwelling, would be to focus on the form of The Bell Jar, and to realize that: “One basic distinction is between first-person narration and third-person narration. Novelists are themselves often conscious of this as a choice to be made when they sit down to a new work” (Mullan, 2006, p. 40). It is a fairly reasonable to claim that Plath’s choice of the first person narrative was not only intentional but also deeply considered beforehand. Through Esther-Plath’s eyes, we are the spectators of the times, social changes, society’s attitudes to various aspects of life, such as marriage, work, social behavior, morality, etc.

On the other hand, the problem with such form of narration is exactly that the first person can speak all too freely and directly to us or that the author is not careful enough and can lose perspective. As James in his The Ambassadors argues: “his possible readers, whom he has to reckon with … so loosely and vaguely after all, so little respectfully, on so scant a presumption of exposure to criticism” (James, 1937 p. xviii). It might be the case with The Bell Jar, when we re-consider the fact that, apart from getting the first-hand picture of the American 1950s, the story does not add anything to the fact that Esther is a broken, clueless person. All through the story, the only thing that resonates is a whiny voice of a delusional character, who contemplates suicide, plus pushes into face of the readers the descriptions of nine ways how to do it.
Some other aspect raised by the novel, such as the exhaustive description of sexual intercourse, can leave the reader speechless.

We could assume, that Plath loses the balance of what is tasteful and what is, in fact disgusting, intentionally – for the reasons mentioned above, to show the reality of a person’s life and struggle in her own times and world surrounding her.

However, when we look at the novel from the biographical point of view, we can deduce that Plath simply did not care, or even worse – she wished to smack the reader into face with full-blown ugliness and stark contrast between the cute American brides-to-be, expectant to find the husbands and begin giving birth to a bunch of kids with those socially unacceptable women, who had feministic leanings. As I quoted above, Plath was not a type of person who would search for pink unicorns and rainbows in every nook and cranny of her life. She was harsh and behaved all too often obnoxiously. It is therefore possible that she did not care what would be the reaction of the readers.

Still, with that final statement, stands in conflict the biographical opinion, that Plath was afraid that the book might not have enough literary merit, referred to it in a letter as ‘a pot boiler’, and wished to protect herself from professional humiliation by disguising her identity behind the pseudonym (Bloom, 2009 p. 12).

Having said that, I claim that it is not easy to ascribe the true literary merits to The Bell Jar, the ones that would define this novel as brilliant or catchy, or at least as a ‘must read in a free time’. I see it as the novel, which must be read with an open mind and if – and only if – the reader is ready for the whiny narrator and multi-layered narration, which offers fairly deep context in ‘between-the-lines’. Without doubt, The Bell Jar’s literary merit is its obvious focus on feministic voice and therefore, if read from such perspective, the novel is a brilliant peek into a girl’s mind and her psyche. For modern women reading this novel, the valuable afterthought might be that we are where we are and there is usually no one above us or beside us who could tell us what we ought to be doing with our lives. Undoubtedly, realizing the gulf between our conditions of life and work and those of the women in Esther-Plath’s times, we will feel almost elated at the mere idea that we do have what to live for – no matter whether we are married or not. There is not a single person who would claim the typist’s job is ideal for womanhood allure. As such, I think that The Bell Jar is brilliant.
Discussion

The following part will represent a ‘discussion’ of those questions which were postulated at the very beginning of my thesis but were not answered definitively so far. Moreover, it will consist of my personal recollections on what it was that I intended to obtain through my work and what it was I actually achieved – how the actual work progressed and where I have found myself after completing it.

Therefore, I can say that the discussion part of my thesis aims to resume the lines of thought established in the previous chapters, as well as the analysis of the data gathered, and finally it serves as a clarification of the research questions.

The Idea

A mere idea for the subject of my thesis, came – even to me – as a surprise. I was pondering over the sense of the “bell jar” metaphor, after reading Sylvia Plath’s only novel The Bell Jar. For some time, I was certain that it only referred to the author’s schizophrenic attitude towards the world, that it only meant that Plath wished to show the comfortable space behind the metaphorical glass dome. What stood in contradiction with that, was the image of the jar raising at the end of young Esther’s narration. That is why, I decided to find out more, not only about Plath’s private, personal life and her experiences, but also to connect her biography to the historical period and draw conclusions from there.

That was the beginning of my vague idea, at the earliest point in my work.

The Questions

After having the rough idea in my head, I proceeded to outlining the work and one by one, postulating questions which could serve as a scaffolding to my thesis. Those questions played also important part as a sort of proverbial sign posts – it was far more easier to position myself and my thinking in the correct direction, when I saw where I was supposed to be heading.

The first question I asked myself was “What were the conditions of life that the American women in 1950s lived in?” That part of my thesis was a pure enjoyment to work on. It led me to numerous valuable sources and showed a completely new perspective to me – one, where beautiful, colorful household devices in nice suburban houses of that era, meant entrapment and potential depression of women who lived then.
and there. After researching the available material, it was easy to find the answer to my question and I could sadly conclude, that although the feminist movement was activating itself in those times, hardly any housewife was educated and free-spirited to take on some action, not to remain passively confined to domesticity.

From that point, I came to the conclusion that it is worth going deeper into Plath’s life and find the answer to the following question – “What were the factors in Plath’s life, that combined with the fifties denigrated role of female gender led to her suicide?” That was the second time, I found myself engrossed in the available resources and biographies. Almost every person, at least once in his or her life, has probably heard about Sylvia Plath. The common knowledge is that she suffered several mental breakdowns and that finally she committed suicide.

Nevertheless, delving deeper into the facts behind the raw – dictionary-like data, was a pure pleasure, tainted obviously by the bitterness of the facts which emerged. To say that Plath was multi-dimensional person was an understatement. For me, she exploded from the pages of various biographies as a kind of wild animal, trapped in some forms she was taught by the society to live in. And sadly – reined by her own husband, who not only abandoned her, but from my point of view – tried to dampen her literary spirit.

I was able to conclude my research with the statement, that Plath’s personal life and her experiences – not only in the period of her marriage – were definitely the factors behind the form of her only novel that she wrote – life narrative.

And eventually, I asked “How Esther Greenwood’s female identity and performances are restricted and shaped by the Cold War era?” It was a very tricky question, because I had to approach to it from two different perspectives – the first saw Esther as a mentally incompetent woman in the 1950s and the second, the young woman who begins shaping her personality through her own experiences.

It was not easy to escape the notion, that apart from Esther’s mental problems, there is really nothing more to see. For the big part of my re-reading the text and its excerpts, the only thought that came to my mind, was that Esther is actually flat, one-dimensional character, so much devoid of any traces of personality, that there is nothing to be found that would make the research interesting. I struggled with focusing on anything but the mental instability aspect.

However, the resources, all of the supporting material, which explained and outlined the difficulties of people with schizophrenia, made it clear that the American
1950s were probably one of the most difficult for the women, who suffered from malady or depression, not to mention those, who had mental problems.

That way, my question dangled and if I were to be completely honest with myself – there is no clear cut answer whether Esther’s problem was triggered by the times she lived in, or whether she was simply a weak-minded person, with no character enough not to be pushed or pulled and victimized.

The end-point

After concluding my work, I sat back and looked through the material I tried to put into appropriate words, so that to show what I wanted to show.

My reflections regarding my work are that: first of all, my knowledge about Plath’s life broadened and I began to perceive her with much more sympathy and understanding; I also got to know McCarthyism from different perspective – that, where women were rolled back to the position of the domestic divas in the remote suburbia and left there to raise the children and look good in the overall picture of the American society against the looming Communists; Finally, I realized, that I did find the link between Plath’s personal life and experiences and her only novel *The Bell Jar*, which was my initial intention. That link is obvious, after having access to the biographical data and analyzing the novel’s text through the perspective of Plath’s *Journals*.

Throughout the preceding chapters I have explored the different layers of the problem, connected with analyzing *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and I have shown how particular moments from her life have influenced how she carried out her work on the novel, which so many critics define as ‘hidden autobiography’. I have therefore established the existing connections which are present within this particular case by postulating and answering the questions regarding the novel and its author.

Therefore, I will now move on to the final part of my thesis, in which I will provide a conclusion about this research which I have undertaken and what I have found throughout conducting it.
Conclusion

In this final chapter of the thesis I will sum up all the findings and conclusions which I have made throughout the preceding chapters – conclusions about value of the life narrative – the literary device that Plath chose to employ in *The Bell Jar*, about the narrative of the novel as referring to the author's own life, and finally, about the social mirror of the American 1950s, as presented in Esther’s story.

By expressing my conclusions, I sincerely hope that the reader will find it more easy to trace back, how I have come to that point and what are the actual reasons for these conclusions.

My thesis was divided into three chapters – each tackling different aspect, however all of the were bound with one thought – that Sylvia Plath was a writer born and raised in the period, which is the time-frame for her only novel *The Bell Jar*.

Due to the fact that I wished to find answers to the questions I presented and discussed above, I began with the analysis, from the socio-historical point of view. My first chapter’s aim was to present the reality of the women, living in the American 1950’s, when the politics shaped a completely new realm of the domestic ideal. From my point of view, that was a crucial basis, on which I could build my theory, that not only fictional character Esther was formed by this ‘mold’, but that her creator – Sylvia Plath, either consciously or subconsciously managed to depict those time, in sort of the ‘false mirror’. With the social attitude, promoting the image of the woman-wife-mother, stuck in the remote suburbia, and also with highly restricted medical help, the women of 1950’s were doomed to loneliness and overwhelming sense of even-deeper isolation and alienation, which in many cases led to depression and mental illnesses. The ‘Red Scare’ period of history, influenced heavily on women’s lives and left those, who did not live-up to a standard, branded as those, who “lost their sanity and ability to think and act rationally, and therefore has lost precisely those faculties that defined him or her as human” (Selwyn, 1953 p. 17).

The second chapter focused on Sylvia Plath as the author and as such, it intended to present the image of the woman from the American 1950s, so that I could find the connections between her life and her writing. That was one of the most straightforward tasks within my thesis. There was no problem with finding the biographical data, which would support my theory that Plath struggled in her married life with the dominant husband and his oppressive personality. It was therefore obvious to claim that Plath,
being the author who willingly wrote semi-biographical literature, portrayed her characters as having such complexes, as she came to live with. That means, that I was able to find the connection between the author and her story – one, which would be a deliberate use of her own life’s experiences in the story.

That is why, the final chapter three, was devoted to presenting to the full extent, the interwoven life stories of Plath and Esther’s. At this point, I found it necessary to explain the real value of the novel The Bell Jar – that, of being actually the ‘life narrative’. As I explained above, the personal value – for me, as the writer of this thesis, was to get to know various aspects connected with the research, deeper and in much broader extent. However, the intended value which I wished to present to the reader, was to point out, what is so worthwhile in the story and its form. Such form of narrative, as it can be found in novel is what we describe as an autobiography as disguised as fiction. Thanks to that narrative form, the readers are supposed to feel more connected with the main characters of the story. We do actually feel more close to Plath while consciously reading her novel, due to the fact that we have strong proofs that the author mirrored her own emotions. Especially when we take into consideration the fact that “she began working intently on The Bell Jar, a novel that contains much autobiographical detail about her near-suicide at age twenty”, as says Bloom (2001 p. 12). Through employing ‘life narrative’, Plath provided us – reader with completely unique two-fold treat – we get to know the actual, real perspective on the particular moment in the social history of the United States and also we come closer to understanding what was going on in Plath’s mind, how it worked and reacted to the surrounding reality. In my opinion, that – and mostly that aspect of The Bell Jar is the most valuable.

Having completed the work on my thesis, I’m inclined to say that this work enriched me. I feel much more appreciative in that I live in the era when women are free to express themselves anyway they wish. I also value the knowledge of more intimate aspects of Plath’s life – they also made me realize, how important is that the modern society has tools – laws which protect us against abuse and domination. The work made me also more attentive to the problems of the minority women throughout the world. I am certain that in the nearest future I will be reading the ‘life narratives’ by other female authors, because that form of narrative offers, in my opinion, much more precious intake of the story.
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