

«We Are All Mad Here»: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as a Political Novel

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ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath's *roman à clef* *The Bell Jar* has largely been read as an autobiographical novel and as the key to understanding her suicide. The novel, however, presents an important political complexity—the contradictions Esther faces in post-WWII, 1950s American society, the unattainable and conflicting ideals of womanhood, and the political treason that betraying them implies, dealt with as madness. Esther Greenwood's descent into madness is no more than the reflection of the sick, hypocritical society she lives in, and an attempt to escape from her obligations as an American woman. However, the institution of psychiatry was closely related to the politics of the time, and acted as a means of control over the population, especially women, through the use of treatments such as ECT and lobotomy. I would like to look at how Cold War politics, gender, and psychiatry interact in *The Bell Jar* in order to submit American society to the conformism and consumerism that dominated the 1950s.

Keywords: Contemporary American Literature, post-1945 fiction, Cold War, Sylvia Plath, madness, psychiatry.

«Aquí estamos todos locos»: *The Bell Jar* de Sylvia Plath como novela política

RESUMEN

The Bell Jar, el *roman à clef* de Sylvia Plath ha sido sobre todo leída como novela autobiográfica clave para entender su suicidio. Esta novela, sin embargo, presenta una importante complejidad política: las contradicciones a las que Esther se enfrenta en los Estados Unidos de la década de los cincuenta, tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial, los ideales de femineidad inalcanzables y conflictivos, y la traición política que supone no cumplirlos, que son tratados como locura. El descenso a la locura de Esther Greenwood no es más que un reflejo de la sociedad enferma e hipócrita en la que vive, y un intento de escapar de sus obligaciones como americana. No obstante, la institución de la psiquiatría estaba estrechamente relacionada con la política de la época, y actuaba como medio de control de la población, especialmente de las mujeres, a través del uso de tratamientos como el electroshock y la lobotomía. En este ensayo me gustaría prestar atención a cómo las políticas de la Guerra Fría, el género, y la psiquiatría interaccionan en *The Bell Jar* para someter a la sociedad americana al conformismo y el consumismo que dominaron los años 50.

Palabras clave: literatura contemporánea Americana, ficción post-1945, Guerra Fría, Sylvia Plath, locura, psiquiatría.

«Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?»
—Sylvia Plath (2008:192)

Although often read as a juvenile *bildungsroman* or an autobiographical account of Plath's way to suicide and usually marketed as college chick-lit, *The Bell Jar* (1963) sets out several controversial claims about Cold War rhetoric and how it is intertwined with gender, without reaching a satisfying answer. I will look at the protagonist's conflicting ideals about womanhood, widely informed by the culture she lives in, and how her own discourse of the Other and the very othering of herself go hand in hand with American Cold War politics and its aim to control the population, in this case portrayed via a discourse of the medicalization of madness and difference. Indeed, as Kate Baldwin has said about *The Bell Jar*, «[w]hile this book demands to be interpreted in the context of US domestic containment, its narrative has as much to say about American women's relationship to national narratives that place, displace, and replace women in an international, geo-political world order as it does about the relationship between US domestic incarceration and the asylum.» (Baldwin 2004:23) Therefore, I propose to first look at the national, totalizing discourse of the Other that the narrator herself makes, and then to look at how this 'othering' affects the main character's psyche to a point of dissociation through R.D. Laing's anti-psychiatric theory.

The very start of the narrative signals an event that marked Cold War politics: the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, a seemingly all-American couple executed for working as spies for the communist government. Esther, despite constantly wanting to detach herself from the world around her, feels a certain fascination and repulsion towards their execution: «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 . . . It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves» (Plath 2005:1). This observation will serve as a proleptical marker for the future electroshock therapy that Esther will suffer to treat her madness—that is, her being unfit for society. In fact, though apparently dealing with a young girl's descent into madness when she loses a scholarship for a prestigious writing summer program, Esther's narrative is as much marked by her gender and class as by the ideology that informs and constructs these experiences.

Cold War rhetoric in the US was marked by a strict division between the private and the public realms, in opposition to the apparent incorporation of women to the workforce in the USSR. The US was proud to defend the values of freedom and individualism; the idea that anyone could chose their own way in life, even though in reality these choices were limited and constricted within a consumer society. After women had worked during the war, had had access to education and more participation in the public life than their predecessors, American women in the Cold War were encouraged to go back to the home and conform to this idea of a good life: a house in the suburbs, a providing husband, and kids, with the freedom, of course, of choosing among a wide variety of products at the supermarket. The feeling of emptiness and the unfulfilling nature of this kind of life was commented upon by

Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, published in the same year as *The Bell Jar*. Friedan termed it «the problem that has no name», a question that is problematized by Plath in *The Bell Jar* as not only consisting on being able to opt for a job or not, but on something much more difficult to solve and deeply ingrained in their psyches, to the point of causing mental distress.

As Norma Alarcón *et al.* claim in the introduction to the essay collection *Between Women and Nation*, «[c]ritically reading the spaces between woman and nation as not only structured by patriarchy, we can begin to grasp the supra- and transnational aspects of cultures of identity» (Alarcón 1999:13). That is, in examining not only gender roles in a society, but also their relation to race or class from an intersectional position, we can infer certain aspects about the national discourse, which, in this case, was the well-known discourse of communist «containment», in containment of the Soviet Other as well as containment of any kind of Other was essential at the same time that individual freedom, paradoxically, was enhanced. As Betty Friedan points out, after World War II, women were moved from the public to the private realm, relying on their being able to raise a family and take care of a house in order to prosper as a society: «[t]hey were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets, or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for» (Friedan 1963:15-6) This, far from private, is actually a political stance about how private life should be, because it in fact has an impact on the realm of the public.

Esther's choice at the beginning of the narrative is still undecided: she is a highly successful college student on a scholarship and a talented poet. However, the standard narrative of motherhood and housewifery hovers over her despite her detachment from it—she is always reflecting on marriage and looking for a partner after her failed relationship with Buddy Willard, although she claims to despise the housewife life embodied by her or Buddy's mother. But the moment she feels inadequate at an internship in a prestigious magazine and is then rejected at a writing summer course, Esther's sense of self begins to break down to pieces. As Baldwin claims, «[t]he rhetoric of the public and the private coalesce to form a particularly pernicious form of disorientation for the fragmenting Esther Greenwood whose sense of a private self becomes increasingly dependent upon her failing public self.» (Bayley 2006:159) That is, the moment her career opportunities dwindle, she starts to feel trapped in a role she does not desire, and that is when she begins to identify herself with the Other counter to the American discourse—for, in refusing to fulfil her role as a woman, she is as terrible a traitor to her country as Ethel Rosenberg was (it is worth noting that Ethel Rosenberg's full name is Ethel Esther Greengrass Rosenberg¹), and, as Esther realizes, the different one finds no compassion in society, but rather the opposite:

¹ For a full discussion on how Esther might represent Ethel Rosenberg's private side, see Marie Ashe's «The Bell Jar and the Ghost of Ethel Rosenberg» in *Secret Agents: The Rosenberg Case, McCarthyism, and Fifties America*, ed. Marjorie Garber and Rebecca Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1995).

So I said, «Isn't it awful about the Rosenbergs?»
 The Rosenbergs were to be electrocuted late that night.
 «Yes!» Hilday said, and at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat's cradle of her heart.
 «It's awful such people should be alive.» . . . «I'm so glad they're going to die.»
 (Plath 2005:96)

According to Judith Butler, «the persistence of disidentification is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation. . . . Such collective disidentifications can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern» (Butler 1993:4). That is, Esther's society rejection of the Other, as well as Esther's rejection of the Other as well, brings to light the very paradox essential for happiness in American society—there is a limited range of roles in order to fit in; otherwise, you are unfit for society. This, however, is so because these very margins exist: the construction of the Other is necessary for the construction of the One. Esther, in othering other peoples, dismantles the very mechanism by which she has been othered, thus questioning the veracity of the discourse of the *statu quo*. Rebelling against it, though, is not so simple, since it means to give up the fictionality of a sense of self, which is at the same time encouraged and erased by the power discourses.

Whenever Esther's sense of self is put into question by the very narrative that holds it together, she refers to her look as foreign; she says, for instance: «I looked yellow as a Chinaman» (Plath 2005:7) when she is wondering whether she fits with the other superficial magazine girls; or: «The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian» (Plath 2005:108) after deciding to give up New York and the internship and escaping rape by a Peruvian blind-date, whom she previously described thus: «They're squat . . . They're ugly as Aztecs» (Plath 2005:99). In fact, Esther realizes her non-belonging at the same time that she identifies with those who already do not belong, and at whose cost the narrative of belonging is constructed. Therefore, this realization opens up a gap for exploring an in-betweenness, a new kind of narrative which may be the key for non-discrimination and inclusion. As Alarcón *et al.* claim:

Dichotomies that challenge the very conditions of belonging and becoming as they are constructed through the discursive racializing, genderizing, and sexualizing signifiers. These metaphorical pairs not only have resonance with each other but also generate that space which is neither/nor. Neither inner nor outer but a common zone—this encounter with the nation taking place through interaction and performative events—between women and nation. This betweenness not only refuses two temporally ordered entities of women and the nation, but also refuses a moment of reversal of women for nation. (Alarcón 1999:14)

When Esther finds herself in this neither/nor which eventually leads her to be incarcerated—contained—in an asylum, she experiences radical truths about the mythical discourse of choice and individual freedom in a free society in which she was so far believing. In an encounter with a negro who serves her food in the asylum she is first put into, she is upset there are only beans and beans to choose from, and

ends up kicking the kitchen worker taking advantage of her privileged status as a white, middle-class woman (Plath 2005:175), but realizing, as Kate Baldwin notes, «the parameters of that choice, and who is implicated. Her reaction to the kitchen worker is all about his insufficient presentation of choice: the beans and carrots, beans and peas, but never beans and beans. The choice he presents is no choice: it's beans and beans» (Baldwin 2004:34). Esther comes to understand that her choice is not such—her choice is limited, like the kitchen worker's, for whom she feels no compassion. However, white, middle-class men like Buddy Willard are allowed to be hypocritical and defend purity while sleeping around, she has no choice as a woman but to submit to her national role (like the negro, the Chinaman and the Indian):

I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state. (Plath 2005:81)

It seems ironic that she links the private realm with a totalitarian state, given the defence of freedom and the opposition to communist Russia that the US was propagating at the time. Indeed, as several studies have pointed out, *The Bell Jar* establishes a connection between feminine, irrational Russia and masculine, rational America, or, as Baldwin puts it: «*The Bell Jar* offers us the opportunity to see U.S. Cold War femininity as caught up in the weird performance—as perpetuated by the U.S. media—of the Soviet other» (Baldwin 2004:31). Esther is a traitor to her country, since she does not want to comply with her role as a woman, but this is made explicit in the narrative when she finds herself flirting with Constantin, the Russian interpreter, and daydreaming about marrying him. In fact, what makes Constantin attractive is the idea that he looks familiar, but different, as she says: «[h]e could *almost* have been an American, he was so tan and had such good teeth, but I could tell straight away that he wasn't.» (Plath 2005:70; my emphasis). The fact that he could *almost* have been an American, but is not, is what attracts Esther, for one thing needs an Other to define itself by negation (we must remember that the figure of the double appears a great number of times throughout the book): America needs Russia to define herself, and Esther needs others to identify or misidentify herself with. It is not coincidental that the moment that she encounters Constantin is also the moment when she realizes that she «was never really happy» after her father died (Plath 2005:71), but was not able to articulate it before: for she could not, in the American language of collective progress, happiness and prosperity. Being unhappy, in fact, is un-American, and must be corrected through psychiatry.

Esther is a student of English and wants to be a poet, which reveals the importance of language herself. In fact, when she begins to get sick, she plans to write a novel but cannot read or write anymore: «Words, dimly familiar, but twisted all awry, like faces in a funhouse mirror, fled past, leaving no impression on the glassy

surface of my brain» (Plath 2005:120). When she falls sick, the first thing that happens to her is the loss of control over language—the inability to produce a discourse. She also recalls an incident at a Chemistry class, where she could not understand the symbols and how they work—they literally made her sick (Plath 2005:33)—, so she devised a plan in order to skip the class pretending she did understand the language and thoroughly enjoyed it. She knows what others expect from her, and she tricks them into believing that she fits into their idea of her through language. Language is her source of power and the way through which she recreates her own identity, but the moment that she begins to realize that words are empty of meaning and that the power which decides what means what does not depend on her—in fact at times she cannot even understand it—she begins to fall into madness. The Other is not only talked about by the One; the Other has no language of its own, only the language of the master in order to attempt to define itself. Thus, the Other is trapped in a language that is not its own, a thought that completely terrifies Esther when her mother suggests she learn shorthand and become a typist or a teacher: «The trouble is, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters.» (Plath 2005:72) She wants to dictate her own letters, but letters in *whose* language?

Incidentally, the other Russian she compares herself to is another UN interpreter, like Constantin, only this time a woman, and she is defined by American standards: «I stared through the Russian girl in her double-breasted grey suit, rattling off idiom after idiom in her own unknowable tongue» (Plath 2005:71). Russian women were thought to be unfeminine and dressing with bad taste, to which they add the irrationality expressed in the Russian language. However, Esther realizes at this point that it is every other language that is irrational too, as Baldwin points out: «The language of idioms is after all one in which meaning is non-coincidental with the literal. The text thus suggests the simultaneous enticement of national narratives that seem to offer identity as a solution and the foundation of that lure in rhetoric that is overblown, idiomatic, and empty» (Baldwin 2004:31). Indeed, the fear of misrecognizing language, which appears meaningless to her—the language of idioms, like chemistry—, terrifies her. Thus she begins to list all the things she cannot do aside from speaking idioms: cooking, dancing or doing shorthand (Plath 2005:71-2). And in fact, by every part of the national speech she cannot identify with, Esther becomes more and more detached from reality, from the fictive but imposed reality of having a stable sense of self.

Her loss of mastery over language also signifies her lack of mastery over her identity, and her realization of the trap of gender and the lack of choice in the society she lives in. The moment she realizes that Buddy is not a virgin, he falls sick with tuberculosis and expects Esther to take care of him, but Esther is disgusted by the lack of his purported masculinity (Plath 2005:46). She is also disgusted at him when he takes her to the hospital to see a live birth. She is horrified by the lack of control of the woman in the labour, by how it all seems to be in the hands of men, using women as reproductive objects, as well as free childcare labour, since the feminine role played a key point in the development of capitalism:

Later Buddy told me the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain and that when she swore and groaned she really didn't know what she was doing because she was in a kind of twilight sleep.

I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been. (Plath 2005:62)

Significantly, what Esther notices is the lack of a language for the pain of the woman in labour. She can only groan, but she will not remember the experience because she cannot describe it either.

According to Baldwin, «*The Bell Jar* offers impulses both towards mental health—an integrated selfhood—and towards the unfeasibility of such a selfhood; this is not, as is commonly thought, because of an impossible choice between 'motherhood' and 'career,' but rather because of the sexual, racial, and global terms of Esther's contradictory location» (Baldwin 2004:24). Esther's political disorientation becomes psychological as well. Esther's madness fits Shoshana Felman's definition of madness as «loss of the relation to the mastery of meaning, of achievement, of production» (Felman 2003:54). Esther discovers, in her way to adulthood, that she has no power over language, that she is an Other incapable of creating meaning like the Russian interpreter. Like the negro, she has no choice—she is a by-product of the national discourse. According to anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing's ideas about schizophrenia, which were being developed around the time that *The Bell Jar* was published, a sick self «is precluded from having a direct relationship with real things and real people . . . [the doctor] is witness to the struggle which ensues to preserve the self's own sense of its own realness, aliveness, and identity. . . . [In a sane self,] [t]he reality of the world and of the self are mutually potentiated by the direct relationship between self and other.» (Laing 1965:80-82; his emphasis). At the moment that Esther is unable to identify and establish a relation with the world that surrounds her, because she feels Othered, she falls prey to madness—the lack of a language, the fragmentation and misrecognition of the self, such as when Esther sees herself in a mirror and does not think it is her at first (Plath 2005: 168).

Regardless of the solution offered by Dr Nolan—actually the only independent woman Esther comes across, and the only one she does not want to be like—, wearing a IUD, she nevertheless keeps looking for «the proper sort of man» (Plath 2005:213) to lose her virginity to. Esther is psychologically constrained by gender and unable to construct a different identity for herself, even if she is not afraid of getting pregnant anymore. Despite the fact that at the end she seems to get better and feels «reborn» (Plath 2005:233), we are told at the beginning of the book that older Esther, the one narrating, has had a baby (Plath 2005:3). So, has she been able to overcome unfair power structures and the national narrative? Many critics, including myself, do not seem so optimistic about it. As Caroline Pinke has pointed out, *The Bell Jar* «suggests that the gender problem is psychological and nearly impossible—even for Esther, whose perceptive nature allows her to at least recognize the paradox—to resolve.» (Pinke 2011:4) Esther's problem is not only part of the struc-

tures of the unfair society she lives in, but it is also deeply ingrained in her psyche, as her expectations towards losing her virginity show. We also know that she has had a baby, but she is writing this—has she been able to have it all, to avoid choosing? The last sentence of the book, when she is leaving the clinic, points to a different direction: «The eyes and the faces all turned themselves towards me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room» (Plath 2005:234). The fact that Esther is guided by others as if by a thread brings to mind the image of a puppet. As Laing argues, «*the sense of identity requires the existence of another by whom one is known*; and a conjunction of this other person's recognition of one's self with self-recognition. It is not possible to go on living indefinitely in a sane way if one tries to be a man disconnected from all others and uncoupled even from a large part of one's own being» (Laing 1965:139; original emphasis). What I want to believe is that Esther opens up a space, a crack in the national narrative, where different selves hinted at may be possible, if we engage and recognize others.

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