

Esther's Journey in The Bell Jar: A Search for Identity

Abstract

One of the main themes of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is Esther Greenwood's search for identity. Her identity is being formed by particular events and characters in her life and the society of the 1950s she has lived in. My research aims to explore these identity-shaping influences and the outcome of the main character's search for identity. The theme was explored by closely reading and interpreting the novel in the context of recent critical literature.

This paper is divided into four chapters focusing on the genre of the novel as *bildungsroman*, the characters influencing the protagonist, her journey, and its outcome.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, search for identity, *bildungsroman*, 1950s

Contents

Introduction	4
<i>The Bell Jar</i> as a <i>bildungsroman</i>	6
The genre	6
The novel and the genre	6
The novel as a female <i>bildungsroman</i>	7
Influential women in Esther's journey	9
Doreen	9
Betsy	9
Jay Cee	10
Connection between them	10
Mother figures	10
Joan	11
The road itself	13
The reason behind her uncertain identity	13
The idea of the fig tree	14
Purification and holiness	14
Experiences with men	15
The mental breakdown	17
The last stage and the outcome of Esther's search	18
The last psychiatrist: Dr. Nolan	18
The complexity of Joan	18
Joan's suicide, Esther's rebirth	19
Conclusion	21
Bibliography	23

Introduction

The protagonist of Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar*, is a gifted young woman, who is offered a job in New York after winning a fashion magazine contest. While she stays in the city, she lives in a hotel with eleven other women. She appears to be just a lucky girl who recently won a competition and now has a fantastic opportunity to lay the foundation for a promising future. Still, throughout this time, she has several mental breakdowns and fights her own inner battles in order to find herself. Despite the fact that she gets to know a lot of influential women who could serve as role models in her life, it does not make her road to finding her identity any less easy: she gets lost in the possibilities, not finding the perfect example according to which she could fashion herself.

Since the time the novel was published, Esther's character has been interpreted in different ways, and the text has acquired the status of a cult novel for young women. One of the recurrent themes in critical discourse is her refusal to adhere to the societal standards that specify the primary task for women in mid-twentieth century, which is to become a mother. She is a talented writer who wants to become successful in her profession, but the social expectations make her question whether her wish to become a professional rather than a mother is a legitimate and appropriate choice. She embarks on a difficult and protracted journey to accomplish her quest for identity.

Thus, *The Bell Jar* revolves around the search for a female identity in the 1950s. What makes it special is that the protagonist is a woman who does not take the social roles presented to her for granted, so the novel itself is best described as a female *bildungsroman*, a female coming-of-age story, which actively negotiates the sociocultural limitations a woman has to face at a certain time (McCann, 2012).

As stated by Janet McCann (2012), this novel is "a highly distinctive and unusual book, and although the era of the 1950s, which it represents, has faded and disappeared into history, the power of this novel does not dissipate" (p. 7) According to her, because the main character is so closely identified with the novel's writer, Sylvia Plath, it causes difficulties in reading and understanding the book. Attempts have been made to distinguish Esther from the author; however, these efforts have been futile; readers commonly regard the book as being trapped between autobiography and fiction.

McCann (2012) also argues that *The Bell Jar* is best labelled as a story in which a bright, talented, young woman is unable to accept the limitations imposed by the time she is living in. Furthermore, she also explains that regardless of the fact whether one lays Plath's own life story over the promising and hopeful ending of the novel, "the interior landscape she describes

remains startling, precise, and unforgettable—as does the world outside her” (McCann, 2012, p. 7).

Rather than trying to disentangle the autobiography or fiction debate, the main purpose of my research is to uncover the elements that contribute to the development of Esther’s identity. Even just the loose reading of the text reveals the way her character evolves and develops. Nevertheless, the real discovery is to be found in a close reading of it.

In line with the above, my research aims to investigate a few themes that have particularly struck a chord with my personal interests, although it must be acknowledged that these mostly align with concerns that women in their early twenties consider. I chose to explore the question of self-determination, focusing strictly on the novel. Hence, the paper addresses the novel as a *bildungsroman* and the journey of the protagonist en route to self-identity. The main questions my paper seeks to find an answer for are the following: Why, if at all, can one consider the novel a (female) *bildungsroman*? How does it thematise the issue of self-determination? Last but not least, what are the stages the character goes through during this process?

My hypothesis is that a significant part of Esther’s journey is determined by her immediate surroundings. This implies that she experiences a lot of impulses from other people throughout her time in New York, some of which will help her complete her voyage successfully. Actually, this is the protagonist’s central issue: If it is the environment that shapes who one is, then who is one really?

Regarding the structure of my paper, firstly, it introduces the genre of the book, as its generic belonging to the *bildungsroman* sets the framework for reading the text as one of character development. When discussing the generic features of the text, my paper relies on the main character’s attempt to develop her self-understanding within the novel. A more precise definition of the genre is the female *bildungsroman*, which is derived from the conventional *bildungsroman*; this is also discussed in the first chapter. The second chapter then introduces the women, who represent different, clearly defined female types with distinct life goals and attitudes toward life. Esther’s approach towards them is going to be explained, as well as the reasons why she is not able to identify with them. The third chapter provides insight into various events and phenomena that impact her development. As the last part of the discussion, the fourth chapter describes the last stage of the process of her search for identity, including the outcome and Esther’s interpretation of it. Lastly, the conclusion summarises the findings and suggests directions for further reflections.

The Bell Jar as a bildungsroman

The genre

Encyclopædia Britannica (2020), defines the literary genre *bildungsroman* as “a class of novel that depicts and explores the manner in which the protagonist develops morally and psychologically”. The genre has a German origin, and the word itself means “novel of education” or “novel of formation.” The genre's central concept suggests a positive conclusion, although the genre is often noted for its penchant for melancholy and nostalgia.

In the history of the genre, differences can be observed between novels written in the 19th century and those written in the 20th century. The 19th-century *bildungsroman* follows the typically ambitious dreams of the protagonist's from youth come to fulfilment, showcasing along their mistakes and failures as well, culminating in “a life of usefulness l[ying] ahead” (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2020). In the 20th century, novels of the genre tended to have an ending revolving around withdrawal or even death. Accordingly, there are different variations of the *bildungsroman*, such as *Künstlerroman*, which tracks an artist's formative years, *Erziehungsroman* as a novel of upbringing, and *Entwicklungsroman* as a novel of (character) development.

The novel and the genre

Simona Mauna (2014) discusses *The Bell Jar* as a *bildungsroman* in her short book, *Confession and Development in Sylvia Plath's Poetry and Prose*. This subchapter is based on her work and understanding of the issue.

Mauna states (2014) that the novel's structure and intent indicate its generic belonging as a *bildungsroman*. The text's central theme is the protagonist's, Esther Greenwood's, maturation and career, which are presented in a chronological and episodic structure. Apart from Esther, the other characters are solely crucial for their part in her development, and it is through Esther's journey that their impact is revealed.

In the novel, Greenwood escapes to a new city, where she tries herself out in the sense that it provides her with an opportunity to find her true self. Although her identity does change as a result of this opportunity, the direction of these changes is not what was expected: she enters a mental condition that almost leads to suicide.

To quote Mauna (2014), “Plath structures the novel to show the process of disenchantment in rapid acceleration” (p. 38). Her life in New York is centred on two main themes: building a complete identity and overcoming her reluctance to submit to the old traditions, people, and men. In spite of the offered identities that the American society of the

1950s dictates, she feels the urge to find a new one for herself, as being, for example, a wife or a mother, is not the major goal in her eyes. Regarding this issue, there are role models throughout her journey that would provide her with a base of identity. These characters are discussed later in this paper.

The novel as a female *bildungsroman*

Taking the genre of the novel into consideration, one can identify how it differs from the conventional *bildungsroman*. The conventional *bildungsroman*'s main focus is on a young man and his education, where the role models are male while there are no female ones. The reason for this is that men typically serve as antagonists in *bildungsroman* stories, whereas women do not, therefore they can be completely eliminated from the plot. Mauna (2014) deals with *The Bell Jar* as a female novel of experience, although a special one because even if female *bildungsromane* have a predominantly female cast of characters, the male characters still stay dominant in the sense that the cultural patterns indicate their strong dominancy in an economic, social, and sexual context. This is a major, obvious difference.

A further difference is that women have to choose between their profession or education and domesticity, while men do not have to face this dilemma. Mauna (2014) words the issue in the following way: "Underlying what would seem to be the choice of profession is the less obvious issue of sexuality, which again plays a very different role in female adolescence than in male." (p. 49). In fact, the conventional *bildungsroman* treats sexual experience as the point at which a man begins to mature and sets up his own home after leaving his family of origin. However, sexual experiences for women have a much different function and mean a change on another level. Their status is subject to change as their experiences play a degrading role. In spite of their degrading role, female *bildungsromane* tend to make them one of the main foci of the novel, while the conventional ones deal with them as insignificant events.

Highlighting the main concern of sexuality, which also appears in Plath's novel, is the loss of virginity. The imprudent way that male main characters may lose their virginity almost never influences their fate; this is not the case for female ones. Discussing *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist's loss of virginity is highly telling. She met a man named Irwin, with whom she started her sexual experience, as a result of which she haemorrhages to a degree that needs medical attention. The outcome of her choice is not only metaphorical.

Taking the whole novel into account, it includes a woman's anguish and search for identity as the main thread. The focus is on the struggle, not on a woman who has established a stable identity. Nonetheless, the struggle itself is based on her blank self, which is the reason behind her urge to stabilise her self-identity. Mauna (2014) mentions that the tone of the novel

is best described as “a painful anger” that differentiates Plath’s novel from generally categorising it as a *bildungsroman*. Other books in this genre that have been published before do not compare to Greenwood's madness. Nevertheless, Plath was able to follow the conventional form in some ways, but she added her own tone and mood that made *The Bell Jar* unique.

Influential women in Esther's journey

It is a crucial part of a female bildungsroman to introduce female role models for the protagonist. During her search for identity, Esther Greenwood has the opportunity to meet a few women who indeed differ from one another in the sense of their whole personalities and lives. All of these women could serve as role models for other women. They are women of the 1950s, and they represent the available roles for Esther (McCann, 2012). As her identity is uncertain from the very beginning of the novel, she is looking for someone she can become, someone she can imitate, in order to be able to feel as if she had a whole, complete identity.

Doreen

First, she meets with Doreen, who is one of the girls living with her at the Amazon Hotel in New York after winning a fashion magazine contest. At the very beginning, Esther describes her as “one of her troubles,” as she has never known a girl like her before (Plath, 2013). Doreen, for her, represents the “bad girl,” who can be considered a woman who lives her life as she wants. She is not concerned with what other people think or with doing what is morally correct to live up to societal expectations. Despite the conventional expectations that she should wait until marriage, she appears to have an active sexual life. Doreen is perfectly described as “a platinum blonde, sexually aggressive version of Esther herself” (Leonard, 2012, p. 318) as “Esther's secret voice” (Leonard, 2012, p. 321). The last expression indicates that Esther would be open to living a life like her, but she is not able to express herself in this way. She would enjoy defying what society expects of her, but she cannot fully relate to this way of life. She also has the chance to spend a night with her and two men, namely Lenny and Frankie, at a bar. The ladies leave the place with Lenny to visit his place, but this trip ends for Esther when she starts to feel uncomfortable with the sexual tension that is going on between Doreen and the man. This experience makes her judge Doreen; hence, she thinks that “deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her” (Plath, 2013, p. 21) and that she would rather be loyal to someone other than a Doreen-like woman, like the innocent Betsy.

Betsy

Betsy is another girl from the hotel with whom she has a connection. Harold Bloom argues (2009) that she is the complete opposite of Doreen and her principles (p. 22). In fact, she is the type of young woman who would make a perfect wife in the future. This statement can be supported by her pure and clean character, which can also represent virginity itself. Unlike Doreen, who exudes a determinedly sexual, free attitude, she has an unspoiled, naive demeanour, which makes her more alluring. Despite how appealing Doreen's rebellious self is,

Esther stands by Betsy's persona. She even expresses this feeling in such a way as to say, "it was Betsy I resembled at heart" (Plath, 2013, p. 21). Though she knows deep down that, by imitating Betsy, she would not have as much freedom as she desires. Regarding relationships, she figures out that a Doreen-type woman would not be able to establish a fulfilling relationship, but as a Betsy-type woman, she would end up with a "nice football hero," which is not her will either (Plath, 2013, p. 39). So, this way, Betsy is also discarded as a possible female model.

Jay Cee

Another female character, who is not a typical woman in society at the time, is Jay Cee. Jay Cee is a successful businesswoman, the editor of the magazine where Esther and the other girls work as a prize. She finds her appealing as she is ambitious and confident, so in this way, she reveals another alternative for her to not become the classic housewife. In spite of the alluring idea of becoming an independent woman with a lucrative occupation, Jay Cee's life is not the perfect path for her either. Considering the amount of great advice she receives from her, she truly admires her, but not to the extent of being capable of adapting this kind of identity into her own. Esther sees her as a second mother, but not much more. Furthermore, what speaks against Jay Cee as her model for self is the fact that "Jay Cee, in her view, has sacrificed her femininity for independence" (Bloom, 2009, p. 27). So, for her, femininity is not something that she would be willing to give up for the rest of her life. Consequently, she removed the "bad girl," the "innocent girl," and the "career woman" options from her list.

Connection between them

The three previously mentioned characters undergo the same process as Esther, whereby she selects her prospects for the future. Apparently, both Doreen and Betsy represent complete personalities, built up from multiple characteristic feature—still, they are reduced to one aspect of their selves by Esther (Sakane, 1998). Doreen is seen as the embodiment of sexiness, as she is only acknowledged by her actions, the way she dresses, and the way she expresses herself. On the contrary, Betsy is the embodiment of innocence with all the positive energy she is sending out to the world. This attitude is present in the case of her temporary boss, Jay Cee, who is only a career woman in her eyes, no matter how wise she may be otherwise.

Mother figures

Previously in this paper, Esther's mother was mentioned in a way that she would be glad if Jay Cee were to be her real mother. This idea points out the less than perfect relationship that she has with her own mother. She even mentions at one point in the novel that her mother has never been much help in her life regarding making good life decisions (Plath, 2013, p. 36).

Although she stays in the background in the story, she exercises a formidable impact on Esther, as discussed in *Bloom's Guide* (2009). Accordingly, she is the realisation of a woman who does everything for her family, which, for them, means only the two of them, as Esther lost her father in her childhood. In order to support herself and her daughter, she teaches shorthand and typing. As for grounding her life on practical things, she would expect the same from Esther, so she does not show that much support concerning her child's possible career choice. Not being practical could also mean for her that her daughter will not be able to fulfil her domestic responsibilities in a corresponding way. As a matter of fact, she has good reason to worry about this, as Esther is not really interested in cooking either, which is treated as a basic domestic duty for a woman.

Another mother character, whom she knows from closer, is her boyfriend's, Buddy Willard's, mother. Mrs. Willard is the absolute embodiment of what the rules of society require of a female member of it. Actually, she can be considered the same type as Mrs. Greenwood. However, the fact that Mrs. Greenwood does not have a husband like Mrs. Willard means that they differ in this regard. With the example of Buddy's mother, "Esther believes that marriage would imprison her in the kitchen" (Smith, 2010, p. 12). The idea of serving someone, more precisely her future husband, makes her uncomfortable, and it is something that she does not want to deal with later in her life. A further example is Dodo Conway (McCann, 2012). The Catholic Dodo is the Greenwoods' neighbour at the time. She is also a society woman in the sense that her life revolves around bringing more children into the community. When Esther meets her, she already has six children, and she is looking forward to giving birth to her seventh child. Yet a parallel can be drawn between her and Jay Cee too, as "Dodo Conway is the fertile opposite of Jay Cee" (St. Clair, 2012, p. 112). Her persona makes Esther realise that the thought of having children makes her sick, and she is not planning to have any in her life.

Joan

Of all of these characters, Joan Gilling is the most notable and complex. Joan is Esther's college classmate; however, according to McCann (2012), she is also a reminder of her past failures. McCann (2012) reveals Joan's identity and function in Esther's journey. In contrast to Doreen, who is her "secret voice," Joan is described as a "wry, black image" by her. Esther's and the character's thoughts and feelings seem to be connected in a way that makes Joan's even darker than her own. Even though she feels a connection with her in this way, Esther also feels a huge gap between them. This gap is based on their sexual orientation, as Joan is attracted to women while the protagonist feels that being a man is the right path. From my perspective, this feeling of hers can be derived from society's ideal image of relationships, which, in fact, can

only happen between a man and a woman. Esther tries to separate herself from this woman by “confirming” her heterosexuality by losing her virginity to a man she barely knows. In the end, Joan also disappears from her choices. However, she loses her physically too as Joan passes away.

Taking everything into consideration, one can recognise how desperately the main character strives to be both a woman who rules her own life and someone who can be accepted by the society of the 1950s. She constantly feels torn between the different possible prospects for not only her life and future but, most importantly, for herself. She is lost in the number of potential role models she meets, so she has an even worse experience trying to find out who she really is.

Alongside the explanation of Joan’s significance and the underlying issue regarding her identity, another female character’s influence is to be analysed in the third chapter. Greenwood's search for identity is brought to a solution by these two characters, whose presence is what brings it about. Thus, a whole chapter is dedicated to them at the end.

The road itself

McCann introduces the beginning of Esther's self-identification journey in her book, *Critical Insights: The Bell Jar* (2012), in the following way:

From the beginning of the novel Esther's self-image is out of kilter. We have no way of knowing whether she was once whole and was shattered by the New York experience, or if this is a fragmentation from early childhood—she gives hints of both— but the New York experience is the last straw. (p. 5)

According to this quote, the whole issue surrounding Esther's identity may not start when she arrives in New York: there is a chance that the problem may have developed earlier. From my perspective, New York could be a place for her where she is far away from her previous life and can discover her identity freely. The road taken is definitely not modest, as different factors play a crucial role.

The reason behind her uncertain identity

The uncertainty of her identity is present from the beginning of the novel. When she arrives at the Amazon Hotel, she immediately has the feeling of not belonging anywhere. This feeling might have its root in the different options that aligned in front of her from the very first day. She gets close to Doreen, with whom she goes out one night. That night, she does not introduce herself as Esther Greenwood but as Elly Higginbotham, which indicates the main subject of the text. Besides, when she gets back to her place, she sees herself in the mirror, and describes herself as a "smudgy-eyed Chinese woman" (p. 17), as well as a person who is "used-up looked. (p. 17)" In Bloom's opinion (2009), her distorted reflection in this scenario confirms her feeling as though she is grappling with a nebulous sense of who she really is.

This uncertainty is also caused by the fact that she is aware of her being a different type of woman in some influential characters' eyes. Bloom (2009) argues that there is an underlying reason for Esther to be doubtful about her identity. The mentioned reason is that she does not know how to act in general. She is a virginal girlfriend for Buddy, a carrier young woman for Jay Cee, and a smart, good, innocent girl for her mother. However, her real self is slowly fading away as she tries to recreate another self for herself. She is experiencing other women's identities, but as a consequence, she only confuses herself, and the feeling of loss becomes a determining factor in her life.

Also, women had way fewer opportunities concerning the trajectories of someone's life in the 1950s than men (Dunkle, 2012). Society's preference for women was motherhood; thus,

Esther's struggle for a self that feels authentic to her is based on the decision whether she should obey the expectations or live as a career woman.

The idea of the fig tree

No road can be taken without road signs that help us figure out the right way. This is not different in Esther's case either. In order to find the right and most favourable way to live in the future, she needs to consider her possible choices. To explain this, she uses a metaphor from nature; more precisely, she sees the resemblance between the paths for her and the fig tree.

As stated by McCann (2012), this metaphor can be understood in the sense that the figs that are hanging from the tree are the embodiments of Esther's options. As there is a possibility of not finding the most delicious fruit for the first time trying it, so the protagonist cannot find the perfect way out of this unsure future image and self-image.

On the other hand, it can be seen as an illustration of the connection between time and possibilities: as time flies, the mellow figs start to die down. Adapting this to Esther's case, she feels that the more she procrastinates, the less chance she has of finding the proper one.

Janet Badia (2009) connects Esther's last name with the fig tree in the following way: "her last name, Greenwood, reflects the fig tree, Esther's damaged self-image turns the once-green branches into rotten, dreadful choices that fall, spoilt, to her feet." (p. 156). This interpretation indicates another way of explaining the trope: the choices that do not correspond with her desire, remain as bad memories of bad experiences. Hence, the fig tree is not a clear and willing aspect that would help her develop her identity. In her eyes, it is overwhelming, so they are not the representatives of something that may shed a positive light on her.

Thinking of the choices and the thought of making a life-changing decision increases her anxiety and becomes one of the main causes of her mental breakdown. Furthermore, Esther explains the anxiety that derives from the fig tree: she believes that choosing one of the choices means losing completely the other ones. She feels society's pressure to start a family, marry, and have children, while her instinct would choose an independent life while being a writer.

Purification and holiness

In the previous chapter, I listed and examined the influential women in Esther's life. These women did not serve as perfect models for the future, so she tried to separate herself from them. The first woman is Doreen, who relatively quickly makes Esther's mind up. After the night that they spent with Lenny, she feels the urge to be separated from Doreen. She is taking a hot bath, which according to her is associated with religion: "I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water." (Plath, 2013, p. 19). Pursuant to McCann

(2012), the protagonist does not believe in baptism, but she somehow makes this association as if a hot bath has the same power as holy water. After taking the hot bath, the aspects from that night, namely Doreen, Lenny, and witnessing their sexual connection, Esther feels pure again, as if she was a newborn again.

Another time when purification and holiness appear in the novel is when the girls at the hotel are poisoned and she throws up. She talks about feeling pure and holy after Doreen gives her a glass of water (Plath, 2013, p. 44). One can identify that the key to the purification is water, which is also a connection between Esther and nature, just like the fig tree.

In McCann's work (2012), a parallel is drawn between nature and her search for identity. The connection is based on the concept of pollution. Thus, they are polluted by different aspects, and they both feel the damage that it causes. Nature is polluted by industrialisation and the way technology evolved in the 1950s. Esther, on the other hand, is contaminated in terms of her decisions, and the closed patriarchal system is what is to blame.

Experiences with men

Concerning Esther's journey of self-identification, one can state that her experiences with men play a huge role in the whole process. According to the society of the 1950s, her approach to men should revolve around finding the perfect husband, or rather, finding a man who thinks she is the perfect wife material for him, as it is written in Bloom's Guide (2009, p. 33). It is also argued that the relationship includes that a woman should save herself, her virginity, until getting married to a man. This traditional picture of the relationship between a man and a woman is not something that Esther can agree with.

At the time of her life that is covered in the novel, she has a boyfriend, Buddy Willard. Her relationship with Buddy contributes to her mental breakdown and process, as Buddy's mother and family prefer the traditional roles for women and men. The boyfriend is a reminder to her that if she has children, she will not want to or be able to write anymore. This thought of hers can be derived from the time when he told her that writing is stupid and senseless. The idea that he thinks that women are people whose aim and only job is to serve their husbands is supported by Bloom (2009). Her attitude towards men and women's place in society undergoes a change after she asks Willard whether he has slept with anyone before (Plath, 2013, p. 65). He tells her the truth, making it seem like it was nothing. At this point, she realises the differences between what women and men are allowed to do in this society. She states that Buddy has a "double life," one pure that he shows to his family and one that is not so pure, and full of secrets (Plath, 2013, p. 77). In the possession of this information, she feels the urge to lose her virginity, showing a kind of rebellious attitude. However, she wants to sleep with

someone who can be anyone but Buddy, because she feels she has to sleep with another man before Willard in order to have the same amount of sexual intercourse. The idea is explained by her in the following lines from the novel (Plath, 2013):

Ever since Buddy Willard had told me about that waitress I had been thinking I ought to go out and sleep with somebody myself. Sleeping with Buddy wouldn't count, though, because he would still be one person ahead of me, it would have to be with somebody else. (p. 74)

Moreover, Bloom (2009) states that the skiing experience she has with Buddy makes her even less comfortable with the idea of living under the control of a man. She also turns down her boyfriend's proposal, which can be considered a strong expression of her longing for freedom. Caroline J. Smith (2010) describes Esther's feelings in connection with marriage as "marriage would imprison her in the kitchen, making food as her mother and Buddy Willard's mother do." (p. 12). She expresses her utmost hatred for the notion of being subservient to any man in her life.

Since she wants to lose her virginity, but not with her boyfriend, Buddy, she starts looking for a man who would be perfect for her to carry out her plan. She decides that she will let Constantin seduce her (Plath, 1963). According to her, "Constantin seemed mature and considerate in every way" (p. 76) which is the reason why he would be a great choice for her. He invites her to his apartment; however, she shows no intention of making love with Esther.

However, there was another man introduced by her in Chapter Seven with whom she had a conversation about sex. This man's name is Eric, and she had this discussion with him in a coffee shop. Eric has had his first experience with a whore in a whorehouse and described it as a boring experience. As Eric has lost his virginity, she looks at him as a possible man for her because he "didn't seem dirty-minded or silly when he talked about it" (p. 75) Then she receives a letter from him in which he states that he might be able to love her. Thus, she draws the conclusion that he would not go to bed with her just like that, so she replies that she would not marry him.

Finally, she chooses a man named Irwin. Bloom (2009) introduces him as "tall and not particularly caring, a mathematics professor with whom Esther chooses to have physical relations because he seems intelligent and experienced and because he is a stranger." (p. 17). He also states that after she tells him she cannot see him again, she immediately feels free.

Besides them, she also meets other men during her time in New York. First, there is Lenny and his friend Frankie, but they do not have a huge impact on her in regards to her

journey. But referring back to the pollution created by men, Esther has an incident with a man named Marco during the last night she is in New York. This incident is described in Bloom's Guide (2009) as "Marco's brutal rape attempt" (p. 75). Marco is the perfect example of oppressive behaviour and a woman-hating character. He not just physically, but also verbally insults Esther by calling her a "slut." Despite the fact that this man in Esther's life is to blame for this event, Plath clearly indicates that Esther's apathy and lack of questioning are equally to blame. Esther's illness has rendered her unable to deal with any form of aggression, whether subtle or overt, except in solitude.

The mental breakdown

The second half of the novel is dedicated to Esther's suicide attempts and her hospitalisation (Bloom, 2009). For her, the rejection from the writing class is the final straw: her prospects for the future become more uncertain. The question arises again: who does she want to become? She thinks about becoming a waitress or a typist, but she soon rejects these ideas. She becomes overwhelmed and loses the ability to write, which is a sign of her losing her old self completely. She starts seeing a doctor, namely Dr. Gordon, who sends her to electroshock therapy. After the therapy, she is not willing to go back to the doctor. Furthermore, the thought of death starts to take her over entirely. After attempting suicide, she is committed to a psychiatric ward in a private hospital.

Concerning the first institution she is put in, she feels the pressure of society when the nurse tells her: "There are lots of blind people in the world. You'll marry a nice blind man some day" (Plath, 2013, p. 165). This comment alone is capable of showing how marriage-centred life was in the 1950s and how the expectation for women to marry and be housewives dominated (McCann, 2012). This is underlined by a scene that literalizes her fears. She asks for a mirror and upon looking into it, she realizes that her reflection is nothing like herself. Bloom (2009) explains that reflections are symbols of disconnected identities. After failing to recognize herself, she breaks the mirror; after which, she is transferred to the ward of the private hospital.

This hospital has three wards; she starts in the middle one, Caplan. There her doctor, Dr. Nolan, a woman, positively impacts her, her mental state, and her search for a self as she represents another possibility for women who do not want to live in accordance with society's dictates. Thus, after seeing Dr. Nolan a few times, she is entitled to move to the last ward, Belsize, dedicated to those who are soon to be released. There she meets Joan, who becomes the final stage of her journey of finding her true self. While Esther is staying in this ward of the institution, she also reaches the final stage of her journey searching for herself.

The last stage and the outcome of Esther's search

This chapter is mainly based on Diane S. Bonds' study (1990), in which she describes Esther's relationship with Dr. Nolan and Joan and its significance in the protagonist's search for identity. According to Bonds (1990), the last pages of the novel focus on these two side characters. Dr. Nolan plays an important role in Esther's journey, just like Joan, who is her "black wry image."

The last psychiatrist: Dr. Nolan

Dr. Nolan's special role is highlighted by Bonds (1990); yet, she also argues that reservations about the psychiatrist's role need to be discussed. On the one hand, one may think that Dr. Nolan is a perfect role model for Esther as her femininity fits the patriarchal society's expectations while she is also acknowledged professionally. She is the only character for whom the protagonist shows complete respect. Moreover, she is successful in her occupation, which normally (or commonly) was considered to be a male job in those days. So, Nolan embodies her desire: to stay feminine while being a career woman, unlike Jay Cee. Still, Bonds (1990) states that this idea should be questioned as this image "can merely compound the oppression of women by leading them to assume expectations traditionally held of men as well as those held of women" (p. 61). On the other hand, the extent to which Nolan contributes to Esther's recovery is not clearly clarified in the novel. One could conclude that Esther owes her doctor a lot, yet their relationship seems to be broken as Esther leaves the hospital for good effectively breaking away from Dr. Nolan.

The complexity of Joan

A short response by Dr. Nolan directs readers' attention to Joan. In Chapter Eighteen, Esther talks to her psychiatrist about not understanding how women can like other women; "What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?" (Plath, p. 210). The doctor answers the question with one single word: "tenderness." The idea of tenderness is embodied in Joan.

Esther quickly associates the doctor's answer with the affair that may be going on between Joan and Dee Dee. Esther sees tenderness and intimacy as threats to her autonomy, so she feels the urge to separate or isolate herself from those with whom she has a tender relationship.

When Esther finds out that Joan may be having a lesbian affair with Dee Dee, she instantly becomes the embodiment of tenderness in the protagonist's eyes. At the same time, the concept of tenderness also gains a negative connotation for her. The possible reason behind

this is explained thus: Esther may be a misfit in society, but she cannot stand other misfits; meaning she disapproves of non-heterosexual relationships, including Joan's lesbianism (Kendall, 2009, p. 123) In the words of Diana S. Bonds (1990):

In her aversion to Joan, Esther denies what the text nonetheless reveals: the possibility of a healing "tenderness" and "weirdness" that the relation of Joan and Dee Dee represents. As we have seen, this denial is authorially endorsed by Plath's invention of Joan's suicide. Suggesting that Joan represents Esther's "suicidal self" ... critics with a Freudian orientation have linked Esther's recovery to a splitting off of an unacceptable portion of the self dramatized by Joan's suicide. (p. 60)

Bonds' study (1990) also discusses the change in Esther's attitude towards Joan after finding out about her sexual orientation. The change is reflected in Esther's cruelty, expressed in negative, hurtful comments. An example of this is when she tells Joan that she does not like her at all and that she makes her sick. Bonds also discusses another, more hidden, humiliating event that Joan experiences because of Esther. After Esther loses her virginity and is dropped off by Irwin, Joan is the one who opens the door for her. While being helpful, she is not told the truth about the "mysterious" bleeding, so she assumes that it is just a menstrual problem. Bonds (1990) responds to this even as Joan is "made to look like a bumbler" (p. 58).

With regard to Joan Gilling, one should explain her being Esther's "suicidal self" (S. Bonds, 1990, p. 60) or her "beaming double of her old best self" as it is described in McCann's work (2012, p. 113). Concerning the latter description, it is explained that Joan is the one who awakens her from her medical treatments. This will allow her to resurface her intellectual and artistic abilities, which had disappeared at the beginning of her condition. To put it another way, her broken spirit seems to be united again. However, her spirit being united results in the emergence of her old fear of inadequacy, which makes her question whether her "old best friend" is really good for her or whether it is just something that is sent to her just to follow and bother her (McCann, 2012).

Joan's suicide, Esther's rebirth

At the end of the novel, Joan commits suicide. Bonds (1990) draws a parallel between Joan's death and Esther's haemorrhaging after losing her virginity. After the incident with Esther's bleeding, she describes Joan as a "myopic owl" (Plath, 2013, p. 222) which can be understood as a reference to Joan's understanding of the origin of Esther's suffering, as well as the trauma of Esther's suffering as a result of rejection. The structure of the novel also adds to the link between the two events. Before getting into the emergency room, Esther recalls "a

worrisome course in the Victorian novel where woman after woman died, palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth” (Plath, 2013, p. 221). As explained by Bonds (1990), Esther’s rebirth is not the birth of a strong new self, but an identity that is built on the fear of affection that is provided by other women, as well as the rejection of the possibility of identifying with other women, for example, with those who served as role models at the beginning of her journey. This new self also acknowledges the stereotypes that she previously tried to comply with and realises that these models have been playing a role in her pain and uncertainty.

The symbolism at Joan's funeral is revealing: Esther attends the funeral and listens to her heartbeats while repeating “I am, I am, I am” (Plath, 2013, p. 233). Those heartbeats now are the reminders of hope and life. She realises that suicide is the same as wasting your own life, so her craving for death dissolves. However, an interesting thought appears in her head: “...all during the simple funeral service I wondered what I thought I was burying” (p. 232). This line underlines that she herself is not entirely sure whether the funeral is only Joan’s funeral. When burying Joan, the old self of the protagonist is buried too, alongside her illness that held her captive for so long. She is aware of the fact that her condition may not be fully cured, but she also looks to the future with a hopeful vision. As Esther ponders upon being born twice: “There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice – patched, retreated, and approved for the road” (Plath, 2013, p. 233).

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is intriguing and complex. The protagonist's, Esther Greenwood's, search for identity is affected by several important influences throughout the described time period of her life, including possible female role models and society's expectations of women in the 1950s.

As a starting point, it had to be recognised that the search for identity is actually a development of character, even if the direction is not linear or straightforward. This statement leads one to the novel's genre as a "*bildungsroman*," which is clearly a genre Plath was experimenting with. By presenting the genre and comparing its characteristics with those of the novel, it was proven that the statement is true. If one wants to be more precise, the genre can be further categorised as "female *bildungsroman*." The novel falls under this category not only because the protagonist is a woman, but also because her character struggles with the very real and severe limitations that women in the mid-twentieth century had to cope with. Thus, the novel presents the development of a character in the specific circumstances that her sex and gender delimit for her.

It is shown that Esther's self-identification journey does not follow a certain model shown in the possible choices for the main character. Instead, her subjectification process is strongly determined by rejecting the available possibilities, as well as by her experiences with male individuals, her breakdown, the relationship she has with Dr. Nolan, and most importantly, with Joan Gilling. Therefore, certain relationships and personalities proved to be less decisive than those I have highlighted. The determining relationships with her last psychiatrist and Joan are the solutions to her questions about her self: she is led and treated by Dr. Nolan, while she realises the link between herself and Joan, ultimately rejecting them all in her complicated and "rollercoaster-like" search for a self, that generations of readers have been able to relate to ever since the novel's publication.

An interesting further direction of study would be the autobiographical view of the novel, indicating the following questions: Could one discover more underlying aspects of the uncertain identity of Esther by examining the author's autobiography? And what can those aspects possibly be?

Another criterion for comparison could be the relevant passages from the author's poetry and the novel itself. While I was dealing with the novel, I could imagine that the female characters I examined in this paper might appear in Plath's poetry. This kind of approach has potential because some poems feature women of different types and roles. In this way, one can

examine Sylvia Plath's general insight into the female persona produced by the society in which she lived.

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