Reflections of 1950s Gender Roles and Mental Health Treatments in the Works of Sylvia Plath

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Summary

This thesis deals with specific aspects concerning Sylvia Plath's literary oeuvre. Her legacy is portrayed through some recurring themes that find their way into her poems and works of fiction. There are two main sources of her overall inspiration – her experiences with mental illness and its cruel treatments, and particularly, rather restrictive gender roles which presented women in the 1950s as housewives rather than career-oriented personas. All of her works encompass either one or even both of these occurrences.

The first part of the thesis focuses on Sylvia Plath's biography and legacy, some specific techniques that formed her writing style and writers who heavily influenced it. The second part concentrates on themes that repeatedly occur throughout Plath's poems and fiction. These themes include mental illness treatments, sacrifices caused by childbirth and motherhood, feeling entrapped and separated from self and the world, experiencing childhood without father and others which carefully represent Plath's emotional states.

Plath chose to write in order to control her destructive behaviour and her lifelong depression. Her poems and *The Bell Jar* helped shape other women writers' works too. She enabled them to finally express their innermost feelings, especially anger and rage, in their works. This kind of writing was considered a taboo in the 1950s. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Plath profoundly influenced American and British literature. Her works show raw emotions and real life experiences. Consequently, readers recognize themselves in her works and feel less alone in their private sufferings.

Key words: Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, mental health, mental health treatment, gender roles

Sažetak

Ovaj rad se bavi određenim aspektima književnog opusa Sylvije Plath. Njezina djela se prikazuju kroz ponavljajuće teme koje pronalaze svoj put u njezinim pjesmama i prozi. Dva su glavna izvora njene inspiracije – iskustva s mentalnom bolesti i njezinim okrutnim liječenjem te specifične, nadasve ograničavajuće, rodne uloge koje prikazuju žene 1950-ih kao domaćice, a ne kao osobe fokusirane na karijeru. Sva njena djela obuhvaćaju ili jedan ili čak oba slučaja.

Prvi dio rada fokusira se na biografiju i nasljeđe Sylvije Plath, na specifične tehnike pisanja koje su formirale njen stil te na pisce koji su na njega utjecali. Drugi dio teksta u prvi plan stavlja teme koje se ponavljaju u njenim pjesmama i prozi. Neke od tih tema su: liječenje mentalnih bolesti, žrtve kroz koje žena prolazi tijekom poroda i majčinstva, osjećaj zarobljenosti i podijeljenosti sebe i odvojenosti sa svijetom, djetinjstvo bez oca i sl. Ove teme pažljivo prikazuju emocionalna stanja u kojima se Plath nalazila.

Kako bi što više kontrolirala svoja destruktivna ponašanja i depresiju, Plath je odabrala pisati. Njezine pjesme i roman *The Bell Jar* su pomogli oblikovati djela drugih ženskih spisateljica. Plath im je omogućila da napokon u svojim djelima izraze njihove najdublje osjećaje, a posebito ljutnju i bijes. Ovakav način pisanja je bio zabranjen sredinom dvadesetog stoljeća. Cilj ovog rada jest prikazati način na koji je Plath duboko utjecala na američku i britansku književnost. Njezina djela pokazuju sirove emocije zajedno s iskustvima iz stvarnoga života. Na taj način čitatelji mogu prepoznati sami sebe te se mogu osjećati manje usamljenima u svojim patnjama.

Ključne riječi: Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, mentalno zdravlje, liječenje mentalnih bolesti, rodne uloge

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath was a highly influential and widely read American-born poet who centred her prose and poetry writings around many, at times, unpopular opinions of the 1950s. Her works have been published 'in over thirty languages, from Arabic to Vietnamese.' (Sampson, 2019, p. 350) While reading her poems and fiction one can find her personal reaction to such topics as patriarchy and typical gender roles, struggles of motherhood and domestic life, living without father, and many others. Moreover, comments on sexism and violence find a way to her poems quite often. Many women faced these problems in the mid-20th century. Plath, however, dealt with another range of obstacles that were considered by-products of previously mentioned events.

One cannot read her poems, short stories, or *The Bell Jar*, without noticing the author's complete openness to her experience. Her works are inseparable from her emotional battles. By fearlessly writing about the internal conflicts, which we all face, and revealing herself transparently in her poems and fiction, she is now considered to be one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. She was, and still is, an inspiration to other young women (and men) who struggle against their own demons. Her poems evoke 'raw emotion and yet reassure those in despair that they are not alone.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 31)

Her ability to turn disaster into art was extraordinarily courageous. Her diagnosed bipolar disorder and clinical depression influenced her writing style. Both her experiences with mental illness, as well as her remarkable talent, made her literary works impeccably brilliant and powerful. Both madness and creativity attracted recognition and admiration. Nevertheless, focusing only on her mental illness, suicide, failed marriage and numerous breakdowns belittles her enormous talent and creativity. Positioning Plath's suicide as the very first event in her life makes the readers 'read her life backwards through her suicide rather than forwards through her development as a writer.' (Clark, 2019, p. 364)

First, the extensive Plath's life story will be told, followed by her literary heritage. These details are quite important for the reader who is not familiar with Plath's life and her works to understand the succeeding paragraphs. Then, Plath's writing techniques will be discussed, focusing primarily on her shift in style, development of vocabulary toward the end of her life, using 'you' in her works, and, of course, on people who shaped her way of writing profoundly.

After that, the era of 1950s will be put in context, focusing mainly on gender roles and mental health treatments. These represent the main two fields from which the recurring themes of Plath's works emerge. In my opinion, her writing style and her overall interest in such topics, in a way, expanded American and British literature. Many women writers after Plath refused to keep quiet about their rage, anger, disappointment, their innermost feelings and emotions in their works.

2. Plath's life and work

Since the majority of Plath's works represent her real emotional states – her experiences with mental illness treatment, suicide attempt, living in fatherless childhood, having limited career options, financial instability, struggles and difficulties of sacrificing the woman's body to give birth to a child – many critics tend to merge Plath's biography with the characters of her writings. Plath used her experience very directly in her writing; links between her life and her work are undeniable.

Consequently, her works always get overshadowed by her biography. Some say that her death gave her an 'iconic status.' (Schetrumpf, 2015, p. 117) Others even go so far as to say that she became popular only 'thanks largely to the shock value of Plath's suicide,' and 'the role that suicide plays in her poems.' (Trinidad, 2006, p. 21) Teaching Plath has some difficulties as well because Plath's reputation always preceded her. Students just think of Plath killing herself, the way she did so, and the possible mark it left on her children. Committing suicide is how everyone remembers one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. (Schetrumpf, 2015, p. 117)

Her fiction and poems, other critics note, need to steer clear of her sensational life story. (Britzolakis, 1999, p. 56) Although, Britzolakis (1999, p. 26) in her *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* concludes that the power of her texts 'can never be entirely disentangled from the narrative of her life and death.' The personal fallout from this relationship between the writer's art and her biography (mainly her suicide) is immeasurable. Almost sixty years after her death it has become easier to view her work in a way it deserves, balanced between her life experiences and her literary brilliance.

2.1. Biography

Sylvia Plath's life has been well-documented in her numerous letters, journals, and in her autobiographically inspired works of art. Plath was a habitual letter writer, producing several thousands of letters, to her friends, husband and family. She kept a journal since childhood, writing almost daily, including everything from the poems she was working on to the most detailed

descriptions of her conversations, places, clothes, teachers, friends and emotional states. When she died all of her journals were saved, all but the ones that were kept the last two years of her life, which were destroyed by Ted Hughes. (Kottler, 2006, p. 286) Other than this, numerous biographies, memoirs and essays on Plath exist.

Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 27th, 1932. Her parents were Otto and Aurelia Plath. Otto was a controlling, dominant patriarchal figure in the household. Sylvia's mother, Aurelia, was forced to take care of children and her uptight husband. Plath's father died when Sylvia was nine, and it was from this time onward that Plath felt like her childhood and overall happiness ended. The family relocated to the town of Wellesley after Otto's death so that Aurelia could find suitable work. (Kottler, 2006, p. 13)

When she was five, Sylvia had already written her first poem, she was regularly 'producing rhymes and couplets.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 13) Throughout her childhood she explicitly showed her interest in writing, many of her early works were published in school newspapers. Other than that, she started publishing her works in common magazines. In 1950 Plath won a scholarship to study at Smith College, where she worked as an editor of the *Smith Review.* She published several stories in *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle* as well. She collected various honours and prizes. Among others, she was invited to be a guest editor of *Mademoiselle* magazine in 1953. (Kottler, 2006, p. 15)

In this period her mood became aggressive, explosive and often unpredictable. Writing poems helped her cope with more frequent and intense depressive episodes. Her mentor suggested Plath to focus on 'writing about her own experiences as much as possible.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 14) And she started to do so, and never really stopped. Depression started to take its toll on her writing, she could no longer write during these occurrences. A chronic lack of sleep came next and she found it challenging to cope with everyday life situations, or even to think clearly.

Plath began to slip into depression. Her doctor prescribed sleeping pills and introduced her to a psychiatrist, who required 'a series of electroconvulsive shock treatments' (ECT). (Stanley, 2006, p. 397) Incompetently administered, the ECT resulted in an 'utterly terrifying experience.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 17) It not only did not cure her depression, but it eventually drove her to suicide. She swallowed fifty sleeping pills and hid in the family basement. By the time they found her (by accident), 'she was barely alive.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 16)

Plath's recovery was rather slow. She was transferred to the 'famed McLean Psychiatric Hospital' (Kottler, 2006, p. 17) where many mentally ill writers tried to heal themselves from their pain. The severity of her mental condition and her problems became clear at that moment. A second round of shock treatments was more helpful. She recovered completely, she gained back her creativity and she was ready to write again. Plath returned to Smith College in February 1954 and graduated in 1955.

Apart from her brilliant career, Plath wanted to be in love. At a party in Cambridge she met the young English poet Ted Hughes. They married within four months of their first meeting, in June, 1956. Since Plath's husband was also a poet, she was forced to find another job in order to provide stable family income. The next year, in 1957, she was offered to teach English at Smith College. The couple enjoyed financial stability, but it came with the cost of Plath losing her creative energy. Nonetheless, Plath risked everything 'in order to pursue her art.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 21) She quit her job at Smith after one year.

When Plath became pregnant with their first child they returned to England. Plath, again, had to work various jobs in order to support the household. Once their daughter, Frieda, was born, Plath suffered 'postpartum depression.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 23) Their second child, Nicholas, was born in 1962. She tried to 'take on the responsibility of motherhood, maintain their family home, earn sufficient income to support them, and yet still find time for her own writing.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 23) She got up very early each morning to write, while the children were still asleep. For the rest of the day she was shared among 'the children, the housework, the shopping, efficient, bustling, harassed, like every other housewife.' (Alvarez, 1974, p. 23)

Hughes was often controlling, violent and abusive. The marriage started to fall apart. In 1962, Plath and Hughes separated after Plath's discovery of Hughes' affair. Plath moved to Devon with her children. Plath became angrier and resentful. She entered her 'darkest and deepest depression yet.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 23) This period, however, marked the most productive phase of her life as a writer. Between September and December, she wrote forty powerful poems. The poems came daily, they were unstoppable. She wrote over half of *Winter Trees* and *Ariel*. It is for the poems of this period that she is best remembered, it was 'arguably the best work of her career.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 24) This time depression enhanced her creativity.

In December Plath moved back to London with her children. She continued to write poems, but less frequently. She was also working on a second novel. *The Bell Jar* was published pseudonymously in January 1963. However, difficulties with her new flat and with demanding mental condition made her seriously depressed. 'Illness, loneliness, depression and cold, combined with the demands of two small children, were too much for her.' (Alvarez, 1974, p. 32) Now, not her poetry, not even her young children, seemed enough to keep her going any longer. 'The creative work was no longer enough to sustain her.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 12)

Plath was clearly unable to cope, and she put her head in the gas oven in the kitchen in the early hours of 11 February 1963, having first taken steps to ensure the safety of her two children who were asleep in an upstairs bedroom so the gas would not reach them. Plath left no message for her husband, but she left him her legacy. Ted's telephone number was on the table, 'alongside the manuscript of the poems that would go into *Ariel*.' (Feinstein, 2019, p. 314) Sylvia Plath gave in to her madness. Suicide was the event that finally brought her 'the recognition she so desperately sought.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 9)

2.2. Plath's legacy

During her short, but rather productive life she had published a number of stories in various magazines. At the time of her death, Plath was known as the author of a first book of poems, *The Colossus* (1960). In addition, she had just recently published a novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas (clearly because of its semiautobiographical nature). After committing suicide, Plath left behind a carbon manuscript of newer work, titled *Ariel*, which predominantly consisted of poems written in the last months of her life. 'Plath's poetics remain alive, and aloft, in their work.' (Sampson, 2019, p. 358) After her death a large body of posthumous work has been published.

Ted Hughes, her husband, took care of the administration of Plath's literary heritage after 1963 and prepared the posthumous publications that made her work broadly accessible. (Sampson, 2019, p. 350) The 1965 publication of her second collection of poems named *Ariel* was somewhat modified in form from Plath's original intention. It was followed by two further volumes of poetry

in 1971, *Crossing the Water* (containing poems written between *The Colossus* and *Ariel*) and *Winter Trees* (containing eighteen uncollected poems and a verse play *Three Women*). Plath's mother published a children's book titled *The Bed Book*, written by Plath in the late 1950s. In 1977 Hughes published *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, a collection of Plath's short stories, and in 1981 Plath's *Collected Poems* was published.

A valuable amount of Sylvia Plath's writing either did not survive or has been restrained from the public. This includes two volumes of her journals covering the final years of her life, 1960–1963, and a possible second novel (sequence to *The Bell Jar*) that was supposedly finished by the time of her death. Despite such loss of evidence, the Plath's published works never stop to display the impressive talent she possessed. Her poetics have influenced a number of contemporary poets. She constructed a way of writing poetry in which a poet needs to look deep within the self and use these conflicts and struggles into art, something violently beautiful. This oversensitivity and fragility made her art so exceptional and rare.

Plath's reputation as a writer dates from the publication of *Ariel*, which was quickly recognized as an outstanding work of poetry. *Ariel* poems revealed many facts about Sylvia's life, and provided readers with possible causes of her early death. The readers now had the opportunity to make accusations and blame others for Sylvia's suicide. Such accusations included her, at times, violent husband, stifling childhood, irresponsible father who 'abandoned' her, and, of course, the rather primitive treatment of her mental condition.

It was only after her death that Sylvia Plath gained the acknowledgment and approval that she so fiercely longed for. Shortly after her death, *Ariel* sold 'over five thousand copies in England alone.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 30) As remarkable poet as Plath was, there is little doubt that she would never have attained such greatness if she had chosen to stick with poems about spiders and flowers rather than her own inner conflicts and unbearable suffering. 'Without the pain, there would have been so much less for her to say.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 31)

3. Plath's writing style

Before explaining in detail some recurring themes, images and symbols that flood Plath's poems, the writers who influenced her work greatly will be mentioned. Plath's writing style developed from formal, highly structured, disciplined, intellectual and rhyme abundant early poems to much freer verse style, frequent use of punctuation marks and powerful imagery. Plath revolutionised her style, abandoning previously inherited methods. She made references to some of the burning topics of 1950s and provided her own opinion across her various collections of poems.

T. J. Schetrumpf (2015) examined her use of specific lyric address (either to her father, mother, her children, Ted Hughes or his lover) and her 'confrontation with patriarchal oppression, post-Holocaust existence, depression, and suicide.' (p. 118) These were the images she magnificently moulded into perfect verses which, even today, shock many readers around the world. These recurring themes will be thoroughly discussed later in the text.

One thing that all of her poems successfully depict are her innermost feelings and experiences. Many of her poems, as well as her only published novel, *The Bell Jar*, deal directly with Plath's experiences in a mental hospital, or with her numerous nervous breakdowns. While reading her late poems, reader finds himself/herself in the centre of the most extreme emotions and feelings of a young woman suffering severe mental illness. Poems such as *Tulips*, *Cut*, *Poppies in October*, and *The Moon and the Yew Tree* vividly describe these occurrences.

Anderson (2007, p. 83) argues that, in her poems and fiction, Plath theatrically tried to make a narrative out of her lived experience. In her late poems, she even represents her experience as mere facts. (Alvarez, 1974, p. 22) Her rhymes, rhythms, metaphors and improvised colloquialisms always contributed to the tone of her poems, in which her mental instability, or so called madness, was unveiled. As her illness progressed, her poems became increasingly filled with extreme, raw images of her self-destructive thoughts and behaviours.

3.1. Influence

Plath always deliberately acknowledged many poets, fiction writers and artists in general who influenced her writing style immensely. Throughout her work, one can notice elements of her favourite artists (W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, Theodore Roethke) as well as her friends and contemporary colleagues (Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell). Her husband, Ted Hughes, also a poet, certainly shaped some of the famous Plath's poems. Throughout her journal entries, one may find many famous writers, such as Virginia Wolf, Elizabeth Bishop, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and many others who undoubtedly established a basis of her poetic maturity.

Out of all these talented artists, two of them were mentioned constantly throughout her daily journal entries. These were, of course, Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell. Plath met both of them at the same point of her life. Many scholars agree on the fact that Lowell influenced Plath (and Sexton) to become a confessional poet. Sexton and Plath knew each other very well, their mutual literary influence can be seen throughout various poems that will be mentioned and discussed later. Both Lowell and Sexton had impacted her to start exploring extraordinary, personal, and taboo topics in her works.

3.1.1. Robert Lowell

Reading Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* courageously opened doors for Plath which she desperately seemed to ignore. All of her works until that moment were always blindly meeting the demands of the magazines in which she wanted to publish, 'each poem seemed built up grudgingly, word by word, like a mosaic.' (Alvarez, 1974, p. 25) Sylvia had attended Lowell's poetry workshop at Boston University in the company of Anne Sexton. She took from him the liberating idea of freedom to write about one's innermost feelings, which was considered a taboo subject decades ago.

She told a British Council interviewer: 'I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*. This intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience, which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experiences in a mental hospital, for example, interest me very much.'

(Alvarez, 1974. p. 24) Poems like *Owl* and *Whiteness I Remember*, written during Robert Lowell's writing seminar, reflect Lowell's 'scene-setting strategies as Plath articulates inner worlds in concrete terms.' (Sampson, 2019, p. 352)

At a crucial stage of her poetic development 'there was no longer any need to be imprisoned in her old poetic habits, which […] she now felt to be intolerably constricting.' (Alvarez, 1974, p. 25) She had risen from the suffocating depths of her earlier style and started to breathe, and write, freer. She reached deeper and deeper into herself to find the most fragmented parts of her soul. While reaching for the deepest thoughts and feelings she finally took a step forward to finding her real self. No matter how detrimental, unstable and challenging was the world inside her, she magnificently used each detail to create powerful and compelling stories.

3.1.2. Anne Sexton

Both Plath and Sexton lived in Wellesley. They first met at Lowell's poetry workshop at Boston University and knew each other for preceding couple of years. Since they became rather good friends it was inevitable for Sexton and Plath to influence each other's work. (Trinidad, 2006, p. 21) Many people seem hard to find any character similarities between the two, since Plath was usually described as reserved, controlled, unapproachable, speaking quietly. Sexton, by contrast, was enthusiastic, always smoking and often late.

These differences are apparent in their works as well. Sexton's poems were more personal, 'ragged; they flew off the page' (Trinidad, 2006, p. 22) while Plath still produced complex, intellectual poems. One can detect Sexton's influence on Plath in her most famous poem, *Daddy*. Plath, however, opened the door to rage and violence in future Sexton's poems. Sexton had 'never dared to write' about and had 'always been afraid […] to express anger.' (Ramazani, 1993, p. 1154) Both poets had one thing in common, they shared they preoccupation and obsession with death. Their poems rise directly from within themselves – their experiences of major depression, breakdowns, hospitalisations and ruthless treatments.

Plath evidently appreciated and liked Sexton's poetry. Sexton's influence is detected primarily in poems like *Ariel* and *Lady Lazarus*. Plath's poem *Ariel* is kind of a response to Sexton's *The Starry Night*. Both works celebrate suicide. Sexton's poems about motherhood (*The Double Image*, *The Fortress*) surely inspired Plath's *Magi*, *Parliament Hill Fields*, *Morning Song*. (Trinidad, 2006, p. 27) On the one hand, Sexton illustrates her father as an alcoholic, tough she never expresses rage at him, she forgives him. Plath, on the other hand, formed her father poems around anger and rage, she does not forgive him but rather entirely neglects him.

After her suicide, Plath's works affected Sexton's profoundly. She started writing looser, longer poems and abandoned her previous, rather formal writing style. This freer style abandons rhyme and 'the number of dashes and exclamation marks increases.' (Trinidad, 2006, p. 28) Nazi imagery, consistent in Plath's poems, intensified in Sexton's later poems. She also admired Plath's theatrical use of metaphors and successfully integrated them into some of her own. Readers of these, altered, Sexton's poems associated them with Plath's famous works and Sexton's popularity grew.

Other than symbolic images (such as tulips, blood and rebirth) Plath influenced Sexton in other ways as well. Affected by her friend's suicide, Sexton started to show symptoms of major depression, insomnia, bipolar disorder and eating disorder. She started drinking alcohol and having affairs as soon as her marriage started to dissolve. Her suicidal thoughts appeared more frequently. 'Plath's suicide was the beginning of the end for Sexton as well, and yet […] the quality and quantity of her creative work reached a new level of excellence before her death.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 29) Sudden divorce and mental illness combined with major depression and sleeplessness made another poet end her life.

3.2. Evolution of vocabulary in the poetry

Lester and Mcswain (2011, p. 73) observed significant modifications in Plath's works over the course of her career as a poet. These changes are especially depicted in her latest poems. They noticed that the words expressing positive feelings and emotions increased, as well as negative ones (particularly expressions related to death and religion). She became less concerned with the

past and references to the present and future increased. The poems, in general, became shorter, with more unique words.

Moreover, Wadsworth, Vasseur and Damby (2016, p. 1) detected some major changes in word choices toward Plath's suicide. These changes in the vocabulary, the authors note, can be used to 'assess her declining mental health'. They acknowledge a notable shift from the dominant use of third-person feminine ('her', 'she') at the start of her work to the dominant use of first-person singular ('I', 'me') toward the end of her work. (Wadsworth, Vasseur, & Damby, 2016, p. 9) Stanley (2006, p. 400) also concluded that the suicidal poets include in their works more instances of 'I', 'me' and 'my' as a way of detaching themselves from other people and focusing only on themselves. Accordingly, Plath's first-person singular is rather consistent in her works.

Furthermore, Tuite (2019, p. 131) noticed how Plath's favourite colours – white, blue, black and red – appear repeatedly across her writings, especially in her later poems. These colours are among 'the most used adjectives in general.' (Wadsworth, Vasseur, & Damby, 2016, p. 10) Words related to babies, childbirth and family life are among the most consistent vocabulary of her poems.

All of these noteworthy changes parallel the changes in her life. Life events that might had caused such a major shift in her writings may be attending Robert Lowell's poetry seminar at Boston University, giving birth to her first child and spending some time at Yaddo artist's colony in upstate New York. As mentioned before, Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton's influence on Plath was huge. She started writing about her own, personal horrors.

She completely changed her writing style from an early highly structured and complex style to a confessional and more confident style. Wadsworth, Vasseur and Damby find a few possible links that can be made between word-use and the facts of Plath's life (e.g. the use of colours and personal pronouns). They conclude that 'poet's word choices evolve through time and contribute to the debate as to a link between creative people and mental illness.' (Wadsworth, Vasseur, & Damby, 2016, p. 10)

3.3. Second-person narrative

Among other mentioned techniques, second-person narrative viewpoint was persistent throughout Plath's works. This routine creates a bond between the imaginary poem characters and the readers themselves. By using this technique, Plath makes these fictional characters literally communicate with the reader. Poem after poem, 'Plath's fluent use of the second person narrative conveys the intimacy and immediacy.' (Brain, 2019, p. 84) Other than closeness, this second-person narrative structure, with a little help of repetition and rhyme, provides a sense of tension as well.

What made Plath use this technique were mainly cookbooks (with instructional character of recipe writings), interviews, advertisements, letters, poems and works of fiction (especially J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*). This second-person address can be found in numerous poems like *You're*, *Lady Lazarus*, *Daddy* and *The Applicant*. These poems, written in second person, are not to be confused with her letter writings, 'they have [some] epistolary qualities, and owe much to her apprenticeship as a letter writer.' (Brain, 2019, p. 89) This technique expands also to her only work of fiction, *The Bell Jar*, specifically in its opening lines where Esther, together with the reader, imagines being burned alive and jumping from the seventh floor of the building.

Demjén (2011, p. 10) notes that the second-person narration can be indicative of various mental states in works. It conveys a sense of emotional depth (depression, suicidality, denial, etc.) and inner conflict (self-alienation, split-self) as well as of emotional balance. It has the potential to evoke readers' empathy by directly addressing them, 'with the reader in the position of assumed addressee.' (Demjén, 2011, p. 5) Verses written in the second-person narrative are naturally more intense, personal, emotional and rather sensitive.

Plath again used the technique that brings the speaker and the reader of the poem closer. With her autobiographical facts incorporated into each poem and work of fiction, Plath powerfully and rather successfully lets the reader look into every corner of her detrimental soul. Thanks to this, as well as previously mentioned techniques that form Plath's writing style, many readers nowadays can unequivocally identify with her poems' speakers.

4. Contextualising the 1950s

Nowadays, mental health is still considered a taboo topic in many countries around the world. One can only imagine what the perceptions of mental illness were like back in the 1950s when Plath and her contemporaries lived. Since the development of psychiatry was still very young and not thoroughly investigated, opportunities for mentally ill people to cure their pain were close to none. Society viewed mentally ill people as a kind of a threat. They did not understand such behaviour and, in a way, they made it even harder for mentally ill people to cope with their illness and possible recovery.

These were the times where mental and physical illnesses were treated completely equally. There were, however, a few options to deal with such horrific occurrences, predominantly lobotomy, asylums and one of the most popular strategies – electroconvulsive (or electroshock) therapy. (Dowbnia, 2014, p. 580) All of these options could result in severe fallouts for the patient's overall health. As one can notice, treating mental illness was not 'advanced enough to provide the type of care that is currently available.' (Kottler, 2006, p. 281)

Another thing was rather specific for this era – society's expectations of what a woman should do with her life. The 1950s presented housewife-and-mother as the only acceptable role for women. They were thought to be naturally gentle, emotional and dependent (usually on their fathers and husbands – of course, male figures in their lives). They had no right to choose their career options, only the brave ones could conquer such restrictions. As a result, women in this complex and rather specific context became more susceptible to mental illness, especially depression and anxiety.

Plath's place in these historical and ideological circumstances played a great part in her works of art. As stated before, such topics flooded Plath's literary works. As we will see later, Plath rejected the idea that she should be confined to an inner circle of home, taking care of children, devoting her life to her husband. This idea of domesticity was a key problem that eventually grew into serious sense of entrapment, sense that her choices are profoundly limited. In the following chapter all of these themes will be thoroughly discussed.

5. Recurring themes in Sylvia Plath's works

Sylvia Plath used many of her subject matters repeatedly, without hesitation. While skimming through Plath's writings one cannot but notice the frequent appearance of themes such as self-loss, insecurity, suicide, depression, inevitability of death, living without vampire-like father, pressures that come from being a woman writer in 1950s, struggles of bearing a child, coping with eating disorders, seeking help for mental instability etc. She is one of the writers that describes these gruesome acts in utmost detail and helps the readers of her works feel less alone in their (sometimes lifelong) sufferings. Her own experiences may have helped her to write about depression both 'accurately and powerfully.' (Marcarian & Wilkinson, 2017, p. 15)

Some of these themes occur repeatedly at the early stages of her poetic development (i.e. *The Colossus* poems), and others are rather consistent in her later poems (i.e. *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* poems), especially in those written just few days before her suicide. It is not only the poems where these topics emerge, but her life as well. These, somewhat anxiety-ridden, themes parallel her personal traumas and other life occurrences. These themes will be discussed in depth in the following paragraphs.

5.1. Gender roles in Sylvia Plath's works

5.1.1. Woman's place in 1950's society

As mentioned quite a few times throughout this paper, Plath lived in a period of time where women had limited opportunities regarding their career choice, and, more significantly, where they had one central role in society – to give birth to children and to live the rest of their lives as housewives. Other options were utterly impossible. From their early childhood they are taught that they need to be submissive, quiet and laid-back. Plath, however, was rather ambitious, and despite all of these stereotypical restrictions (by her sex and class) she successfully managed to incorporate her love for writing in her life.

In one of her extensive journal entries Plath provided her critique opinion on 'sexist and hierarchical social arrangements,' (Axelrod, 2006, p. 86) as well as double standards for men and women of the time: 'And yet does it not all come again to the fact that it is a man's world? For if a man chooses to be promiscuous, he may still aesthetically turn up his nose at promiscuity. He may still demand a woman be faithful to him, to save him from his own lust. But women have lust, too. Why should they be relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of soul, body and pride of man?'

Her attitude was a result of a great resistance and partly mockery of 1950's cultural forces. Everywhere around her, magazines and advertisements on the pleasures and fulfilment found in domestic life, were all that she could see. Many women, like Esther, found their lives did not mirror the glorious advertisements they could find in their favourite magazines. Perloff (1972, p. 518) makes a solid point saying that 'the mad world she inhabits surely intensifies her condition.' *The Bell Jar* provides a valuable insight into the restrictions and social expectations many women faced during this period. Although it is focused on the 1950's women, some of the horrific realities are still relevant even today.

Through her observations of married women, Esther understands domestic bliss is deceptive. Rather than embodying the cheerful housewives pictured in women's magazines, she knows from observing Buddy Willard's mother that being a homemaker really means 'getting up at seven and cooking […] eggs and bacon […], to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, […] a big dinner, […] washing up even more dirty plates until I fell into bed, utterly exhausted.' (Plath, 1966, p. 105) Esther even thought that 'maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave.' (Plath, 1966) Through her highly realistic views on marriage and motherhood, 'Esther is understandably alienated from these two institutions.' (Coyle, 1984, p. 166)

The Bell Jar perfectly depicts young woman gradually declining towards major self-loss and depression, caused by, for the most part, extreme societal standards. Many scenes representing different kinds of sexual violence appear throughout the novel. One of them being attempted rape by the misogynist Marco. In conversations with him, Esther is reminded that society humiliates women who 'dress attractively, drink alcohol and end up alone with men.' (Harding, 2019, p. 185)

When he assaults her, Esther realizes that she has allowed herself to be controlled and manipulated by her own volition in dating a 'women-hater.' (Plath, 1966, p. 130) Esther successfully fights off his attempt to rape her. Plath's characters are straightforward in their attacks on the society which they imagine as 'predatory.' (Dickie, 1982, p. 12)

As mentioned earlier, Esther, as a woman of a middle-class, had no control over her career path. Other choices in her life also had quite serious restrictions and limits. Women of 1950s were constantly encouraged to choose one and only path – successful marriage and motherhood. These two were considered as only appropriate routes for one woman to feel genuinely accomplished. Unfortunately, choosing that one path meant losing all the rest. Esther was thoroughly frightened by this idea. Domesticity and procreation, specifically, choked her.

Many scholars (Dowbnia, 2014; Coyle, 1984; Budick, 1987; Badia, 2006), who interpreted and analysed Plath's works, implement her central metaphor that perfectly symbolizes unfortunate restrictions of 1950's gender roles – the imaginary fig tree metaphor which Esther comes across while recovering from her poisoning – in their works. The fig tree offers multiple life choices on every branch, but Esther cannot settle for only one fig, she wants to experience many different options at once. One fig represents a family life with husband and children, another a career as a famous poet, a brilliant professor, an amazing editor, another fig represents a lifestyle filled with multiple lovers and many more figs make the tree. Each fig is 'mutually exclusive' and only one can be picked. (Dobbs, 1977, p. 12)

Some of these possibilities are doomed to failure. Buddy Willard did not fulfil her expectations of a good husband, all of the career paths turn into impossible missions when Esther becomes unable to read or write, and the fig representing multitude of lovers might result in the possibility of pregnancy, which, like the bell jar, always looms over her. She can only choose one fig, but because something in her wants them all, she hesitates and sits paralyzed with indecision, and the figs rot and fall to the ground. She is 'starving to death' not simply from indecision but also from 'an increasing sense of alienation from self and alienation from the world.' (Coyle, 1984, p. 169) This results in Esther seeing her only avenue as 'opting out of the system through starvation and death.' (Dowbnia, 2014, p. 582)

Buddy explained this phenomenon concerning having two options at the same time almost flawlessly, saying that, if Esther wanted to be both, for example, a poet and a mother, 'after [she] had children [she] would feel differently, [she] wouldn't want to write poems any more'. (Plath, 1966, p. 106) Esther blindly followed such advice. She is once again told that she has absolutely no control over her choices. Societal standards and expectations continuously determine her opportunities. 'Esther's frustration' concludes Badia (2006, p. 133), 'is not unreasonable given the societal constrictions regarding women's roles in mid-century America.'

Plath's writings (*Stings, Three Women, The Jailer, In Plaster, Tulips, Fever 103°, Cut*) clearly describe 'male violence and the domestic servitude in to which women are coaxed by the blandishments of romance.' (Ditum, 2017, p. 448) Despite impressive social changes since Plath's time, it seems women's physical, psychological, and actual existence remains in a continuous struggle. Esther's lack of choice drives her to the stifling bell jar. Nevertheless, Esther shows incredible consciousness of the ways in which society controls the lives of women, and she seeks another available choice for her future in order to find desirable self-fulfilment and thereby regain her sanity.

5.1.2. Struggles of motherhood and childbirth

As stated before, Esther's imagined future including many lovers is uncertain because such a lifestyle could lead to unwanted pregnancy. From the moment she got fitted with a diaphragm she suddenly felt liberated, this kind of birth control provided her with 'freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person.' (Plath, 1966, p. 270) Accordingly, Esther sees birth control as something that frees her from an undesirable family life. She, all of a sudden, has more than one choice for her and her body, she had gained some control over her choices.

Sylvia Plath, through Esther, honestly acknowledges all the horrors surrounding childbirth. Buddy Willard, a medical student, takes Esther into the delivery room to witness a birth. Childbirth, for her, seems to be a torture, 'a frightening ritual.' (Perloff, 1972, p. 516) She accepts her evidently non-maternal feelings, stating that 'if I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go

mad.' (Plath, 1966, p. 53) Such descriptions found their way into Plath's poems *You're, Dark House, Heavy Women, Magi, Love Letter, Candles, Small Hours* and *Metaphors.*

Poems that deal with motherhood in a dark, fearful way, can be found in *The Colossus,* her first collection of poems. Real revulsion to motherhood is expressed in *Moonrise* and *I Want, I Want* where she even compared childbirth and pregnancy to the crucifixion. She compared it to self-sacrifice. Childbirth made her lose identity, and she felt insignificant and small. More importantly, she feared that she will eventually lose her creativity and stop writing. Childlessness, on the other hand, seemed perfect, but deadly for Plath. We can see this in *Tulips* where flowers, just like babies, suffocate her. They put her in a trap, the same as the children do. The speaker of the poem ends up rejecting them.

Through the voices of the three women, her dramatic play *Three Women* perfectly summarizes Plath's attitudes toward childbirth and motherhood. The Wife represents a woman who is ready for childbirth, after the birth she glories her son, The Secretary represents a woman losing her child, she feels empty and useless, and finally, The Girl represents a woman who is not ready for such sacrifice, she rejects her child and continues with her old life. Plath again explores women's fates and choices 'such as those represented by the fig tree.' (Dobbs, 1977, p. 22)

She also resolves the conflict about marriage, recognizing that if it means marrying someone like Buddy 'she does not want it at all.' (Coyle, 1984, p. 172) The patterns of marriage and motherhood around Esther make her 'loathe more than desire either of these accepted institutions.' (Coyle, 1984, p. 162) Society spreads the idea that 'the all of a woman's existence is a husband, a house, and a handful of kids.' (Dobbs, 1977, p. 12) Fighting that idea meant fighting against the system as a whole. Esther concludes that being married and having children 'was like being brainwashed.' (Plath, 1966, p. 106) To be married is to be 'in purdah, in plaster, in jail.' (Dobbs, 1977, p. 17)

Nonetheless, when Plath herself had children, her works started to increasingly incorporate such topics in a positive way. Endless demands of the children seemed to disappear. Dickie (1982, p. 13) notices how from *The Manor Garden* poem Plath fears for her children's safety. She longs to protect them in a world that 'will kill and eat' (*Mary's Song*). After Hughes and Plath's divorce, the theme concerning motherhood especially dominated her poetry. In this period, Plath, now a

single mother, wrote poems celebrating childbirth, such as *Poem for a Fatherless Son*, *By Candlelight, Nick and the Candle Stick* and *The Night Dances*.

5.1.3. Father and rage

Her father's death was a trauma from which Plath never properly recovered. His figure is a recurring, rather quintessential motive in plenty of her works. His presence haunts her poetry in 'unfamiliar, violent, obsessive imagery and sounds.' (Wisker, 2004, p. 109) She inexorably recalls his death in her novel, journals, stories, and poems, especially in *Full Fathom Five*, *The Colossus*, *Electra on Azalea Path*, *Little Fugue* and her most famous poem, *Daddy*. (Clark, 2019, p. 362) Some call it her 'central obsession from the beginning to the end of her life and career' (Butscher, 2003, p. 3), others call it a 'curse' (Stevenson, 1989, p. 32) which Plath was doomed to retell to whoever would listen.

Poem after poem, Otto Plath is associated with extremes: violence, fear, loss, absence and abandonment. In *Daddy*, Plath aligns her father with a 'danger', a 'Nazi', a 'Fascist', a 'devil' and a 'vampire'. She carefully associates her personal sufferings and horrors with historical images of oppression. She identifies herself with the persecuted gypsies, Jews and concentration camps, and her persecutors with fascism and torture. In her poems she demonstrates the mind confronting its own pain and trying to control it. She manipulates her terrors by adding unusual, simplistic, nursery-rhyme-like rhythmical patterns and images, abundant rhyming and repeating short phrases. This kind of writing Uroff (1977, p. 114) called the 'singsong language'. It helped her feel secure in extremely dangerous world around her.

Scornful anger and rage become by-products of her lifelong, rather frustrating, effort to find and restore the lost father and to finally fix her broken family. Because she does not succeed in this quest, in her later poems she becomes cruel, violently attacking and murdering the father instead. Behind all this rage and resentment, Plath's wish for protective and caring father can be found. (Dickie, 1982, p. 13) She does not choose forgiveness but rather fights back against the original source of her pain, the thing that disturbingly occupied her thoughts. This anger might be

explained by her mourning and depression which caused such aggressive feelings towards her father.

Plath used the apostrophe to express mixed feelings toward her father. This technique gave her father the incoherent, brutal, aggressive, vengeful, guilt-inducing voice. It helped her resurrect her dead father - only to kill him again. Writers usually use apostrophe to connect the living with the dead, but Plath primarily used it to annihilate her dead father completely and forget about his presence. In the end, she borrowed his retaliating, attacking voice to utterly destroy him. In other words, 'she has spilled his blood to free herself from his vampire like appetite for her blood.' (Ramazani, 1993, p. 1152)

Her rage, however, is not narrowed down only to her father, it is present in relationships with her mother, husband, husband's lover and many others. (Trinidad, 2006, p. 27) Moreover, it is not only these people who are under Plath's attack, but political systems as well. Her rage towards terrible restrictions of patriarchy, its direct control, society that repeatedly entraps women is omnipresent all over her works. Plath's violence and extremity are necessary strategies of the oppressed, explains Sinfield (1989, p. 279). Additionally, Cox and Jones (1964, p. 108) comment that 'in a deranged world, a deranged response is the only possible reaction.'

Plath, again, shattered taboos on expressing female anger and personal grief in literary works. It was definitely not something that women writers of the 1950s would normally do. Sylvia Plath opened doors for other women to openly voice their innermost rage and despairing mourning in poetry. Other women poets, like Anne Sexton, started to use their poems to 'exorcize, slough, divorce, defame, even annihilate the dead.' (Ramazani, 1993, p. 1143) Anger is unique to Plath, she contributed to the genre, and, in a way, extended Lowell and Sexton's confessional writings.

Plath's final line of *Daddy* says 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.' That sounds like confident declaration of her liberty. However, many people interpret it as a sign of her suicide. She finally murders her father, but in doing so she kills herself as well. The act of killing him considerably exhausted her. Her personal freedom from dead father can only be achieved in death. In the end, suicide, again, becomes 'the proper tragic [re]solution.' (Cox & Jones, 1964, p. 120) In other words, Plath translated her scornful rage into tragic resignation.

5.1.4. Language

Language, and its different symbols, play an important role in Esther's perception of patriarchy in general. She explicitly explains her love or hatred toward some of the language symbols which reflect her opinions on male dominance and women's limitations. For example, Esther does not like the German language, physics and chemistry formulas and shorthand. Her estrangement from such symbols represents a struggle with 'a male domination' expressed 'in the potencies of language itself.' (Budick, 1987, p. 877)

During her childhood, her mother always insisted on Esther to learn shorthand. She finds it a practical skill that can always be useful in Esther's life, especially in regard to her possible, financially unstable, career option. Esther passionately hated the idea. Another thing she despised was the masculine language of physics and chemistry. Language that shrinks everything into letters and numbers, it 'abbreviates, restricts and reduces the universe into physical principles.' (Budick, 1987, p. 874) This language, which makes ugly abbreviations out of beautiful words, causes her mind to go dead.

Because of such experiences with masculine languages, Esther was encouraged to find her own language and form. Towards the end of the novel, Esther found language that speaks directly to her, that stimulates and feeds her imaginative life – language of botany. The language is full of different shapes, diagrams, cycles, heart and leaf shapes. That language, for Esther, was protective and feminine. It represents the universe and life through pictorial depictions. Esther escapes the language that shortens and stifles to a language that breathes life.

Esther's dislocation from language happens right in the middle of the novel. It, in a way, symbolizes her descent into depression which is followed by nervous breakdown. The words on the paper do not cooperate with her, she is unable to decipher them in order to construct any meaning. She can no longer read. This alienation from language resulted in Esther reading only psychological books which describe her mental condition in detail, and scandal sheets which report on suicides. Later, she cannot even write or speak. This is a sign of a complete loss of control over her body.

5.2. Reflections on mental illness in *The Bell Jar*

5.2.1. Eating disorders

Dowbnia (2014, p. 567) examined symbolic and rather complex connection between characters and food and in her analysis concluded that it reflects 'larger cultural ideas about appetite, consumption, and the body.' This is usually best described in women's fiction in which such relationships are developed, particularly relating to the suppression and indulgence of appetite. This theme is especially important for understanding many food-related events Esther Greenwood, *The Bell Jar*'s protagonist, encounters.

Esther's eating habits follow a bulimic pattern of binging and purging. She usually rapidly consumes luxurious foods and then undergoes a sort of purification through purging (usually vomiting). Esther's relationship with food is, therefore, symbolic of her 'freedom not to know what she wants to be […] as an adult, sexual freedom and control over her reproduction.' (Dowbnia, 2014, p. 569) Moreover, her eating habits display her eagerness to be a part of an upper-class lifestyle and desire to enjoy luxuries, benefits and overall freedom of such class. Though, she continues to be considered 'an outsider' till the end of the book.

Esther's feelings are closely related to food. Food advertisements of the time usually encourage such behaviour. The idea that food can cure emotional distress is a typical marketing tactic and one that we can see even today. In these commercials, they usually relate food with 'fun, pleasure, and positive transformation,' and therefore 'encourage emotional eating in their consumers.' (Dowbnia, 2014, p. 574) Esther fanatically read women's magazines and worked in the making of one and was surely influenced by such messages.

The relationship between Esther and food took another path after getting food poisoning. Esther and the other girls attending the banquet vomited till the end of the night in the bathroom. While other girls were angry and scared, Esther 'enjoyed the bliss of her purge' and described it as something 'holy'. (Dowbnia, 2014, p. 575) Making herself vomit made Esther feel pure and

reborn, ready for the next binge eating and purge that follows afterwards. This cycle of binge eating and vomiting is characteristic of bulimic behaviour.

As mentioned earlier, people who predominantly suffer of eating disorders are women. It, of course, has to do with cultural restrictions and expectations of women in the 1950s. This era, which limited women's progress in many areas of their life, contributed to the phenomenon of such illnesses. Focusing Esther's treatment only on her physical body cannot help much. It is in the conversations with her psychiatrists that her mental health finally progresses. (Dowbnia, 2014, p. 580)

5.2.2. Treatment of mental illness

Cut, Paralytic, Amnesiac, In Plaster, Face Lift, Insomniac and *The Surgeon at 2 A.M.* perfectly describe the pain experienced in the mental hospital. The opening lines of *The Bell Jar* bring up famous historical event, execution of the Rosenbergs, which serves as an equivalent of what is Esther about to experience – 'failure to conform is punished electrically.' (Sinfield, 1989, p. 275) As mentioned before, treating mental illness was, nowadays quite shockingly, equated with treating physical abnormalities. Plath, and *The Bell Jar*'s central figure Esther, both experienced electroshock therapy which is used to heal their emotional traumas and horrors. *The Bell Jar* provides different kinds of therapeutic treatments which emphasize the conceptualization of mental illness as physical, bodily one.

Esther receives two shock treatments in the novel. The first treatment left Esther feeling dreadful and she could not even recognize herself in the mirror afterwards. She only saw darkness; she could not speak or listen. Esther's experience with shock therapy reveals what it has to do with her: 'Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world […] 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, 1966, pp. 175-6)

The second treatment was successful, Dr Nolan makes her feel at peace, confirming Esther's identity and re-establishing her sense of self. She leads her out of the bell jar, out of the room, into the 'fresh, blue-skied air.' Esther, similarly to her relationship to food, felt as if she had been reborn and purified through that experience. One of the first signs of recovery is that the bell jar metaphor changes, 'the bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air'. The 'suffocating barrier' has moved and Esther makes the 'slow climb out of madness'. (Coyle, 1984, p. 171)

The plot of *The Bell Jar* moves back-and-forth from physical sickness to mental illness. All of these occurrences suggest that one may treat both kinds of illnesses identically. Nowadays researchers and scientist would strongly disagree. But, the 1950s lacked today's knowledge on the topic. So, as Perloff (1972, p. 518) understandably documented, 'all illness is to be viewed as part of the same spectrum: disease, whether mental or physical, is an index to the human inability to cope with an unliveable situation.'

5.2.3. Sense of entrapment

This theme is the one which many people associate with Plath at its first mention. It represents being trapped – in a bell jar, a plaster, a cellar or a wax house – by society or self, and then, in some way, escaping (Gilbert, 1978, p. 592), though, at times, with severe consequences. The speakers and characters of her works are trapped in a cycle of despair with, usually, nothing to look forward to. This theme is present throughout Plath's poetry (e.g. *Medusa, The Applicant, Cut, The Munich Mannequins*), journal entries, short stories and, of course, her only published novel, *The Bell Jar*.

'Under the bell jar one breathes only one's own self-poisoning air.' (Scheerer, 1976, p. 478) Sylvia Plath clearly could not tolerate this pressure which, for her, began early, in her childhood. After her father's death, the family moved to another town because her mother needed to find more secure job in order to provide for her children. However, having moved inland, Plath had moved also into a plaster cast, the bell jar, the cellar and the wax house. Her central problem had become finding her way out.

Even though she desperately wanted to escape, she is scared of the risks this unusual freedom might bring with itself. In her works, Plath either gets out of this, partly self-inclined suffocation, by murdering her father or flying away disguised as a Queen Bee (in *Stings*), a bear (in the short fiction piece *The Fifty-Ninth Bear*), a train (in *Getting There*), a horse (in *Ariel*), a risen corpse (in *Lady Lazarus*), an arrow (in *Ariel*, *The Bell Jar* and *The Other*), or, frequently, as a baby. (Gilbert, 1978, p. 594)

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's sense of being entrapped, separated from everyone, herself included, and her gradual lifting of the jar makes her wonder whether it will collapse around her again. This feeling of being captured and struggling to release oneself parallels her previous understanding that her choices (concerning life, love and career path) are profoundly limited. Annas (1980, p. 171) again emphasises that this is 'directly connected to the particular time and place' in which both Esther, and Plath, lived.

Later in the novel, Esther expresses her awareness of the bell jar that once surrounded her, symbolizing her majestic detachment from it. Her mother advised her to forget all about her negative experiences and to treat them just as a bad dream. Esther did not intend to forget such occurrences because 'they were part of me.' (Plath, 1966, p. 287) Forgetting them would completely destroy her. Hiding these horrific feelings, she encountered primarily through her experiences with mental illness, would certainly slow down her overall progress.

5.2.4. Sense of separation from the self and the world

As a result of all these previously mentioned experiences many Plath's poem speakers (*The Night Dances, Ariel, Edge, Paralytic, Cut, The Applicant*) and fictionalized characters (*The Bell Jar*) encounter a kind of detachment from themselves, and the world as a whole. Some scholars call it 'sense of dislocation and dissociation from self', 'alienation and sense of otherness' (Coyle, 1984, p. 168), others call it 'fall into division' (Kendall, 2000, p. 28) but all of them acknowledged this motive as recurrent in Plath's works. Plath herself simply called this separateness, separateness that eventually led to 'Esther Greenwood's breakdown and suicide attempts.' (Bonds, 1990, p. 49)

This otherness, for Esther, starts with her body. Her body begins to sabotage her in many different ways; her hands move as if on their own. She is losing control over her body movements. She desperately wants her old self; in this way she creates a sense of duality. This, other, unrecognizable self, has taken control of her. Shock treatments Esther receives in the novel worsen this feeling. After the treatments Esther feels terrible, even more separated from herself. Now, not only her body and voice, but her mind as well, does not cooperate with her.

This split-self or alienation from self is again seen in three of her suicide attempts. When she wanted to slit her wrists, she notices that the skin of her wrist looked so white and defenceless. When she tries to strangle herself, again, her body sabotages her, her hands act on their own and save her. Similarly, when she decides to drown herself, her body will not cooperate, it keeps popping her back to the surface of the water. In all of the three attempts she does not want to kill herself but someone or something that is captured deep within her mind and body. That foreign, damaging, voice points out all her failures and betrays her. She sympathises with her physical self, but it is something within her that needs to be cruelly annihilated.

The way that Esther negatively perceives her own face in the mirror accurately demonstrates her sense of detachment, a kind of a self-loss. When she is in New York in an elevator she mistakes herself for 'a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman.' (Plath, 1966, p. 34) She does not recognize herself in the reflection. In another instance, when she tries to commit suicide, she makes a difference between the face she sees in the mirror, and the person with the razor cutting her wrists. After her suicide attempt she is given the mirror in the hospital. She thinks that she has been given a picture of another person, unrecognizably male or female, 'with their hair […] shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head,' (Plath, 1966, p. 213) instead. She is completely indistinguishable to herself.

Other than this self-alienation and fragmentation, Esther separates herself from relationships with other people as well, especially women. (Bonds, 1990, p. 55) Esther's mother, Joan, Doreen, Dr Nolan (the psychiatrists), Philomena Guinea and Jay Cee (the editor for whom she works at *Ladies' Day*) all represent some kind of a threat to her integrity. Even though these women helped Esther to create her authentic identity she consciously rejects their further contributions. Eventually, she even denies their influence. This denial results in Esther losing touch

with ‘the talents and skills that these women nurtured.’ (Bonds, 1990, p. 57) Consequently, this too played an important part in making her nervous breakdown happen.

5.2.5. Death and rebirth

For Esther, and many other early poem speakers, death does not mean the end. Such as her relationship with food (through binging and purging), death and eventual rebirth have purifying effect. These early works offer an escape, through death, into a new and better life. The person is recovered and perfected. In her later poems (e.g. *Edge, Contusion, I Am Vertical, Last Words, Death and Co.*) of ‘resignation and despair’ (Axelrod, 2006, p. 87), however, the possibility of rebirth is obscured. Death is associated with end, defeat, and desolation rather than the ‘route to glorious rebirth.’ (Kendall, 2000, p. 37) The hope of rebirth has disappeared. Destiny has become inescapable.

Esther frequently contemplates suicide and ‘describes her attempts in a methodical, matter-of-fact manner.’ (Marcarian & Wilkinson, 2017, p. 15) Esther tries cutting, drowning and hanging, but finds that her body has all sorts of little tricks, such as making her hands go limp at the crucial second. Esther adored the idea of death, she often obsessively read scandal sheets, stories of suicides, murders and crimes found in magazines and newspapers. (Ditum, 2017, p. 448) She even compared herself to a picture of a dead girl in one of the scandal sheets. Esther, in a way, identifies with the victim.

The final scene of the novel, where Esther, dressed all in red, triumphantly walks in the room full of doctors who discuss her release from the hospital, signifies the ultimate rebirth scene. Esther is not really reborn, but rather remade, reworked. There are various opportunities for her in the future. There is, finally, hope. Esther’s quest for identity and search for herself is over. Through her own effort, and Dr Nolan's help, Esther ultimately forms an authentic self. *The Bell Jar* offers some hope that ‘no matter how severe the depression is, people can recover.’ (Marcarian & Wilkinson, 2017, p. 15)

As stated before, death floods Plath's poems. Plath's confrontation with suicide is visible in *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus*. In *Lady Lazarus*, however, the speaker rises from and finally has power to defy death. Her description of suicide attempts some readers might find alarming, but others can undoubtedly feel less alone. Suicide was a weapon she used not only against others (her parents and her husband) but also against herself. *Edge*, the possibly last poem Plath wrote, with its chilly imagery, many scholars interpreted as 'Plath's suicide note.' (Clark, 2019, p. 366) Her latest poems really feel like death and despair. They brutally and painfully describe Plath's psychological state of mind.

6. Conclusion

Plath's oeuvre introduced us to some of the rawest emotions one poet and fiction writer might deal with. Growing through horrific instances of encroaching pain and madness, feeling the emptiness of contemporary societal expectations and restricted roles of women in 1950's America, experiencing the dangers of mental illness treatments that were popular back then, suicide attempts, and finally death were the themes that Plath dared to write in the first person about across many poems and, of course, her novel. The end of Plath's life appears as a 'dramatic realisation of the themes of her writing.' (Ditum, 2017, p. 446)

Plath invested so much of herself in her works. Al Alvarez believed that Plath's brilliance did not lie in her technical skills but rather in her willingness to search through her own pain, going down into the cellars and confronting her demons. (1974, p. 31) Her engagement with intense taboo topics such as mental illness, sexuality, mortality, motherhood, domestic experiences, conflict between family and career, miscarriages, childbirth and her divorce literally made the majority of her most powerful and successful works. As well as her suicide attempts and her father's death, which are quite ubiquitous throughout her works.

By manipulating and balancing tones, rhythms and internal rhymes through characters, images and stories, Plath showed her immense control of her terrifying experiences in her works. She broke free from strict, highly patterned, rule-following and emotionally safe style to much freer, breathable and liberating one. Writing, especially after this significant transformation, became the true source of her healing, a kind of therapy. Articulating personal pain and traumas in her texts partly enhanced her healing. But, after some time, engagement with such taboo topics started to stifle Plath in her works and life as well.

Sylvia Plath 'revealed herself accurately in all her writing.' (Runco, 1998, p. 644) At the early beginnings, Plath found her journal-writing habit therapeutic, venting about her frustrations and sadness. But it was only temporary comfort. Working through deeply held private and personal material (especially in works such as *Daddy* and *The Colossus*), however, was not that beneficial for Plath's mental condition. Eventually she chose one of the most frequent ways of escaping such traumas in her poems, death. Her poem speakers, and possibly Plath as well, often perceived death as a purified freedom.

The reader of her poems is immersed in the anxieties, desires and despairs of the writer's personal experience. The writer allows us to explore 'territories we dare not encounter alone.' (Schetrumpf, 2015, p. 127) This 'terrifying insight into a private world of suffering' (Cox & Jones, 1964, p. 111) helps the reader to identify and confront personal suffering. The frequent use of 'you' in her poems connects the reader and the speaker of the text, which increases the intimacy. This technique directly addresses the readers, especially those who are depressed and suicidal.

Articulating a revolt against society and system that underestimates and overlooks women's interests, Plath had gained the admiration of many contemporary women. Plath's influence, however, was fundamental for other women writers. Many women writers, like Sexton and Rich, abandoned their usual restrictive writing. They started to express their anti-patriarchal anger, fears, violent grief and traumas in their writings. Plath enabled women writers to finally be heard. Other than writers, Plath was inspiration for the very development of the feminist approach to therapy. Since Plath's works reflect a feminist awareness that was ahead of its time.

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Izjava o izvornosti diplomskog rada

Izjavljujem da je moj diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mojeg rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristila drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

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(vlastoručni potpis studenta)