



AKIL HASTANESİNİN KURGULAMA OLARAK OKUNMASI: SIRÇA FANUS'DA “M” HARFİNİ TAŞIMANIN AĞIRLIĞI

*Reading Asylum as a Form of Simulacra: The Burden of Carrying the Letter “M”
in The Bell Jar**

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ÖZET

Sylvia Plath'in *Sırça Fanus* (1971) adlı eseri Soğuk Savaş döneminde kadın bedeni ve zihinsel alanının ne denli ağır bir biçimde sosyal hadımlamaya maruz kaldığını irdeleyen önemli bir eserdir. Bu önemli metin, delilik kavramı ve entelektüel kısıtlamalar merkeze alınarak incelendiğinde eserin olay örgüsünün sadece dönemin sıkıntılarını yaşayan ana karakter Esther Greenwood'un değil, onunla birlikte Soğuk Savaş travmalarına maruz kalan tüm bireylerin hikayesi olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Yaşanan travmaları Rosenberg Davası üzerinden yansıtan Esther Greenwood, bu yolla bireylerin yaşadığı türlü travmalara değinmekte ve psikolojik baskının fiziksel baskıdan çok daha acı verici olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Bu çalışmada *Sırça Fanus* senatoryum, delilik, ve Soğuk Savaş dönemi kısıtlamaları ele alınarak incelenmiş ve eserin bir dönemi içine alarak yansıttığı sosyal, psikolojik ve politik travmalarının üzerinde durulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sylvia Plath, Sırça Fanus, Soğuk Savaş.

ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1971) deeply analyzes the social castration of the female body and psyche in Cold War America through the portrayal of the protagonist Esther Greenwood. In this respect, discourse of madness, asylum as a perfect metaphor of the Cold War America, and intellectual entrapment serve as perfect examples of how *The Bell Jar* is the story of an entire generation. Therefore, Plath's evocation of the Rosenberg Trial acts as a vehicle for approaching Cold War ideology and the trauma it creates for the individual. Reading the asylum in *The Bell Jar* as a simulacra underlines the fact that, for Plath, Esther Greenwood's story is an act of rebellion that aims at reflecting all the restrictions imposed on the female body and psyche. This study mainly focuses primarily on “the asylum” as a simulacra designed for individuals who have the capacity to criticize the dominant ideology.

Key Words: Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar, Asylum narrative, Cold War.

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At first sight, *The Bell Jar* seems to signify the story of a young girl, Esther Greenwood, who comes to New York as a guest editor of a famous magazine and who later experiences a mental illness, and is even labeled as a schizophrenic, which seems closely related with Plath's personal psychological trauma, not with her culture's trauma. This picture has also been supported by some Plath critics and scholars in order to justify the claim that "although Plath claimed in a late interview to be deeply concerned with world politics, she did not have an explicitly political imagination"(Gilbert and Gubar 297).² Therefore, they have given way to depoliticize *The Bell Jar*. However, as Frederick Jameson emphasizes "...there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed that everything is "in the last analysis political"(5). In relation with Jameson's crucial comment, it can be asserted that *The Bell Jar* is one of the most significant literary texts of twentieth-century American literature, which crystallizes the social and psychological traumas and *facts* of Cold War America. While focusing on traumas of the Cold War generation, *The Bell Jar*³ deeply analyzes the social castration of the female body and psyche in Cold War America through labeling her mad. Focusing on Esther's story highlights how Sylvia Plath achieves a portrayal of the psychological and social traumas of an entire generation. Therefore, the discourse of madness, asylum as a perfect metaphor of the Cold War America, and intellectual entrapment serve as perfect examples of how *The Bell Jar* is the story of an entire generation but not solely the story of Plath.

In *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist Esther Greenwood defines female entrapment in terms of the organic bond among women, madness, and consumerism in Cold War America. This time women are not viewed as objects that are forced both to consume and to be consumed, but as objects who must be intellectually entrapped in order to prevent the destruction of the dominant ideology.⁴ As a result of that, women are kept in asylums,

² In their works, *No Man's Land. The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar portray the works of various women writers, and Plath is one of them. They accuse Plath of not having any connection with politics. Their accusation lies under the fact that they declare Plath as a female intellectual who did not focus on the social problems of women. However, indicating *The Bell Jar* Ellen Moers claims that "No writer has meant more to the current feminist movement"(xv). For further reading see Ellen Moers *Literary Women*. (New York: Doubleday, 1976) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *No Man's Land. The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Volume 3. Letters From the Front*. (New Heaven: Yale, 1994).

³ The bell jar is a term used in science which is used to define a cylindrical vessel used to protect fragile objects in scientific experiments in order to establish a vacuum.

⁴ In *The Bell Jar* the dominant ideology of the twentieth century Cold War America signifies the power of the patriarchal political voice that tries to silence women in order to preserve its power. Therefore, it promoted the place of women as either at home or shopping and championed the social castration of women in all areas of social and political life.

and the sense of female captivity is intensified by Esther's depiction of the hospital's "yellow clapboard walls"(Plath 157)⁵ that reminds the reader of "The Yellow Wallpaper"⁶ of Charlotte Perkins Gilman whose creative capacity was also diminished and derided by nineteenth century American psychiatrists. By means of comparison, Esther portrays how twentieth century American women were labeled as mad and how they had to carry the burden of the letter "M" upon their bosoms just like Hester Prynne carried the letter "A" in *The Scarlet Letter*.⁷

In *The Bell Jar* Esther has entered into the asylum with her "gloved hands"(156) as she commits suicide through taking fifty sleeping pills which is a "literal rebirth, a new beginning"(Kroll 170). She begins to interpret the hospital through informing her reader that "none of the people were moving"(158). Furthermore, she says,

I focused more closely, trying to pry some clue from their stiff postures. I made out men and women, and boys and girls who must be as young as I, but there was a uniformity to their faces, as if they had lain for a long time on a shelf, out of the sunlight, under siftings of pale, fine dust. Then I saw that some people were indeed moving, but with such small, birdlike gestures I had not at first discerned them.(158)

Evidently the hospital for Esther represents a social and psychological space, a microcosm of the Cold War years, and the most significant element is hidden beneath Esther's enticing comment on the individuals in the hospital.⁸ Furthermore, from Esther's statement it becomes apparent that uniformity has become one of the most clear-cut values of Esther's generation producing a generation of people who are pale as dust.

⁵ Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). Subsequent references will be identified by parenthetical page numbers in the text.

⁶ For further reading see Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *The Yellow Wallpaer and Other Stories*. (New York: Oxford UP., 1995).

⁷ The name Esther and the letter "M" she has to carry reminds the reader of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* who has to carry the letter "A" on her bosom. While choosing the name of her protagonist Plath was probably inspired by the character "Judith" in Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," who is Shakespeare's sister because in the earlier drafts of *The Bell Jar* Esther's name was Judith Greenwood. Plath probably used the name Judith in order to underline the female castration in terms of a universal problem. In her journals Plath also writes, "Virginia Woolf helps. Her novels make mine possible: I find myself describing: episodes: you don't have to follow your *Judith Greenwood* [emphasis added] to breakfast, lunch, dinner, or tell about her train rides, unless the flash forwards her, reveals her. Make her enigmatic: who is that blond girl: she is a bitch: she is the white goddess. Make her a statement of the generation. Which is you"("Journals" 289).

⁸ If the bell jar exists, it is apparent that it does not exist only for women but also for men, as the hospital encompass both women and men. Therefore, Esther's story is not only the story of women but also of men.

Therefore, under the umbrella of the Cold War the individuals of both men and women is helplessly smothered because at Esther's hospital while "a gray-faced man was counting out a deck of cards...at the piano a young girl leafed through a few sheets of music..."(158). It can be assumed that the hospital is not a place that is designed to cure people but just another simulacra⁹ designed for the suppression of both women and men. R.D. Laing, the famous psychiatrist of the era mentions that it is a very easy act to label the individuals as mad, which turns into a normal thing.

In the context of our present pervasive madness that we call normality, sanity, freedom, all our frames of reference are ambiguous and equivocal. A man who prefers to be dead rather than Red is normal. A man who has lost his soul is mad. A man who says that men are machines may be a great scientist. A man who says he *is* a machine is 'depersonalized' in psychiatric jargon. A man who says that Negroes are an inferior race may be widely respected. A man who says his whiteness is a form of cancer is certifiable.(11)

Esther comments on the hospital with the following words: "I felt as if I were sitting in the window of an enormous department store. The figures around me weren't people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life"(159). It should be underlined that at the beginning of the story Esther depicts the shop dummies in New York and associates them with women who are the victims of consumption and materialism and who are forced to live in a simulacra. Esther again associates her social milieu with the material world, but this time in a private hospital, the signifier of Private Corporation in Cold War America, where intellectual people are labeled as 'mad.' In addition, in order to emphasize the fake atmosphere of hospital life, Esther uses the word "counterfeiting"(159) to highlight the fact that the hospital is a place that is designed by the dominant discourse.¹⁰ As an example of that, while at the center of the hospital as Esther is following Dr. Gordon,¹¹ somewhere in

⁹ "Simulacra" is a term created by Jean Baudrillard. The term is used to define hyperreality in the post-modern world.

¹⁰ In *The Bell Jar* the dominant discourse of the era reflects the patriarchal power that tries to silence women through labeling them mad.

¹¹ Dr. Gordon is the psychiatrist of Esther. As a male psychiatrist he is the emblem of psychiatric treatments of Cold War years and how psychology was used as a form of brainwashing in order to castrate the intellectual mind. As R.D. Laing claims, "Psychiatry could be, and some psychiatrists are, on the side of transcendence, of genuine freedom, and of true human growth. But psychiatry can so easily be a technique of brainwashing, of inducing behavior that is adjusted, by (preferably) non-injurious torture. In the best places, where straitjackets are abolished, doors are unlocked, leucotomies largely foregone, these can be replaced by more subtle lobotomies and tranquilizers that place the bars of Bedlam and the locked doors *inside* the patient. Thus, I would wish to emphasize that our

distance, she hears a woman shouting. Esther describes the episode: "As the woman dragged by, waving her arms and struggling in the grip of the nurse, she was saying, "I'm going to jump out of the window, I'm going to jump out of the window, I'm going to jump out of the window"(159). Thus, ironically, Esther comes across a woman who is trying to free herself from the suffocating environment of the hospital albeit by physical rather than psychological means. Later she meets a nurse, and she tries to understand the nurse's vision. She cannot decide which eye is the real one and which is the false. Although Esther cannot help thinking about the woman who tries to free herself, the nurse makes the last point on the issue: "She thinks she's going to jump out of the window but she can't jump out of the window because they're all barred!"(160). Portrayal of the female entrapment and the asylum as a form of simulacra are the signifiers of the final strategy of Cold War America in labeling creative minds as "Mad."¹² This strategy is apparently the extension of the discourse of "the enemy within" which involved labeling any innocent person with views contravening the status quo as a Russian spy.¹³ In relation to this strategy, the suffocating barred-windows that signify both McCarthyism and the strategy of suppressing female creativity have their extensions in the poems of Plath. The narrator of Plath's *Ariel* poem "Tulips" defines her tragic situation with the following statement,

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.
They bring me sleep
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage—
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox.(18)

'normal' 'adjusted' state is too often the abdication of ecstasy, the betrayal of our true potentialities, that many of us are only too successful in acquiring a false self to adopt to false realities"(12).

¹² It can be assumed that *The Bell Jar* manages to reflect the trauma of an entire generation. As underlined by Christina Britzolaskis, "While the trauma, loss, and mourning work staged in the writing can never be entirely disentangled from the narrative of her [Plath's] life and death, it none the less exceeds the personalizations of biography"(148).

¹³ "The enemy within" is the dominant discourse of senator MacCarthy whose name marked the Cold War as the age of McCarthyism. It can be claimed that the execution of Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg and Julius Rosenberg became the symbol of McCarthyism. Therefore, in *The Bell Jar* the execution of the Rosenbergs served as an example of how one could be inhumanly killed even without proof of one's crime. The traumas of McCarthyism can also be found in Plath's short stories "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," "The Shadow," and "Superman and Paula Brown's Snowsuit." For further reading see Sylvia Plath. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams. Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts*. (Ed. Ted Hughes. New York, Harper Perennial, 2000).

The narrator juxtaposes tulips, that signify spring, vitality, and nature, with the surgeons, nurses and silence, which highlight entrapment and an unnatural space, a simulacra. Another poem “Wintering” also gives voice to the same dark windows that Esther’s generation face. The narrator describes her situation while “Wintering in a dark without window”(Plath “Ariel” 89). Like the yellow walls of the asylum, the narrator describes “Chinese yellow on appalling objects”(Plath “Ariel” 89). However, like in the voices in the poems, Esther is conscious about the simulacra that takes the form of an asylum this time. The voice in the poem “Cut” notes,

O my
Homunculus, I am ill.
I have taken a pill to kill.(Plath “Ariel” 27)

Like the voice in the “Cut,” Esther also takes her pills and acts as if she were part of the simulacra in order to kill both her false self and the simulacra she faces.

In relation with the voice of “Cut,” Esther does not want to believe the nurse, and she later describes the atmosphere,

I saw that the doors in that part were indeed barred, and that the room door and the closet door and the drawers of the bureau and everything that opened and shut was fitted with a keyhole so it could be locked up. The wall-eyed nurse came back. She unclasped my watch and dropped it in her pocket. Then she started tweaking the hairpins from my hair.(160)

The entrapment of Esther is intensified by the neutralization of femininity. By taking her hairpins, one of the strongest symbols of Esther’s femininity made absent. While she is being prepared for Electro Convulsive Therapy, the nurse tells her: “Don’t worry ... Their first time everybody’s scared to death”(160).

The trauma of ECT, electro convulsive therapy, is deeply felt by Esther. She says, “I tried to smile, but my skin had gone stiff, like parchment. Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal pates on either side of my head. He buckled them into place with a strap that dented my forehead, and gave me a wire to bite. I shut my eyes”(161). The traumatic experience of ECT is one of the strongest criticisms of Esther’s generation, which is symbolized by the electrocution of the Rosenbergs.

After Esther shuts her eyes, “there was a brief of silence, like an indrawn breath”(BJ 161). She depicts her tragedy with the following words:

...something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Wheee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, though 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.(161)

It becomes apparent that one of the first aims of ECT¹⁴ is to convince people that at sometime in their lives they must have done something so bad that they have had to face this tragic, painful, and unbearable consequence. However, the only bad thing, according to the dominant ideology of the time, is that Esther and her generation has dared to rebel against the artificial system which is imposed upon them by patriarchal order and the female figures, especially mothers, who strictly obey it. Once the reader has remembered the very first sentence of *The Bell Jar*:

IT WAS A QUEER, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers—goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would like, being burned alive all along your nerves. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world. (1)

It now becomes evident why Esther associates her experience with the Rosenberg's throughout her story. The relationship lies in the fact that both Esther Greenwood and Ethel Rosenberg, whose maiden name was Greenwood, face the same tragedy. One labeled as mad, and the other as the spy, neither having being judged properly. In relation of this dilemma, Dr. Gordon's inability to diagnose Esther's writing problem runs parallel with the Rosenberg's being falsely judged of betraying their country. Both Esther and Ethel are accused without a deep analysis. It is patent that Esther begins her story with the Rosenberg's as they both face the same dilemma: being burned alive all along their nerves. It can be asserted that the claim that supports the idea that "*The Bell Jar* is a novel of descent into madness, uniquely female in viewpoint ... and circumstances"(Paterno 135) is not right, as it does not tell the story of Esther Greenwood as someone inherently

¹⁴ Through her heroine Plath sharply criticizes her culture and the medical world both of which were the extensions of the dominant political discourse of the Cold War America that socially and politically castrated women. Although instead of ECT there were many different options for psychiatric problems, ECT was used as a tool to brainwash the minds of the intellectuals. In relation to these Plath's case was not exceptional, as poets such as, Robert Lowell and Ann Sexton also stayed at McLean, and faced similar treatments. In addition, the term "Brainwashing" had first entered the American lexicon in the 1950's as a result of the Communist hysteria. One of the Cold War experts Eugene Kinkead defines the terms as "the total psychological weapon by means of which...Soviet Russia firmly expects to conquer the rest of the world"(9). However, brainwashing became a tool for psychological treatments in America rather than a toll of the Soviet Union.

mad, but how her culture labels her as mad. Therefore, because Plath emphasizes “the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts”(Jameson 1) in *The Bell Jar*, she describes the political traumas of her generation that resulted in psychological traumas. As Merjorie Perloff argues,

To label Esther as “schizophrenic” and leave it at that does not take us very far. For Sylvia Plath’s focus in *The Bell Jar* is not on mental illness per se, but on the relationship of Esther’s private psychosis to her larger social situation. Indeed, her dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject”(511).

After ECT, the emblem of Esther’s generation, which aims at causing a psychological trauma, Esther feels her watch replaced on her wrist, and it looks odd. In addition, the unfamiliar positioning of the hairpins makes Esther to feel that her natural life has already become an unnatural one that is controlled by not nature but by a simulacra. The asylum apparently turns into a Disneyland because As Baudrillard argues,

...everywhere in Disneyland the objective profile of America, down to the morphology of individuals and of the crowd, is drawn. All its values are exalted by the miniature and the comic strip. Embalmed and pacified. Whence the possibility of an ideological analysis of Disneyland....digest of the American way of life, panegyric of American values, idealized transposition of a contradictory reality. Certainly. But this masks something else and this “ideological” blanket functions as a cover for *a simulation of the third order*: Disneyland exists in order to hide that is the “real” country, all of “real” America that is Disneyland ...Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality & ideology but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real and thus of saving the reality principle.(12-13)

Therefore, the asylum is just like a simulacra, like Disneyland, which forces Esther to believe that what is real is her madness not her creativity. When Dr. Gordon asks Esther how she feels after ECT, she says that she feels good, but she feels absolutely terrible. At this crucial moment, Dr. Gordon again asks Esther the name of the college she attends, but this time he connects Esther’s college with war. “Ah!” Doctor Gordon’s face lighted with a slow, almost tropical smile. “They had a WAC station up there, didn’t they, during the war?”(162) Dr. Gordon’s association of Ester’s college with the war is quite significant in the sense that while American culture tries to uplift the generation through

education, it also tries to suffocate the same generation through regulations and ideologies that prevent democracy and freedom. One should remember that when Esther first visits Dr.'s office he immediately asks her the name of her college and that time he associates it with the young girls he remembers. The point is that female intellectuality is never associated with college as an intellectual aura, but with a place that is a pool full of fishes which are waiting to be hooked by males who are expected to be rich, and preferably studying in a medical profession both like Buddy Willard¹⁵ and Dr. Gordon. Hence it could be asserted that thousands of girls in the colleges are expected to find a male partner thanks to a college life that will have no use in a later married life. Hence, the reader faces with this absurdity, an education that is not a preparation for professional life but for motherhood and marriage. Therefore, it is not a surprise for the reader to read, "A few more shock treatments, Mrs. Greenwood," I heard Doctor Gordon say, "and I think you'll notice a wonderful improvement"(163).

Although Dr. Gordon does not do anything to diagnose Esther, he advises more shock treatments for material gain. The actual act of arbitrarily labeling people mad is self-fulfilling that is designated as mad become the definition of madness. Even Esther's mother states that her baby is not like the awful dead people at the hospital. In this respect, Esther associates her mother's discourse with Jay Cee, who is the editor of the magazine in which Esther works. At the hospital Esther remembers Jay Cee's question "*Doesn't your work interest you, Esther? You know, Esther, you've got the perfect set up of a true neurotic. You'll never get anywhere like that, you'll never get anywhere like that, you'll never get anywhere like that.*"(164). Through labeling Esther neurotic, Jay Cee, like the symbol of the patriarchal order Dr. Gordon, defines her as the 'Other' because the word neurotic, like mad, is just like another label that is put on the female body and psyche, as this is a form of strategy to keep women dependent on psychiatrists. As Simone de Beauvoir confirms,

History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence, their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other. This arrangement suited the economic

¹⁵ Buddy Willard is the emblem of the material, therefore, the external forces of Cold War America. As a popular medical student at Yale, at first sight Buddy strictly fits into the ideal picture of a young man. As a medical student, he is member of one of the most prestigious Ivy League colleges, which means an economically secure future for his wife. However, as an emblem of the age Esther immediately recognizes his false values and artificiality.

interests of the males; but it conformed also to their ontological and moral pretensions. Once the subject seeks to assert himself, the Other, who limits and denies him, is none the less a necessity to him: he attains himself only through that reality which he is not, which something other than himself only through that reality which he is not, which is something other than himself.(171)

Therefore, it is natural that, after echoing Jay Cee's comments, Esther remembers her creative writing professor at college who defines her story "Factitious." Later, Esther uses this word to define her situation at the hospital as "Factitious, artificial, sham"(BJ 164). After uttering these words, she again echoes the same sentence: "*You'll never get anywhere like that. I hadn't slept for twenty-one nights.*"(165). It is evident that it is the soul of Esther that is contaminated by the dominant ideology of her generation. Hence, the enemy is not within, but outside, in the social world that threatens the psychological health of the individual. However, it is patent that the Cold War ideology that labels Esther as mad, as the Other, does not achieve a suppression of Esther because, through her play of language, Esther deciphers that as

Appearing as the Other, woman appears at the same time as an abundance of being in contrast to that existence the nothingness of which man senses in himself; the Other, being regarded as the object in the eyes of the subject, is regarded as *en soi*; therefore as being. In woman is incarnated in positive form the lack that the existent carries in his heart, and it is in seeking to be made whole through her that man hopes to attain self-realization.(Beauvoir 173)

As Esther is not the one who is *lack*, in order to free herself from the artificial world she lives in, she decides to take a bus to Boston. In relation, if anxiety is both the key word of Cold War America and Esther's asylum days, it is crucial to focus on R.D. Laing's definition of "three forms of anxiety encountered by the ontologically insecure person: engulfment, implosion, petrification"(43). While focusing on the 'Engulfment,' he points out that,

the main manoeuvre used to preserve identity under pressure from the dread of engulfment is isolation. Thus, instead of the polarities of separateness and relatedness based on individual autonomy, there is the antithesis between complete loss of being by absorption into the other person (engulfment), and complete aloneness (isolation). (44).

Apparently, as a strategy, Esther uses engulfment, which helps her to isolate herself from the asylum, through going to Boston. Evidently, she manages to protect her identity in this way. At this phase of her journey, Esther's trip to Boston is quite significant

because she tries to return to the center of American nation where the first settlers came in the name of the essence of freedom and democracy. As a return to the aura of the founding fathers, it is not a coincidence that Esther comes across with her father. Esther meets a fat man in the ticket booth and he asks her where she is trying to go. She defines her feelings with the following words,

I could feel the tears start to spurt from the screwed-up the screwed-up nozzles of my eyes. "It's my *father*." The fat man consulted a diagram on the wall of his booth. "Here's how do you do," he said, "you take a car from that track over there and get off at Orient Heights and then hop a bus with The Point on it." He beamed at me. "I'll run you straight to the prison gate."(167)

The appearance of the father like an angel is quite symbolic. He appears both as an angel who will illuminate a new path, a new way to Esther, and as a figure who also symbolizes the return to the values that were born by the founding fathers. In the same episode, in order to intensify the sense of departure from the values of the founding fathers, Esther depicts the prison, the asylum that she has to enter into, as having "red brick buildings"(168).¹⁶ One of the workers at the hospital asks Esther: "How do you get into that prison?(168). He thinks that Esther might have stolen a car or robbed a store so that she can get into the hospital that promises "TV and plenty to eat"(169) in order to hypnotize the people who are kept in it. Hence, prison is the signifier of the hospital that acts as a simulacra offered to anaesthetise the creative organ. Plath's emphasis on television reminds the reader of Baurillard's comment on television. He claims that "...nothing resembles the control and telecommand headquarters of the nuclear power station more than TV studios..."(Baudrillard 53). Esther depicts the episode with the following remark,

I waited, as if the sea could make my decision for me. A second wave collapsed over my feet, lipped with white froth, and the chill gripped my ankles with a mortal ache. My flesh winced, in cowardice, from such a death. I picked up my pocketbook and started back over the cold stones to where my shoes kept their vigil in the violet light.(172)

The emphasis upon the water is an allusion to the return to the mother, the womb, in order to refresh both the soul and the body. In relation to this, Esther implicitly turns her face to the mother, the natural. In addition, the water signifies the unconscious

¹⁶ The color red is the illustrator of McCarthyism that is the dominant ideology of Esther's generation.

mind.¹⁷ Hence, it is not a surprise that Esther opens a chapter with this new sentence, “OF COURSE HIS MOTHER KILLED HIM”(173).

The chapter begins with a description by Esther of Jody and Cal, little boys, Esther’s mother and the cozy atmosphere that encapsulates the family. Esther portrays them as,

...After we ate, Jody and Mark ran down to the water hand-in-hand, and I lay back, staring into the sky, while Cal went on and on about this play. The only reason I remembered this play was because it had a mad person in it, and everything I had ever read about mad people stuck in my mind, while everything else flew out.(174)

Without a doubt, one of the most obvious discourses of the twentieth-century America is the concept of ‘madness.’ As a result of that Esther can only remember the play in relation to the idea of madness. This leads her to want to learn how the boy was killed by his mother. Although she remembers the story perfectly well, she wants Cal to retell the story. Cal says that the boy was killed by “morphia powders.” Then, Esther asks:

If you were going to kill yourself, how would you do it?” Cal seems pleased. “I’ve often thought of that. I’d blow my brains out with a gun.” I was disappointed. It was just like a man to do it with a gun. A fat chance of laying my hands on a gun. And even if I did, I wouldn’t have a clue as to what part of me to shoot at. I’d already read in the papers about people who’d tried to shoot themselves, only they ended up shooting an important nerve and getting paralyzed, or blasting their face off, but being saved, by surgeons and a sort of miracle, from dying outright. The risks of a gun seemed great.(176)

Evidently, Esther associates madness with death, or with urge that causes individuals to end their lives. Like the babies in the jars, Esther’s environment is walled in by the discourse of madness, especially in the case of individuals who try to purge themselves of that suffocating milieu. The significant point is that, when she meets with

¹⁷ The unconscious mind is a term invented by the eighteenth century German romantic philosopher Ser Christopher Riegel and later introduced into English by the poet and essayist Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Unconscious mind refers to the unconscious feelings, automatic skills, unnoticed perceptions, habits and automatic reactions hidden phobias, concealed desires which generally reveal themselves through night dreams. Unconscious is later defined as a “Storehouse” by Freud, who defines the unconscious as a storehouse that preserves painful emotions, unacceptable ideas, wishes or desires. In twentieth century Jacque Lacan’s claim that “the unconscious is structured like language” altered the definition of the unconscious mind. For further reading see, Jacques Lacan *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: Norton, 2006).

water, Esther echoes

I am I am I am. That morning I had tried to hang myself. I had taken the silk cord of my mother's yellow bathrobe as soon as she left for work, and, in the amber shade of the bedroom, fashioned it into a knot that slipped up and down on itself. It took me a long time to do this, because I was poor at knots and had no idea how to make a proper one.(178)¹⁸

Because the houses' ceilings are low she cannot actually kill herself. She calmly continues depicting her case with the following statement,

...After a discouraging time of walking about with the silk cord dangling from my neck like a yellow cat's tail and finding no place to fasten it, I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and tried pulling the cord tight. But each time I would get the cord so tight I could feel a rushing in my ears and a flush of blood in my face, my hands would weaken and let go, and I would be all right again...And when people found out my mind had gone, as they would have to, sooner or later, in spite of my mother's guarded tongue, they would persuade her to put me into an asylum where I could be cured. Only my case was incurable. I had bought a few paperbacks on abnormal psychology at the drug store and compared my symptoms with the symptoms in the books, and sure enough, my symptoms tallied with the most hopeless cases. (179)

Ironically, Esther alludes to the popular psychology books¹⁹ of her age that generally label women as hopeless cases, as women like Esther are aware enough to resist being forced into a picture of reality that had no part in creating. In relation, after the hanging fiasco, Esther begins to think about what would happen if she returned to face the doctors. However, she immediately remembers Dr. Gordon and "his private shock machine"(179) she says, "Once I was locked up they could use that on me all the time"(179). She further comments,

They would want me to have the best of care at first, so they would sink all their

¹⁸ That famous line of Plath is literally significant in many ways. First, Esther's repetition of "I am" is a performative act of a confirmation of her own identity that she has tried to separate from the pressures of the dominant ideology. Second, it is an act of self-actualization, the return to the true self. Third, that kind of self-actualization becomes the basis of many of the Plath's poems.

¹⁹ During the Cold War Years Sigmund Freud's works were widely read in order to focus on abnormal psychology. For further reading see Sigmund Freud. *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. (London: Penguin, 2002). Although R.D. Laing's famous work *The Divided Self* was one of the most popular psychology books of Plath's age, which was also enthusiastically read by Plath, as opposed to the other psychology books, it successfully portrays the traumas of Cold War America.

money in a private hospital like Doctor Gordon's. Finally, when the money was used up, I would be moved to a state hospital, with hundreds of people like me, in a big cage in the basement. The more hopeless you were, the further away they hid you.(180)

Although the tragedy of Cold War America that forces Esther to carry the letter "M" in her social life, seems to be only Esther's trauma, it is also the trauma of not only twentieth century but also of twenty first century America. Elizabeth Wurtzel in her national best-seller work *The Prozac Nation*²⁰ observes,

...There's nothing I want, nothing I can use. As far as I can tell, the sweatpants and pajama top I have had on since I got back from England will never be peeled off of my body again. I have to remember to leave a note telling them that this is what I want to wear in my coffin, this is my ten-feet-under attire. Because I'll have no occasion to change my outfit from this day forward: Bathing seems like an exercise in futility, like making my bed or brushing my teeth or combing my hair. Clean the slate, then let it get sullied once more. Wipe it down, and wait for more filth. This inevitable pattern of progress and regress, which is really what life is all about, is too absurd for me to continue. The moment in *The Bell Jar* when Esther Greenwood realizes after thirty days in the same black turtleneck that she never wants to wash her hair again, that the repeated necessity of the act is too much trouble, that she wants to do it once and be done with it, seems like the book's true epiphany. You know you've completely descended into madness when the matter of shampoo has ascended to philosophical heights. So far as I'm concerned, the last shower I took is the last shower I will ever take.(292)

Sylvia Plath also writes in her journals, "To get up, brush teeth, wash face, and begin again in the merciless daylight, all the rituals of dressing that our culture subscribes to"("Journals" 50). It can be asserted that for Plath, rejecting washing her hair, is just a passive resistance to the social norms of her culture. That may be the reason why Esther rejects washing her hair as a reaction to Cold war ideology that portrayed women as shop dummies. As a final resort Esther remembers her mother's idea that the cure for thinking too much about yourself is helping somebody who is worse off than you are. Therefore, Teresa, who is Esther's aunt's sister-in law and also her family doctor, arranges for her to sign on as a volunteer at their local hospital.

²⁰ "Prozac" is the name of the anti-depressant that has been prescribed to most of the Americans in twenty-first century.

Esther's job at the hospital is "to put the right vases at the right beds in the right rooms"(182). However, while she is walking with her trolley full of flowers, she notices that the flowers in the rooms of the mothers are dead. She says: "It would be discouraging for a woman who'd just had a baby to see somebody plunk down a big bouquet of dead flowers in front of her, so I steered the trolley to a washbasin in an alcove in the hall and began to pick out all the flowers that were dead.(182) She immediately decides to change the dead ones with the fresh ones. Plath's juxtaposition of the dead and the live flowers is quite significant in the sense that women are associated with flowers that are cut off from their roots and turned into ornaments that are exploited and whose intellectual and creative capacities are then thrown away, just like the flowers. In addition to the flowers, another juxtaposition is rebirth and death. While the female body is naturally associated with rebirth through giving birth, on the other hand, they lose their freedom as they are not women anymore, but mothers. The women at the hospital "...were all sitting up and knitting or rifling through magazines or putting their hair in pin curls and chattering like parrots in a parrot house"(BJ 183). After describing the life of the women at the hospital, Esther moves on another story and the first sentence is "Which way is the graveyard?"(184). It is clear that, Esther associates the flowers with the dead bodies of women who have become the slaves of women's magazines. The significance of this beginning lies in the fact that Esther associates the women of her generation with the dead flowers and the dead bodies in the graveyard. She apparently does not want to be one of them. Hence, at short intervals she thinks of killing herself. Then Esther combines her metaphoric death as a woman with her father's death. She shares her feelings about her father with the reader.²¹ Hence, the strong emotional tone of her novel is far from a "poet's casebook." In the same episode, Esther visits her father's graveyard for the first time. In *The Bell Jar* Esther brings to her fathers graveyard "azaleas"(188) just like Plath, who wrote her poem "Electra on Azalea's Path." She shares her feelings with the reader

...Then I remembered that I had never cried for my father's death. My mother hadn't cried either. She had just smiled and said what a merciful thing it was for him he had died, because if he had lived he would have been crippled and an invalid for life, and he couldn't have stood that, he would rather have died than had that happen. I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss

²¹ Furthermore, if the reader should associate Sylvia Plath with Esther, it must be underlined that Sylvia shares her feelings about her father for the first time so intensely. The loss of her father that she strictly both embraces and rejects is shared for the first time with the reader.

into the cold salt rain.(188-189)

After she has visited her father's grave, she begins to tell the story of her second suicide attempt, the story which had already been written in the journals of Sylvia Plath. In the novel Esther describes her attempt with the following words, "I turned on the tap and poured myself a tall glass of water. Then I took the glass of water and the bottle of pills and went down into the cellar"(190).

It is significant to remember that, at the beginning of the chapter, Esther's association with the water and the return to the mother are both related with death and rebirth. As Marilyn Yalom comments, women writers have

...appropriated literary insanity for their own ends and have endowed it with specifically female parameters. Many have emphasized the gender-related aspects of mental illness....The best of these works possess a symbolic structure beyond the narrative line, with levels of meaning that elucidate the female situation in particular and the human condition in general. Thus, Sylvia Plath's story of her breakdown and recovery in *The Bell Jar* is simultaneously a pre-feminist exposé of the adverse effects of sexist culture on American women in the 1950s and...a pan-human myth of death and rebirth.(2)

Apparently, it is not a coincidence that the last line of the chapter ends with "Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep"(191). The sleep that Esther passes into is the deep sleep that Esther's generation is forced to live in, and the deep darkness is the only thing that is provided by the dominant ideology. That's the reason why chapter fourteen starts with "IT WAS COMPLETELY DARK. I felt the darkness, but nothing else ..."(192) and Esther cries, "MOTHER!"(193). After Esther has shouted, she says that she cannot see, and later she mentions that "A cherry voice spoke out of the dark. "There are lots of blind people in the world. You'll marry a nice blind man someday"(193). Then, Esther combines this voice with the depiction of Philomela Guinea's²² "black Cadillac"(208). The black Cadillac, apparently, signifies power in the sense that the color black implies wealth, dominance and strength. In addition, as the Cadillac is an emblem of prosperity in America, Esther states that, "Philomela Guinea's black Cadillac eased through the tight, five o'clock traffic like a

²² What is significant is the reality that Sylvia Plath recreates Olive Higgins Prouty in *The Bell Jar*, who helped her financially to organize her treatment at McLean, which was the hospital where Sylvia Plath spent some time recovering after her suicide attempt. Elizabeth Wurtzel, Olive Higgins Prouty and many other famous intellectuals also stayed at McLean

ceremonial car”(208). Cadillac’s symbolism in American culture is reflected upon by Esther, as throughout the Cold War years, American culture tried to combat the Soviet Union’s self-promoting propaganda through by portraying itself as a culture that was both materially and spiritually rich. While the spiritual richness was meant to be fostered by strong family ties, the material richness was equivocated with having the most luxurious life not as a super power, but as the greatest super power. The luxurious life that Esther portrays through Philomela, is intensified by her depiction of Philomela’s car: “In front of me I could see the Spam-colored expanse of the chauffeur’s neck, sandwiched between a blue cap and the shoulders of a blue jacket and, next to him, like a frail, exotic bird, the silver hair and emerald-feathered hat of Philomela Guinea, the famous novelist”(208). The color silver that signifies the dominant ideology of Cold War America, foretells the power of the ideology that Esther has tried to combat. In addition, although Miss. Guinea seems to be as strong as she is materially rich, she is psychologically traumatized by her culture because as Esther shares with her reader, “All I knew was that she had interested herself in my case and that at one time, at the peak of her career, she had been in an asylum as well”(208).

After reading Esther’s suicide attempt in the newspapers, Mrs. Guinea sent a telegram to Esther’s mother from the Bahamas. What is significant is that she immediately asks,

“Is there a boy in the case?”(209). Esther’s mother responds to her that the problem is Esther thinks that she cannot write again. Mrs. Guinea comes to Boston and takes Esther to a private hospital which has “golf courses and gardens, like a country club”(209).

Apparently, Mrs. Guinea does not diagnose Esther in the same way as Dr. Gordon, who champions classical psychological treatments that label intellectuals mad. The most significant point is that, as an intellectual electrocuted by the dominant ideology, as Mrs. Greenwood writes to Olive Prouty, “Esther thinks she will never write again”(209). It is apparent that Esther symbolizes here the female intellectuals of her generation, who could not write due to the stifling environment they had to live with. The word ‘writing’ most probably acted as a spur for Mrs. Guinea to understand the creative trauma which Esther has had to combat. As a result, Mrs. Guinea takes Esther away from the city hospital, and takes her to a private hospital that has “golf courses and gardens, like a country club...”(209) However, Esther is quite sure that even this top quality private hospital will not help her. She clearly indicates that her problem is not so simple that it can be cured by a private hospital,

I knew I should be grateful to Mrs. Guinea, only I couldn't feel a thing. If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air.(209)

As Esther further comments, “I sank back in the gray, plush seat and closed my eyes. The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn't stir”(210). What must be highlighted is the fact that Esther begins to repeat the existence of ‘the bell jar’ again and again, although she is being taken to a private hospital that is completely different from the one she has been in recently. However, she feels the stale air of the bell jar much more than at any other time. Why Esther feels herself suffocated more and more lays in the fact that Esther will find herself at the very center of the simulacra she has tried to escape. As a private hospital, the center of capitalism, embodies the very epitomy of the values that Esther wants to escape.

It can be assumed that the illusionary atmosphere of the hospital in the Cold War America is the amalgamation of all the influence of Esther's generation. The asylum she is taken into is the same as the life that her generation faces. At first sight everything seems to be perfect, the golf areas, and the alluring social activities that are designed to be enjoyed by the patients, just like Disneyland. However, the main aim of the asylum is to numb the patients more and more placing them under the same bell jar in order to make them believe that the outside world is unreal. However, outside and inside are almost the same and this fact negates the social space that the patients may create to cure themselves. As a result, through the negation of the creation of the social space, *The Bell Jar* portrays how the creative capacity of the intellectual mind is destroyed.

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