

SEX AND SUCCESS

A Feminist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Agnese Boffano

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Abstract

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Author: Agnese Boffano

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Institutions: Department of Languages and Literatures

Supervisor: Margrét Gunnarsdóttir Champion

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Summary:

Sexuality is an subject area that affects the power relations between genders, where one gender uses sex to subjugate and control the other. Sylvia Plath comments on this use of sexuality in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, while also criticising how sex is used to limit women's success but used to enhance men's success. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, wishes to convey to her audience how sexuality for women should not be perceived as a taboo and should be praised as much as men's sexuality is. Therefore, this essay is based on the thesis that Sylvia Plath criticises the sexual hierarchy present in the novel's contexts and its arbitrary role in social and career advancement of women. The focus of this essay is to examine the double standards present in Esther's American society of the 1950s, how sexuality is used to control the female gender, and finally what Plath believes should be done to eliminate this gap.

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1: <i>Sexual Politics</i> and <i>The Bell Jar</i>	
1.1 Kate Millett and Sylvia Plath	6
1.2 Temperament	6
1.3 Sex Role	9
Chapter 2: Female Sexuality	
2.1 A Sexual Dichotomy	11
2.2 Marriage and Virginity	13
2.3 Work and Success	16
2.4 Feminine Sexuality	18
Chapter 3: Male Sexuality	
3.1 Great (sexual) Expectations	22
3.2 The Phallic Cult	25
3.3 Work and Success	27
Conclusion	29
Bibliography	31

Introduction

Feminist literature is very much concerned with criticising gender inequality in its present society and takes the act of reading such literature as a political act to enact change. In the midst of Third Wave Feminism, there are still unresolved feminist concerns that were brought up in the previous centuries that are relevant today. As feminist criticism has become more influential with time, scholars have begun revisiting texts from previous centuries with the hope of breaking down the inequalities present in past societies.

Sylvia Plath, one of the most successful poets of the postwar era, is considered a leading figure of the literary aspect of the Second Wave Feminist Movement. Known mostly as a confessional poet, Plath's work is full of both vivid personal and societal criticism, enabling the reader to empathise with her eloquent prose. From her earlier poetry in *Colossus* (1960) to her poetry collection *Ariel* (1965), published two years after her death, her work has been extremely influential. Her poetry has been studied extensively from a feminist perspective, as she criticises the oppressive society she found herself at mid century. Given that her work is still relevant today, so too can her criticism be helpful to feminist readers of the 21st century.

Although Plath's poetry has been extensively studied, not as much attention has been devoted to her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. Suffering from depression that eventually led to her suicide in 1963, a few weeks after the publishing of her novel, this work has been darkened in light of this event and not much attention has been paid to the humorous commentaries the novel touches upon. Some studies that have looked at this novel from a purely fictional and comical point of view have touched upon the role of, for example, sexuality in the development of the protagonist but not how it affects women in the private sphere and workfield. However, I believe there is as much to be gained from analysing her novel as from her collection of poetry.

The different settings of *The Bell Jar* give rise to numerous interpretations and points of discussions that are worth analysing. Esther Greenwood begins her story during an internship working at a fashion magazine in New York alongside other women who want to become anything from successful businesswomen to secretaries. The plot later progresses to her moving back to her hometown and developing serious symptoms of depression that eventually lead to her attempted suicide. After a series of shock therapy sessions at a mental hospital, she then returns to college and leaves the audience with an open ending as to whether her health has indeed improved or not. All of these locations have various recurring

themes in common which Esther criticises, one of these being the unequal treatment of the genders based on their sexuality. Whether from her difficulties in finding a suitable career, the various pretentious Yale students she encounters or her psychologist's inability to listen to her thoughts, sexuality is the red thread that links all the struggles the female protagonist has to face.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyze the criticism evident in the novel regarding the social construction of female sexuality and its arbitrary role in career and social advancement as opposed to the sexual freedom evident in men and how it allows them to be successful in both social and work environments. More specifically, this essay will attempt to answer the following questions regarding sexuality in the two genders as expressed in the novel; what are the sexual expectations for both women and men? How do these sexual differences allow for the domination of one gender and the subjugation of the other? What is the relationship between sexuality and success in the workforce? What does Plath suggest as a solution to the problem of using sexuality to establish control?

This essay explores the theoretical work of Kate Millett in her 1969 book¹ *Sexual Politics*, which talks about the role of sexuality in establishing a sexual hierarchy. Amongst other theories, she claims that there are two main aspects in society that facilitate the misuse of sex to establish dominance over the female gender; temperament and sex role. I find these aspects being criticised in Sylvia Plath's novel as well. With sexuality as a recurring theme in *The Bell Jar*, and the two works being published in the same decade, the two feminist works have many ideas in common but are, I believe, expressed in different ways. Therefore, this paper looks at the theories Millett proposes and applies them to the semi-autobiography with the hope of validating Plath's fiction as a real-life criticism of the 1950-1970s approach to sex.

Apart from Millett's central part of this essay, other theoretical feminist sources that will be used to analyse *The Bell Jar* are Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Ronald B. de Sousa and Kathryn Pauly Morgan's *Philosophy, Sex and Feminism*, as well as a Case Study from the Netherlands that looks at the relationship between work and sexuality. More specifically to do with the novel, Linda Wagner-Martin's *The Bell Jar - A Novel of the Fifties* and Tim Kendall's *Sylvia Plath - A Critical Study* will be used as basis for analysis. Both of these scholars, though writing from different decades, outline the context of the fifties and the hierarchy that was visible at the time - both in the private sphere of the home and its social

¹ Originally published as her PhD dissertation, but later published as a book.

context. Moreover, they both point out how sexuality was viewed at the time and touch upon its effect on both genders in relation to the novel. It is only recently that sexuality has been analysed in Plath's work and, research including "Sexualization of Mental Illness" published in 2017 by Patricia Ann Grisafi and Kate A. Baldwin's "The Radical Imaginary of the Bell Jar" (2004) will also be referred to in this paper.

Serving as a theoretical background to feminist ideas with regards to sexuality, the first chapter will be devoted to comparing Millett's two aspects of sex in society - temperament and sex role - and their manifestations in *The Bell Jar*, portraying whether a sexual hierarchy is present in the context of the novel. The effects of such a hierarchy are then developed in the second chapter, which is devoted to female sexuality alone and how society's taboo of sex affects their chances of success. Then, the same process is applied to male sexuality and how, on the other hand, society's acceptance of their sexuality allows them to have more chances of success in the workforce and more dominance in the private sphere. Lastly, in the conclusion I summarise the main arguments of the essay and reflect on the conclusion in relation to the research questions.

Chapter 1: *Sexual Politics* and *The Bell Jar*

1. Kate Millett and Sylvia Plath

Written in 1970, Kate Millett's work *Sexual Politics* aims to expose the patriarchal use of sex in a study of literary texts to establish dominance over the other gender. From the works of D.H. Lawrence to Henry Miller, Millett criticises their male-dominated view of sex in literature and brings our attention to the misrepresentation of sexuality in such texts. However interesting these 'uncoverings' of canonical literature may be, I will concentrate on her second chapter, namely her theories of sexual politics. In this chapter, Millett suggests two main ideological concepts (temperament and sex role) which, if present in a society, encourage the use of sex to establish dominance and display the existence of a sexual hierarchy.

As a theoretical background to *The Bell Jar*, the first chapter aims to analyse these concepts in relation to Sylvia Plath's novel to see whether she also aims to expose this sexual hierarchy in her own context. More specifically, by applying the ideas of temperament and sex role to the protagonist's critiques in the novel, a relationship between the sexual hierarchy and success will be made; if a hierarchy is present where the men are on top, women cannot succeed. Furthermore, the aim with this chapter is to identify the double standards present in society as portrayed in the novel.

Both Millett and Plath highlight the importance of considering sexuality as a political² instrument since both authors recognise that sexuality is directly representative of the public sphere. Sousa and Morgan point out "the extent to which public ideology permeates allegedly private experience" (3). To quote their own example, a country's laws regarding supposedly private institutions (such as marriage) reflect its society's ideology; for example, countries where marital rape is still permissible today tend to be permeated by a patriarchal ideology.

2. Temperament

The first concept mentioned in Millett's dissertation is *temperament*, defined as "involv[ing] the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category" (Millett 26).

These lines of temperament are dictated by the dominant (male) group, labeling what they

² Here I am using Millett's definition of "political" referring "to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (23)

praise most about themselves as ‘masculine’ and how they wish the subordinate group to act as ‘feminine’. Masculine traits would include “aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy” while feminine traits are along the line of “passivity, ignorance, docility, ‘virtue,’ and ineffectuality”. Any male or female that does not comply to their corresponding description is prevented from being accepted in society.

For women, these assigned traits create a view of women as incompetent and unintelligent, therefore not making them eligible for a successful career. In fact, sexuality is not only reflective of ideology but of the workforce as well. If an entire gender is coined to be incompetent, then they are dependently incompetent to pursue a career. Overall, “throughout Western thought and practice women have been regarded as less rational than men either because their intelligence is seen simply as lesser in degree or inferior in kind” (Sousa & Morgan).

This unfair categorization of femininity is something Esther criticises from the time working at the fashion magazine to the end of the novel. Esther realises how women are categorised not from biological differences, but entirely based on cultural ideologies. She struggles to conform with societal expectations of women, criticising the limited options on offer for them especially when it comes to a career path. When Jay Cee asks her what she would like to be when she ‘grows up’, Esther finds it difficult to choose one option alone and compares her situation to a fig tree, each fig representing a different path where “choosing one meant losing all the rest” (Plath 73). The protagonist realises that women do not have the social liberty to flow around this sexual hierarchy and as she cannot choose which of the already-decided paths she should take, “the figs began to wrinkle and go black [and] plopped to the ground at my feet” (73).

From Dodo Conway, the suburban housewife with six children, to the virginal heroine in the cliché technicolour movie, women in the 1950s of *The Bell Jar* are constantly bombarded with images of females who comply to these temperament traits, reminding them to aim for this path in life. Consequently, male figures like Buddy have accepted the temperament descriptions above and do not acknowledge Esther’s abilities as an educated woman as the female gender is ‘tempered’ to be incompetent. For example, through Esther’s flashbacks of Buddy, it becomes clear that he dismisses her poetry as being the work of a novice, but when he attempts to write poetry he believes himself to be an accomplished writer (despite Esther criticising its quality). Because society believed men to have more positive qualities than women, Buddy thinks he is more capable of writing poetry than Esther.

This stereotyping of qualities is evident in more recent research, which has continued to portray society's fixation with the "instrumental qualities" of man as opposed to the "more expressive-oriented" women when it comes to career (Vianen and Willemssen 472). In a case study conducted in 1992, Vianen and Willemssen show that these sexual descriptions attributed to the two genders do affect their chances of success at work. More than 30 years after the publishing of the novel and of Millett's dissertation, they too argue that the "structure of industrial [and let me add capitalist] society is highly segregated by sex" (471).

In this experiment, both genders had the same qualifications and applied for the same academic job while the employers 'rated' their personal characteristics. When males applied for a job, their selected positive attributes were daring, logical, rational and confident while the female positive attributes were thoughtful, understanding, warm and gentle. The decision as to which candidate should be chosen was based on a theoretical ideal candidate which, coincidentally, had supposedly more 'masculine' traits. If the male candidates pass the company's own version of Millett's masculine temperament descriptions, they have a good chance of being hired before the females. Finally, the table below shows that despite the female candidates having more positive features (scientific interests, job motivation, personal presentation) than men (having one less positive feature: work experience, knowledge), the

Table 4
Mean Evaluation of Male and Female Candidates

	Male candidates	Female candidates	Total
Work experience	2.14	2.57	2.31
Knowledge	2.05	2.30	2.15
Scientific interests	1.97	1.83	1.90
Job motivation	1.65	1.62	1.64
Personal presentation	1.97	1.96	1.97
Expected success in the job	2.14	2.33	2.22
Expected acceptance by colleagues	2.05	2.08	2.07
Expected feelings of comfortability in the job	2.14	2.25	2.18
Tendency to accept the candidate	2.70	2.91	2.78

(1 = good, 5 = poor).

male candidates were still hypothesized to perform better at their work.

No matter how valuable the women's credentials are, or how educated or intelligent they may be, this study portrays how society's stereotypes will prevail before any factual evidence.

3. Sex Role

The second concept Millett introduces is sex role, “which decrees a consonant and highly elaborate code of conduct, gesture and attitude for each sex” (26). She continues to discuss the sex role of work, where each gender is assigned certain kinds of jobs; women are “assign[ed] domestic service and attendance upon infants” while “the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to [men]” (Millett 26). Just as class is divided according to their societal prestige, certain jobs are also deemed more prestigious than others. Often, work with a high pay and roles of decision-making are assigned to masculine temperaments and are therefore ‘sex typed’ as masculine. Since women are placed in occupations where (according to society) they are lower down in the sexual hierarchy, it ‘excuses’ control of the male-dominated work force over the female one. As Millett explains, “the function of the male’s antipathy is to provide a means of control over a subordinate group and a rationale which justifies the inferior station of those in a lower order” (47). This rationale normalises the infamous position of an important businessman using their sexual masculine temperament to establish dominance over, for example, his female secretary.

If we use the symbol of the secretary to portray (not a demeaning job per se) the sexual relationship between herself and her boss, then Esther herself decides that she does not want to become a secretary. As she explains, “[t]he trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters” (Plath 72) and she hates that all the women working with her at the fashion magazine become “secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hang around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other” (Plath 4). For them, the final goal is to work in a position inferior but still close to successful men in order to use their diminished sexuality to eventually marry them. Plath can be seen to criticise the female version of the capitalist idea of ‘working yourself up’ as ‘marrying yourself up’ therefore presenting their own virginity as the female equivalent of ‘attractive credentials’.

Here again there is a link to the importance of sexuality as explained in Millett’s *Sexual Politics*. Women are made to follow just one path in life and despite their intelligence, education, race or class, their only desirable trait is their (lack of) sexuality³. In this case, Sylvia Plath criticises both men’s use of sexual experience to control women and women’s

³ See chapter 2.4

need of lack of sexuality in order to succeed. Thus, women have to constantly struggle to get to the top of this sexual hierarchy saturated by double standards in order to succeed in the workforce. There are “a staggering number of incidents in which the caste of virility triumphs over the social status of wealthy or even educated women” (Millett 36), showing that men and females who have the same education, background and interest are not treated on the same level because men will always have a ‘sexual advantage’. Their sex role has given men an advantage for centuries so that even today, in our own society, we talk about certain fields of work and research as being mainly male-dominated and we picture certain jobs as belonging solely to men.

Since certain jobs are fashioned for women and others are fashioned for men, jobs labelled as masculine or feminine limit the chance of the other sex entering into that field. This sex typing is used not only to limit women but also to ‘emasculate’ men or to make them feel inferior in the sexual hierarchy. For example, seeing as nursing and housewifery were both sex typed as feminine in the context of the 1950s, there was a need to specify that the employer was a *male*-nurse and not a regular female nurse, and that the housewife was actually a stay-at-home-dad. This not only implies that nurses and house[people] tended to be female but also came with negative effeminate connotations for the male. Likewise for the female, there was a need to specify that it was actually a *female* doctor or a *female* professor as opposed to just a doctor or a professor. Therefore, “[b]ecause the feminine set of attributes is commonly regarded as typical of women, it is plausible that women are less likely to be selected for jobs which are sex typed as masculine” (Van Vianen and Willemsen 487).

Chapter 2: Female Sexuality

Esther's conflicts regarding her sexuality can be seen to usher in a new era for women's sexual independence while society still not accepting such rights. Therefore, Sylvia Plath expresses women's concerns for their sexuality through Esther who, as she meets various characters and challenges, realises society's expectations about female sexuality. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to identify these double standards and limited options for women, acknowledging the difficulties these pose for women when it comes to their career, independence and freedom of expression.

1. A Sexual Dichotomy

Women's 'correct' temperament and behaviour is a widely discussed issue even today. Sylvia Plath criticises how women's expectations are already planned, expectations which according to Millett are based on "an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs" (Millett 46). In the context of *The Bell Jar* and the North America of the 1950s, women could either be seen as docile, virginal and almost angelic girls or as sinful, sexually active women, with no possibility of being placed in between those two extremes. Society rewarded women who chose the first path and punished the one who identified herself as the latter category by degrading and demeaning her in society. Millett describes that the purpose of having a dichotomy in which to place women

is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron, and in the present between career woman and housewife. One envies the other her 'security' and prestige, while the envied yearns beyond the confines of respectability for what she takes to be the other's freedom, adventure, and contact with the great world (Millett 38)

Baldwin expands on this idea of a binary classification as being very common in the time when the novel was written as it was shaped by Cold War ideology (where U.S. was set against Soviet; liberalism against totalitarianism) where there was a general need to belong to a category and, preferably, the 'good category' that would be linked to everything American capitalism stood for. This dichotomy is something that is expected of women and a categorization that Esther struggles with because she would want to belong to more than one category; "Esther's search for selfhood through the dramatically opposed lives of poetry and

motherhood offer us a character who throws herself against the limited options available to her” (Baldwin 24-5).

Throughout the novel, there are many instances of dichotomies that generally represent societal views of what is good and evil. Most notably, with the opening of the book, the two characters who work alongside Esther at the magazine, Betsy and Doreen. If Esther chooses to befriend Betsy, she would fit in safely with all the other College Board members aspiring to become secretaries. Doreen, on the other hand, takes Esther to diverse social establishments and introduces her to a variety of men, which would perhaps lead Esther into a life of hazardous sexual experience. These two women are very much reflective of their own society, where even in movies this dichotomy of whore and virgin is represented. The favourable opportunity that women are presented with is portrayed by Betsy, with a “Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile [...] smiling out of those ‘P.Q.’s wife wears B.H. Wragge’ ads” (Plath 6), who would end up marrying a successful man and become a housewife.

Women grow up knowing what society expects them to become and what ending is waiting for them. When Esther goes to see a technicolour movie of a typical high school football romance, she finds herself predicting the end; “I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along” (Plath 9). The two girls cast in the movie portray the consequences of playing the part of the good girl and the bad girl respectively, where the “sexy black-haired girl who looked like Elizabeth Taylor” (Plath 38) is punished because she was too sexual. Or, rather, she was as sexual as her male counterpart – the only difference being that at the end of the movie the girl is humiliated while the boy “was now packing off to Europe on a single ticket” (Plath 39). Whether from the cliché movie or from food poisoning from the food at *Ladies’ Day*, Esther falls sick.

To highlight the sexual opposite of ‘the matron’ is Doreen, described as wearing “these full-length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through, and dressing-gowns the colour of sin [...] with an interesting, slightly sweaty smell” (Plath 5). A few hours after a sexual encounter with a disc jockey, Doreen sits in her own vomit outside Esther’s room and asks her for help. Esther finds this image of the previously sexy, controlled female disturbing. Because society has been teaching and viewing women with a sexual activity as active as that of most males as something ‘not normal’, Esther too sees this disturbing image as sick; “Esther connects Doreen’s sexual excess with physical illness and begins to contemplate how interior disorder, mostly hidden, occasionally can slip out and disturb performances of femininity and health” (Grisafi 2). Through Doreen’s intoxication, Esther’s view of sexuality

is unsettled and results in her being afraid of the possible consequences of sexual activity for women.

After seeing the vulnerability of Doreen after her sexual liaison with Lenny Shepherd, having lead her (rather than to a flock of sheep as his name would suggest) to the path of a mistress, Esther reflects on the consequences of women's sexual experimentation. Doreen's consequence is that all the other girls at the magazine cease to take her seriously because of what society pictures her to be. Since she chooses the second path, society degrades her. Her title is no longer that of a successful fashionista, but that of mischievous mistress. As Esther's mother's favorite magazine relates, a woman who has sexual relations outside of marriage would have no chance at success because "as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men" (Plath 77). It is assumed that for men, sexuality is a natural instinct they have to live with. Women, on the other hand, are pictured as animals if they practice sex out of marriage. As a Yale student tells Esther, "if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business" (Plath 75). In this case, any sex at all is associated as dirty when it is done by women.

2. Marriage and Virginity

During Esther's young adult life, the pressure for women to marry was inescapable. No matter how successful, independent or intelligent a woman may be, after her 30s the single woman would be labeled a spinster and have no economic stability as well as no social status. Wagner-Martin states that in the United States of the 1950s the average age for women to marry was 20.3 and describes how Plath was critical of this societal pressure that only fell on women. Working at a fashion magazine in New York, Esther sees how "women's magazines cynically teach girls the art of 'catching' a husband like flypaper catching flies" (de Beauvoir 447) and how "young readers were given articles with such titles as 'Are You Worth Dating?' and 'The Toughest Customer in the World Is the Man Who Doesn't Want to Marry.'" (Wagner-Martin 4-5). These reflect the cliché belief that the only way a woman could be happy is if she was married – a path that Esther takes into consideration but which at times makes her sick. She does not want to give up her dream of becoming a poet just because society requires of her to become a wife and a mother.

Women in her family have chosen the path of housewifery and motherhood, which makes it impossible for Esther to find other role models; her mother and Buddy's mother follow the familiar storyline of young women who approach an educational career but give it all up to settle down; "[they] had gone to school together and then both married their professors and settled down in the same town" (Plath 54). Since society only accepts this path, Esther lies to her female friends from college announcing her near engagement with Buddy (even though she cannot stand the idea of marrying a hypocrite) so they would stop pleading for her to find a suitable husband instead of studying; "[i]t is the best of both worlds in a world that, as *The Bell Jar* shows, is not arranged to allow women freedom, choice, or happiness" (Wagner-Martin 34). Even at home as she is finished with her internship in New York and enters a summer of solitude and depression, Dodo Conway's image of her six children haunts Esther as she boasts about her social situation, reminding Esther that unless she too chooses to devote her life to husband and child-bearing she will have no life.

One of the main issues Esther faces when picturing marriage is that she does not want to subdue her femininity, sexuality or career opportunities which she knows she will have to do if she settles down. Esther "does not want to marry and never have a career, but neither does she want to be some stereotype of the unfulfilled ('unwomanly') spinster" (Wagner-Martin 4). As she reflects in the novel, her choices are all ripe figs where "choosing one meant losing all the rest", but as she becomes indecisive as to which one she wants, "the figs began to wrinkle and go black [... and] they plopped to the ground at my feet" (Plath 73). Society of the 1950s does not offer women the possibility of choosing more than one fig at a time, and even limits their chances of selecting the figs that have nothing to do with housewifery and motherhood. For Esther, however, housewifery is compared to the beautiful kitchen mat which Mrs Willard, Buddy's mother, spends days to create and which gets destroyed and stepped on by her husband because her role then "was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs Willard's kitchen mat" (Plath 80). No matter how much effort a woman may give to something, it always becomes unnecessary and unwanted. Nevertheless, women are made to believe that this is what they should want; as Mrs Willard calmly explains to Esther, "[w]hat a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from" (Plath 67).

Sexuality is a very delicate matter when it comes to marriage. Esther knows that if she chooses to lose her virginity, her chances at finding a suitable husband may diminish. Society's image of female sexuality, therefore, is reduced to a very Freudian approach where "sexual satisfaction was gained through a woman's desire for motherhood" (Wagner 5). The

model of sexiness is a desexualized mother, whose sexual activity is devoted to one male partner only. Millett claims that by desexualizing women who are single, the patriarchy is able to establish their dominance in the private sphere. For the patriarchy, family “is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole” (Millett 33). By allowing men to be sexual while the married and single women to become completely desexualised, the men are able to establish dominance in the gender relationship.

If sex is used by men to establish dominance over the female gender, then virginity is used to limit women’s chances of success. Portrayed as something to be protected, virginity was seen as a good sign of a package being received intact. If a woman’s virginity is endowed with great importance, and lack thereof is punished, then patriarchy can control women’s chances of success through their (lack of) sexuality. Millett claims that defloration on the female’s part comes with (physical and mental) suffering, while for the male it is a means to establish social interest and prestige. Although Dr Norian allows Esther access to sexual freedom by prescribing contraception, the incident when she loses her virginity is a painful experience for both the protagonist and the reader. Her haemorrhage is analogous to the consequences many women faced when losing their virginity in the 1950s and 1960s, while no blame or social aftermath affected the male.

In fact, *The Bell Jar* portrays how sexuality carries consequences solely for women. Esther, like many women are lead to believe, should remain chaste and protect their ‘honour’ until marriage. Men’s sexuality, on the other hand, is openly accepted and praised; especially in the workforce and the family context⁴. Esther does not mind that Buddy has had an affair with a waitress and is no longer a virgin, but it bothers her that he does not criticise the existing double standards, if they were to marry, of her needing to be chaste while he would not need to be a virgin. Perhaps coming from a biological perspective, as de Beauvoir argues, women are always on the unfavourable side should there be a pregnancy; they must endure the burden of sexuality while men have no physical attachments. Furthermore, “[e]ven if one does not become pregnant, one loses value in the marriage market. Perhaps worse, one may become sexually enthralled to some partner who is not appropriate as a future husband” (Wagner-Martin 30). Therefore, Esther losing her virginity towards the end of the novel leaves her with a sense of freedom like nothing else before. When Esther uses Philomena Guinea’s money to buy a diaphragm as she prepares to have her first sexual encounter, Esther

⁴ See chapter 3.

says, “[w]hether she knew it or not, Philomena Guinea was buying my freedom” (Plath 212). For Esther, like many women she represents, her freedom is her sexual freedom. The diaphragm represents a new age where Esther can feel as powerful as a man during sexual intercourse.

3. Work and Success

The society described in *The Bell Jar* dictates that women should not work; they should instead devote both their work and sexuality to raising a family and caring for their husbands. Seeing Dodo Conway and her six children for the first time since her internship, Esther cannot stand looking at the only option women are supposed to have. Although she contemplates the idea of becoming a mother, she disagrees with “how women aren’t expected to be creators except in the reproductive sense, how they must abandon their professional goals to support their husbands’ goals, and how they can’t be sexually active without living in a state of constant anxiety” (Grisalfi 63). From the passage where she describes her situation to a fig tree, she recognizes the difficulty women have to become both a housewife and a career woman, as only one path is available to them: “Esther believed firmly that there was no way, in the American society of the 1950s, that a talented woman could successfully combine a career with homemaking” (Wagner-Martin 38). When Jay Cee, her successful editor, asks Esther what she would like to apply for after the internship, it is the first instance when she feels doubtful and insecure about her future in the novel; what is she going to do in the real world? Either she could become a housewife and marry a tender garage-boy as she explains, or attempt to follow a successful but limited career. She cannot be a writer, she says, because “[h]ow could I write about life when I’d never had a love affair or a baby or seen anybody die?” (Plath 117). So, seeing as there are no options available to her, “Esther gradually narrows down her options to just one: suicide” (Kendall 53).

In the 1950s, working women could have more economic freedom and sexual independence than perhaps married women would. Nevertheless, society saw these women who sustained themselves as a sign of belonging to the working class and symbol of poverty. Traditionally, if the women of the family needed to work it was because the men could not sustain the whole family on their own. Having one’s wife become a housewife was a sign of prestige, showing that the male was successful and economically stable. Likewise, women using their sexuality or even embracing their sexuality was seen by society as a weakness,

interpreting this as if they felt the need to use their sexuality in order to advance in the career. This situation cannot be said to be represented by a male who, if he is shown to be very sexually active, is a sign of fertility and therefore success. Women staying at home show that they do not need to use their sexuality to advance, but rather can 'afford' to use it only for reproductive purposes – just like Dodo Conway who is praised for being at home and spending all her time caring for her six children. In accordance with society, Buddy and the other males in Plath's novel cannot comprehend why Esther would want to work in the first place, since "[f]or Buddy, women are helpmeets; they are to have no identity in themselves. Esther's poems are 'dust,' and her role is to be virginal and accepting of his direction – whether the terrain be sex or skiing" (Wagner-Martin 37).

While men use sex to establish dominance, women who use sex in the workforce are deemed sluts and deceiving for selling their bodies in return for career advancement – they might be successful, but lose respectability. As we saw in the case study where successful job positions were attributed to male characteristics, women are deemed less able to achieve such positions of power. Therefore, "[t]he female is continually obliged to seek survival or advancement through the approval of males as those who hold power. She may do this either through appeasement or through the exchange of her sexuality for support and status" (Millett 54). As society in the 1950s (and even today) is full of prejudices towards women and their ability to procure a successful position, it was much easier to achieve advancement and success by using their sexuality, even if (contradictory enough) they are then punished for it. As Simone de Beauvoir stresses in *The Second Sex*,

it is an almost irresistible temptation for a young woman to be part of a privileged caste when she can do so simply by surrendering her body; she is doomed to have love affairs because her wages are minimal for the very high standard of living society demands of her; if she settles for what she earns, she will be no more than a pariah: without decent living accommodations of clothes, all amusement and even love will be refused her [...] she needs to please men to succeed in her life as a woman [...] Sometimes this help will enable her to improve her situation and achieve real independence; but sometimes she will give up her job to become a kept woman. She often does both; she frees herself from her lover through work, and she escapes work thanks to her lover; but then she experiences the double servitude of a job and a mascot (de Beauvoir 722)

As was outlined in Chapter 1, the female equivalent (and only possibility) of 'working your way up' is 'marry yourself up' or the infamous expression, 'sleep your way to the top'. Women's class, education or intelligence were no more important to the employers than their

beauty and sexual experience. De Beauvoir compares the female body to an object that can be easily purchased and the only capital women have to offer. In return, they must give up their respectability. Understandably, Esther does not know which career to pursue because each path she decides to take, has consequences for women.

4. Feminine Sexuality

In the American culture of the 1950s, a woman's sexuality was compared from the male's perspective; "[the Freudian description of the female genitals is in terms of a 'castrated' condition" (Millett 47). Whatever the circumstances, the female in a patriarchy was always blamed for any sexual encounter. When Esther attempts to write a short story entitled "The Big Weekend" for her creative writing class, where she talks about her early sexual experiences, her professor dismisses this as "Factitious: artificial, sham" (Plath 141). In fact, female sexuality and eroticism was an unknown area for both men and women in the 1950s, and perhaps still is today. As Millett explains, it is easy for the male to achieve ejaculation and serve the purpose of reproduction, while the female orgasm is – in practice – needless in order to procreate.

While in the asylum, Esther's view of sexuality takes a decisive and educational turn that eventually leads to her losing her virginity towards the end of the novel. Firstly, Esther's acquaintance and initial 'rival' for Buddy, Joan, enlightens her with regards to lesbian sexuality. Even Esther says that despite knowing what she and DeeDee are secretly doing, "whenever I thought about men and men, and women and women, I could never imagine what they would actually be doing" (Plath 210). It is perhaps because both men and women do not understand that there is an unexplored area of female sexuality that Joan turns to DeeDee for understanding as she complains that "I never liked Buddy Willard. He thought he knew everything. He thought he knew everything about women" (Plath 209). Perhaps more than apprehension, as Esther's psychiatrist Dr. Nolan suggests, what women look for in other women is tenderness.

In general, Esther finds it difficult to understand women's choices and what society has to offer them, and this can partly be attributed to her lack of female role models. Throughout *The Bell Jar*, all the female characters the narrator introduces us to either coincide with the general patriarchal customs or have a visible negative characteristic. Esther complains how she attracts strange old women who want her to become just like them when

she grows up; “women who inscribe their words and actions in the power of the patriarchal realm, many of the women characters in *The Bell Jar* have sold out to the enemy in countless ways” (Wagner-Martin 51). A prime example is Philomena Guinea, who has read Esther’s case and decides to ‘fund’ her therapy only if her depression has nothing to do with a boy. Esther’s mother also wishes her to be shaped into the ideal virginal daughter without any mental or physical defects. Mrs. Greenwood is the ideal woman according to the standards of the 1950s, having “subordinated her life to her husband’s” (Wagner-Martin 52) and devoted her life to teaching shorthand to young girls so they can become secretaries. As Dr. Nolan is treating Esther in the asylum, she gives her permission to feel hatred towards her mother and what she (and her generation of women) represent, opening up a new understanding for Esther. She is now free from conventional ideals that have always been forced unto her in the form of inappropriate role models.

Although some women in the novel do not uphold patriarchal values and may be successful, they lack their feminine characteristics or have given up their sexuality in return. As Simone de Beauvoir explains,

This is the conflict that singularly characterizes the situation of the emancipated woman. She refuses to confine herself to her role as female because she does not want to mutilate herself; but it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex [...] Misogynists have often reproached intellectual women for ‘letting themselves go’; but they also preach to them: if you want to be our equals, stop wearing makeup and polishing your nails [...] Precisely because the idea of femininity is artificially defined by customs and fashion, it is imposed on every woman from the beginning and conforming, a woman devalues herself sexually continually because society has incorporated sexual values (724)

Even from the case study by Van Vianen and Willemsen we saw that in order to achieve success in the workforce, the ideal candidate had to have as many male characteristics as possible, and feminine traits were looked down upon. What de Beauvoir is explaining is that the successful or emancipated woman is ‘shooting herself in the leg’, so to speak, if she acts feminine. She should not dress revealingly, should not expose her emotions and accepts the possible criticisms that she does not look well. That is the price she has to pay in order to succeed, since society has taught her that femininity is not to be taken seriously.

While the older women speak for patriarchy, “the younger women either mimic their elders, as does Dodo Conway, or become unwomanly in their professionalism” (Wagner-Martin 52). The Russian female translator working for the UN translating idioms from one

language to the other is described as a “stern, muscular Russian girl with no make-up [...] in her double-breasted grey suit” (Plath 70-71), lacking femininity. The most notable example of a successful woman lacking femininity is Esther’s successful editor of the magazine, Jay Cee. According to Wagner-Martin, “Jay Cee becomes an object of ridicule to the smart young college women of the College Board because, even though she has power on the magazine, she dresses unstylishly and seems unfeminine” (52). Doreen says she is ugly as sin and Esther cannot imagine her in a sexual context either. This female character can be said to have achieved a successful position and career while still being married; it is she who talks to writers and authors and decides who will be featured in the magazine, and she even introduces famous men to Esther herself. Nevertheless, she does not become a role model to Esther despite her wishing Jay Cee had been her mother.

Feminine sexuality not only limits women’s advancement in a career, but Esther also shows us how it can be a painful experience. Her first sexual experiences are very frightening for the reader, conveying a sense that Esther is being physically punished for expressing her sexual freedom. She is full of anticipation as she enters Irwin’s bedroom, “[b]ut all I felt was a sharp, startlingly bad pain” (Plath 218). When her bleeding does not stop after the sexual intercourse, and Esther “remembered a worrisome course in the Victorian novel where woman after woman died, palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth” (Plath 221), the scene portrays the physical consequences women have to face when involved in sexual liaisons.

The second section of Plath’s novel depicts women’s inequalities through Esther’s mental illness⁵. Many feminists during the 20th century have adopted the idea of mental illness as a rhetorical figure to expose gender norms and inequalities. Overall, if a woman has ideas that do not conform to general opinion, she is deemed crazy and placed in a mental asylum. Esther’s realization that society does not offer adequate career paths for women leads her to believe that her only option is suicide and, failing that, depression. Even before her time at the institution, Esther’s conversation with Buddy shows how radical ideas of marriage and independence are seen as crazy and neurotic; Buddy tells Esther, ““You’re crazy”” to which she replies, “then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days” (Plath 90).

⁵ In my opinion, however, too much attention has been devoted to Esther’s depression and mental illness, shifting the reader’s attention from the insightful and humorous commentaries the novel has to offer. Although it is definitely a vital theme of the novel, not too much attention will be devoted on the topic of mental illness in this essay.

The disturbing sexualization of female bodies is something widely discussed by feminists and Plath alike, where “the vulnerable female body functions as a symbol that Plath uses to highlight the struggles between perception, women, and institutions of power” (Grisalfi 67). Women have to constantly struggle against their own bodies and how they are controlled by patriarchal society. If they acknowledge that they are being controlled through their bodies, they are labelled insane. Perhaps Esther also came to this conclusion when she no longer wanted to stay as part of her body and began thinking of suicide, “[b]ut when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenceless [...] what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse [...] but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at” (Plath 142). This passage shows how she struggles to find the will to kill herself because she knows that what she really wants to kill is not her body per se, but what it represents. Wagner-Martin further reflects on Esther’s mental history, where Mrs. Greenwood visits Esther at the hospital and decides to forgive her for attempting to commit suicide. She believes that Esther

finds particularly hateful the fact that her tortuous experience of madness – the most telling education she has known, an experience that has brought her to a new stage of maturity and self-understanding – is being written off by her mother as illusory, inconsequential, a bad dream. Esther’s madness has been not just something to reject; it has been her means of saving herself from the pressures that a victimizing society would inflict. When Esther leaves the hospital, though she refers to herself comically as ‘patched, retreaded and approved for the road,’ her exhilaration at being free of restraint, at being truly on her own, and at her being her own woman for the first time in her life is unfeigned (Wagner-Martin 43)

Although Esther feels free for the first time in her life, she introduces the idea of the Bell Jar to the reader, warning them that at any time, this trap might once again fall on women. “What was there about us, in Belsize [...] Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of sorts” (Plath 227), reflecting how every woman at the mental institution, whom society has labeled as crazy, might be as aware of the social and sexual inequalities they must face as Esther herself.

Chapter 3: Male Sexuality

Although *The Bell Jar* as a *Bildungsroman* (a novel depicting the life of a character as they develop through their life) centers the narrative from a female point of view, it is useful to observe the various male characters that cross Esther's path from an outsider's perspective, revealing that the other gender also has certain discriminatory stereotypes when it comes to their sexuality. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to consider the other side of the coin, so to speak, and how (contrary to female sexuality) the praising of the phallus and male sexuality enables men to become successful and dominant in society.

1. Great (sexual) Expectations

What Millett claims about the relationship between sex and 'politics' is valid for men as well – if not the more so, since there seem to be great expectations for men when it comes to their sexuality as they come of age. There is a certain shame for men to be virgins in their adult life and there seem to be certain unspoken requirements for men when they enter a successful career. The male characters in the novel, from featuring recurringly or from one single scene, “are often the characters who control the direction of the narrative, the women characters, and eventual outcomes” (Wagner-Martin 47), opening Esther's eyes to a world of double standards and sexual dominance. Esther's first infatuation, Buddy, allows her to see what a hypocrite he is; Lenny Shepherd makes her a witness to scenes of sexual experimentations with Doreen; Irwin becomes Esther's first real sexual experience which then leads to her haemorrhage; Marco the woman-hater shows how sexual dominance is ever-present in some males. Finally, although present in a single scene, Esther's frank conversation about sex with “a bitter, hawk-nosed Southerner from Yale” summarises the role of sexuality for men. He says, “[i]t was an unwritten rule that you had to have known a woman [...] in the Biblical sense” (Plath 75) at least once before a man settled down to marry.

Not only is virginity not expected of men before marriage, but marriage in itself did not form part of their list of great expectations. Even today, an unmarried woman is a spinster; making us think of a ghostly old lady, while an unmarried man is a bachelor; a word with respectable connotations. As seen in the previous chapter, Esther realises that the only favourable option for women is for them to marry and have children, but this argument does not seem to be as vital to the men she meets. Constantin can afford to focus on his career as an interpreter for the UN, Lenny Shepherd does not seem to want to settle down with Doreen

just because they are sexually involved, Irwin is portrayed as the epitome of the bachelor professor and even Buddy wants to marry out of convenience and tradition instead of necessity. As de Beauvoir writes, men “*take* a wife. In marriage they seek an expansion, a confirmation of their existence but not the very right to exist; it is a charge they assume freely [...] They are just as free to prefer a celibate’s solitude or to marry late or not at all” (442).

De Beauvoir continues to argue that for young men, economic stability and social status is what will bring them success instead of marriage, unlike women who still needed to marry in order to (contradictorily) achieve independence. Esther recalls Mrs Willard once saying, “[w]hat a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security,’ and, ‘What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from’” (Plath 67). Women are made to believe that sex is synonymous with marriage, while men do not necessarily need marriage to achieve sex. Historically, the benefit of having a stable partner for sexual purposes is not necessarily needed since carnal satisfaction is easily available – for men. Even if married, the adulterous act is not altogether blamed on the man, since taking it from Eric’s explanation, they might be doing the honourable thing by going to a whore or a mistress for sexual relief. Like DeeDee who acknowledges the fact that her husband is probably with his mistress, “‘I’d call Jack... only I’m afraid he wouldn’t be home. I know just where I could call him, though, and he’ll be in, all right’” (Plath 197), the question of male sexuality is not really questioned.

Just like being kind and emotional are certain expectations society has for women, its male equivalent is just as valid for men when it comes to sexual dominance through aggression. Whether to reinforce this sexual hierarchy or for private vendetta, many men feel the need to affirm their superiority through sex in order to subjugate the other gender. As Millett describes, patriarchy “also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape” (44). Particularly evident in *The Bell Jar* is the woman-hater Marco, whom Esther goes with to a party. He forces her to dance, saying “it doesn’t take two to dance, it only takes one” (Plath 103), tries to buy her off with a diamond, takes her outside with the intention of raping her, and (ironically) calls her a slut when she does not want to be raped. Angry for his own personal reasons, he instead takes his sexual dominance out on a complete stranger that for him represents revenge over the entire gender. In sexual assault, “the emotions of aggression, hatred, contempt, and the desire to break or violate personality, take a form consummately appropriate to sexual politics” (Millett 44). If Besty is the epitome of an extreme feminine character, then Marco is its male counterpart full of favourable – but immoral – sexual expectations.

2. The Phallic Cult

Where sexual politics is a war between the genders, the phallus is the weapon males fight with, since there is a certain fetishising of power attributed to it. There are certain qualities a male must maintain if they are 'blessed' with this weapon, and it carries heavy symbolism with it. This sexual organ becomes a kind of cult, a "badge of the male's superior status in both preliterate and civilized patriarchies, is given the most crucial significance, the subject both of endless boasting and endless anxiety" (Millett 47). Traditionally, the possession of 'balls' means being brave and using the penis is praised (unlike the use of a vagina). In fact, the praising and worshipping of such male physical qualities also reinforces the feminine qualities of passivity and weakness attributed to the female sexual organs, not least when it comes to its reproductive role.

According to Millett, "fertility cults in ancient society took a turn toward patriarchy, displacing and downgrading female function in procreation and attributing the power of life to the phallus alone" (Millett 28). Even if a female body is able to sustain a baby for 9 months, and eventually go through the painful experience of childbirth, the cult praises the phallus and the male for beginning this new life. Even Esther, tired of fighting back the stereotypes she has to live with, wonders how one day she too will follow the successful line of career according to society and says, "one day I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway" (Plath 127). This stereotypical family image enhances the male for having such virility, while also praising the female not for showing her sexuality, but for being able to physically sustain the offspring. The fact that a large family is due to male expression of sexuality contributes to its being acclaimed, while female sexuality is not directly connected to the act of procreation. De Beauvoir expands on this by saying that "[t]he advantage man enjoys and which manifests itself from childhood onward is that his vocation as a human being in no way contradicts his destiny as a male" (723).

Perhaps it is because virility is attributed to the phallus alone that everything related to the male's role in sexuality is also praised. As mentioned before, having 'balls' meant being brave, while being a 'pussy' means being a coward. The language governing male sexuality and especially the phallus is made into a cult; for example, "[t]he most common of the unprintable words for erotic-sexual activity – 'fuck', 'screw', 'bang', and many others – all

carry the implication in their very syntax of activity on the part of the male and passivity on the part of the female” (Sousa and Morgan 4). *The Bell Jar*, on the other hand, mocks this very Freudian approach of glorifying the phallus alone. When Buddy attempts to lecture Esther on the topic of sex, and shows her his own penis to arouse her, all Esther can “think of was a turkey neck and turkey gizzards” (Plath 64). Through this comical scene alone, Plath is able to satirize the idea of the phallus as a cult and the power attributed to men through it.

3. Work and success

The conclusion that was drawn from chapter 2 relating to female work and success was that in the context of *The Bell Jar*, sexuality and success could not work well together. If a woman was sexually active, it would ruin her chances at marriage and if she used it in the workforce, she might advance career-wise but would lose all respectability. For males, on the other hand, sex and success are very much synonymous. Dodo Conway’s husband, although not mentioned in the novel, brings success to both himself and his family through a) his virility which leads to such a large family and b) his ability to sustain the result of such. Buddy and Eric both thought that before they married they needed to have sex with someone else, knowing that their sexuality would not ruin their chances of a successful match. Career-wise, there is no shame in sleeping with the boss in order to get a promotion but the male can boast of such a liaison without fearing isolation from his coworkers. In fact, the more successful a man may be in his profession, the more he is rewarded with sexuality – with success comes a mistress, prostitution and sexual boastings. Instead of businessmen, Esther refers to doctors; “Sunday - the doctor’s paradise! Doctors at country clubs, doctors with mistresses...” (Plath 222). Esther hates that Buddy and many other men are hypocrites when it comes to sexuality; that what they expect of women’s sexuality should not be the same for them. She resents men “being able to have a double life, one pure and one not [... and began to see] the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t” (Plath 77). Men are often excused for committing adultery, seeing that it “was not generally recognized in males except as an offense one male might commit against another’s property interest” (Millett 43), again relating sex to business.

There seem to be many cases in the novel where successful men want to instruct Esther with regards to different topics. Just like she complained of attracting old women wanting to make her like them, all the teaching in the novel seems to be done by men. Esther

goes on a date with a boy named Cal who lectures her on the ‘proper’ way to commit suicide, but when they go swimming and he cannot keep up to Esther, the narrative undermines his instructive powers. Moreover, Mrs Tomorillo’s birth is at the hands of inexperienced doctors who believe to know more about her pain than she does. Men’s success is believed to give them the right to instruct women in any topic they like, whether it be sexuality or the female body, making Esther think back to the eighteenth century “with all those smug men writing tight little couplets and being so dead keen on reason” (Plath 120).

Other successful men who attempt to lecture Esther include Doctor Gordon, who treats Esther during her early depression. Hopeful that he would be able to help her read and sleep again, Esther is only disappointed as she meets this conceited good-looking man. He does not seem to take Esther seriously as he asks her what she *thinks* is wrong with her, making “it sound as if nothing was *really* wrong, I only *thought* it was wrong” (Plath 124). He does not talk to her directly but mentions electroshock therapy to her mother, again undermining her opinion. Furthermore, the only remark he makes during their first session is of how pretty the girls at her college were. As Wagner-Martin explains, “[t]he patriarchy and its pervasive misuse of power are best represented in the character[] of [...] the seemingly much more respectable Dr. Gordon, the self-important psychiatrist whose abuse of Esther occurs in the malfunctioning of the electroconvulsive shock he administers to her as an outpatient” (34). Despite this mistreatment, Esther is able to get a small satisfaction as she chooses what she wishes to tell him and what she wishes to hide about her depression, thus having a slight control of the situation which otherwise would be completely out of her hands. Even during her first sexual experience with Irwin, she chooses not to contact him again and decided to take control of her own sexual life. All these men, though portrayed as sexually dominant, successful in their career, with domestic power and highly educated are nevertheless always rebuked by Esther in the novel. This alone not only makes such a morbid and distressing topic into a narrative with a comic touch, but also allows the reader to be hopeful in an age where men were dominant in every situation.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath as a feminist writer is widely recognized for her collection of poetry and has been extensively studied posthumously. Her novel, *The Bell Jar*, openly talks about sexuality and the rarely discussed topic in literary studies, about how women feel about sexuality. This is a topic that concerns feminists from the first wave of feminism to our current wave: the freedom of sexual expression and the inequalities and prejudices this brings to each gender. In a way, Plath was ahead of her time when she criticised the construction of women's role in sexuality, alongside Kate Millett and Simone de Beauvoir who have helped provide a feminist theoretical background to this essay. As a *Bildungsroman* with Esther at the centre, this novel certainly helps the reader understand the struggles women have to face everyday and the double standards existing between the genders. Whether entirely autobiographical or partly fictitious, *The Bell Jar* is still a notable critique of the stereotyped genders in the 1950s, portraying the female point of view of American society.

As my essay has stressed, the main problem Esther faces in the novel is the question of which path she would like to follow. Society tells her that she can only choose between becoming a submissive wife with many children or devote her life to sexual liaisons and isolation. The preferred path for a female is to give up her sexuality and remain a virgin until marriage – even if this means subjugation to the other gender. In this case, lack of sexuality corresponds to a setback in the male-female relationship where societal laws – dictated by men – win over women's bodies. One interpretation of the novel is then that sexuality and freedom to express it is extremely important for women, giving that there is a direct relationship between taking control of one's own body and gaining independence. This burden that society wants to inflict on Esther, through the strange old women she meets throughout the novel, becomes too much for her and she decides to no longer remain a virgin, to finally – by the end of the novel – gain control and become successful through her own sexuality. Therefore, this novel becomes a sort of warning for the reader, too, as Plath presents us with horrifying images of haemorrhages and near-rape to portray the possible consequences of sexuality.

Furthermore, my essay analyzes how Plath portrays the stereotypes and prejudices that come with male sexuality through the various male characters Esther encounters. Marco shows us how aggression is used to establish dominance over the other gender; Lenny Shepherd and Constantin reveal to us the erotic power attributed to their gender and Buddy demonstrates the hypocrisy and double standards present in our society. Most importantly,

The Bell Jar draws our attention to the relationship between sexuality and success which was the main focus of this essay. For women, those two are completely opposite of each other since sexuality ruins the chances of success in marriage and even in their career, since a sexual woman in command does not have high status. For men, on the other hand, sexuality is praised both in marriage and in a career.

To conclude, then, what does Plath suggest as a solution to the problem of using sexuality to establish control? Of course, it is simplistic to say that with sexual freedom comes societal independence as well. Just like the ambiguous ending of the novel where Esther wonders when the bell jar will fall on her again, this novel does not provide a clear answer to this question. However, Sylvia Plath portrays how women can achieve independence through the freedom of expression, be it sexual or in the management of their own body. Even though today's stereotypes may be different from those present in the novel, women still suffer from prejudices and stereotypes when it comes to their sexuality – especially in their careers – which limits their chances at success. Talking about women's sexuality openly, and revisiting such canonical texts like *The Bell Jar* in academic contexts will hopefully help in eliminating the gap between genders.

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