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Painful Disclosure: Women Writing About Mental Illness

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" initiated a genre of literature in which women writers use fiction as a means of telling their own stories of mental illness. Various as mental illnesses may be, the literature of this genre shows a good deal of commonality from one work to another. These works reinforce each other in telling a story in which women's illness is specifically female and connected to the vocations available or unavailable to women. They also narrate of a medical profession dominated by men, in which female patients' complaints are not listened to or taken seriously. This essay will look at three works that are prominent in this genre: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). What is most interesting from a literary point of view is how these authors transform their stories into works of fiction.

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1. Introduction

There is growing awareness that mental illness has a gendered construction. Hysteria, the word used to describe exaggeratedly emotional behavior, derives from the Greek word for uterus. Hysteria was thought to be specific to women, the result of the uterus moving about the body. This etymology is an example of how the medical profession tended to take a misogynistic view of nervous disorders. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath wrote about their experience living with mental illness. They suffered from an emotional or nervous disorder, were treated for it and eventually committed suicide. Gilman's diary story is written as a case study and is about a patient relating her experience, partly delusional and partly true. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is an autobiographical novel in first person which follows the events of the author's own life through a fictional character, Esther Greenwood, who tells an artfully reshaped version of Plath's life. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is partly based on Woolf's own experiences with mental illness and of psychiatrists but is more constructed as fiction than "The Yellow Wallpaper" or *The Bell Jar*. The experience of mental illness becomes a discontent that Clarissa Dalloway shares with Septimus Smith, a veteran of the Great War suffering from shell shock. The gendered quality of mental illness is still connected to Smith's failure to be "manly" enough. What the three works have in common is the use of the first-person voice. In Gilman's story, the first-person voice is built into the diary form. Woolf's novel is written in the third person but uses the free indirect discourse to modulate into interior monologue. In short, this is a literature in which patients tell their own stories, even if this might mean to lose coherence.

2. From Life to Literature: *The Bell Jar* as an Autobiography and Fiction

Sylvia Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* in 1961, when she was already a recognized poet who published her first collection of poems. She was writing the novel under the sponsorship of the Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship, which was not satisfied with her work and denied its publication. It was later published in 1963 by Heinemann under Plath's pseudonym "Victoria Lucas." *The Bell Jar* follows the author's life between 1953 and 1955 closely enough that one feels warranted in reading it as an autobiography as well as fiction. It draws upon Plath's experience as an intern at *Mademoiselle* magazine in New York and then on her struggle as a mental patient. *The Bell Jar* has been labelled as an autobiographical novel and many other authors have based their career on autobiographical fiction, such as Jack Kerouac, Tim O'Brien and Ernest Hemingway. Labelling a work is not important as much as it redraws our expectations of the work. Following the events of Plath's life so closely, it becomes difficult to think of *The Bell Jar* as a novel rather than an autobiography. Reading *The Bell Jar* as an autobiography has implications since one might consider the intention of the author, the question of truthfulness and the different expectation reading it as fiction or nonfiction might create in readers.

The Bell Jar can be read as an autobiography due to the many similarities between Plath and her fictional character, Esther Greenwood. Gill writes that one of the problems of the novel is "the matter of the relationship between Plath's own life and experience – specifically her time as an intern at *Mademoiselle* magazine in the summer of 1953, her subsequent suicide attempt and her hospitalisation – and the plot of the novel. Is *The Bell Jar* merely a thinly disguised

report of real events?" (75). In fact, from the first pages of the novel, the reader can notice the many similarities between author and fictional character. The novel begins with Esther Greenwood being an English student at a women's college and working as an intern at *Lady's Day* magazine. Plath herself attended Smith College between 1950 and 1955, where she graduated in English literature, and she worked as an intern at *Mademoiselle* in the summer of 1953, a women's magazine about fashion and culture. Esther's father dies when she was a child, as Plath had lost her father Otto when she was eight; both men were entomologists. Moreover, Esther dates a young man who studies medicine at Yale, as Plath has done in 1954. Both men contract tuberculosis, and both Plath and Esther have a serious skiing accident. The protagonist of *The Bell Jar* attempts suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills, just like Plath did in 1953, and both are committed to a mental institution where they undergo the electroshock therapy. Even the episode in which Esther is not accepted to a summer writing course is based on the author's life since Plath was not admitted to a writing course at Harvard Summer School. Moreover, characters such as Filomena Guinea, the woman who funds both Esther's scholarship at Smith College and the private psychiatrist institution, seem to be based on people Plath knew during her life. Even Doctor Nolan, the first sympathetic psychiatrist Esther is treated by, seem to be based on the author's therapist, Ruth Beuscher. Therefore, these autobiographical episodes render *The Bell Jar* a work in which narrator and author could be interpreted as constituting a single figure.

The Bell Jar's publishing history is taken into account when considering whether Plath desired her work to be read as a novel or autobiography allowing one to reflect on the implications of writing an autobiography. After initial rejection by Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship, Heinemann agreed to publish *The Bell Jar* in 1963. At that point, Plath asked to have it published

under the pen name “Victoria Lucas.” This suggests that the author had mixed feelings about the novel. She wanted it to be published, yet also to distance herself from it. It is not clear whether she wanted to distance herself from it since she wanted to protect the privacy of her personal life, or whether she wanted to protect her reputation as a poet. According to Middlebrook this “afforded a degree of disguise and protection . . . it shows Plath’s intention to establish an entirely separate – potentially more commercially successful – authorial persona, one that would appeal to a popular audience and not be confused with the persona behind the other, more highly valued, poetic work” (Middlebrook qtd. in Gill). Hence, having *The Bell Jar* published under a pseudonym allowed Plath to keep her poetic work separate from her first attempt at writing a novel. Regarding the author’s wish to not be associated with Esther Greenwood, it is fair to assume that she did not want her first prose to be read as an autobiography. The most obvious reason behind Plath’s desire to have her name distinct from the novel’s narrator involves the need to protect her identity. In fact, “‘*The Bell Jar* is about the events of Sylvia Plath’s twentieth year: about how she tried to die, and how they stuck her back together with glue. It is a fine novel, as bitter and remorseless as her last poems.’ It is also . . . ‘about the way this country was in the Fifties and about the way it is to lose one’s grip on sanity and recover it again’” (Scholes qtd. in Gill 75). Indeed, the novel deals with personal and controversial topics such as mental illness, gender issues and sexuality. Plath’s critique of 1950s America in terms of gender issues and sexuality can also be considered an understandable reason to conceal one’s identity. According to Coslett, “Esther, like Sylvia Plath (indeed as Sylvia Plath) had to negotiate the sexual and social contract of the 1950s: a contract which in the early pages of the novel seems hopelessly weighted in terms of male agendas and interests but gradually shifts towards the possibility of female autonomy and agency” (77). This process towards female autonomy

involves Esther's rejection of traditional women roles, a skepticism towards motherhood and a desire to live sexuality with no constraints, ideas which at the time were controversial. In addition, Coslett also reflects on the nature of autobiography and traditions by writing:

Convention still demanded that women (and to a large extent men) did not speak of their sexuality in anything other than a conventional way. What was not allowed was ambiguity and doubt around the issue of gender. For women, autobiography has always demanded a secure, determined self, in which an individual confronts specific forms of difficulty and difference but nevertheless suggests a self which is clearly defined (78-79).

Coslett suggests that the autobiography in the 1950s was governed by the same rules of decorum for polite conversation. Young women were not to speak of sexuality in any but modest and conventional terms. *The Bell Jar* as an autobiography defies the rules of modesty that governed conversational and literary decorum in offering a self which is far from secure and defined. In more instances, Esther does not even recognize the person she sees in the mirror as herself. From this point of view, *The Bell Jar* can be read as a romantic novel of a protagonist's struggle to find her "real self." Also, Esther is not satisfied with the roles society expects her to conform to and does not refer to sexuality in a conventional way. Esther desires to have multiple premarital sexual relationships, wishing to be as experienced in sex as men. Dealing with these topics, Plath might need the figures of "Victoria Lucas" and Esther. According to Coslett, "In choosing to become both Victoria Lucas and Esther Greenwood, she allows herself both distance from herself (which is impossible in conventional autobiography) and a degree of control over the narrative" (81). This considered, reading Plath's novel as an autobiography or a memoir involves being aware of the conventions the author broke, which renders the author's choice to publish her work under a pseudonym understandable.

Reading *The Bell Jar*, it is difficult not to think of Plath's life and draw connections between Esther and the author, feeling tempted to divide the story between autobiographical and literary parts and risking to undervalue the poetic devices used in the novel. The novel's success increased once it was published after the author's death and with her real name on the paratext. Gill writes that "From 1965 in particular, the novel has been read in the knowledge – or more properly perhaps with a thirst for knowledge – of the lived experience of the author. It has been read with a view to the insights it might offer into the working processes of the poet, and as though this were the real, authentic voice of the now-dead author communicating from beyond the grave" (74). This is understandable considering that books are also read to feel closure with an author, to reach a sort of intimate relationship between writer and reader. Plath's tragic death also increased the curiosity towards her work and life. Gill writes that the novel was read with the intent to get to know about the author's life rather than for the fictionalized Esther Greenwood. However, this can lead to overlooking or undervaluing the aesthetic accomplishments of the novel. To think of *The Bell Jar* as a mere report of real events would be to neglect the poetic devices used to describe Esther's descent into madness, such as the metaphors. Still, readers might feel tempted to read the novel trying to figure out which parts are from Plath's life. Overall, it is challenging to read *The Bell Jar* impartially, without taking into consideration both the fictional and nonfictional aspects.

Differentiating between autobiography and work of fiction can be complex with texts which, like *The Bell Jar*, are partly based on real events and deal with issues of mental illness. Plath never stated that she desired for her book to be read as an autobiography or memoir. On the contrary, "Plath commented wryly that the book was a 'potboiler', thereby hinting at the degree to which artifice and unreliability might be some of its key ingredients. Even criticism that seeks

to avoid biographically based analysis ends up invoking the author in order to stake a truer claim about her text” (Baldwin 22). Plath’s stress on the fictionality of the novel is significant when trying to label the text as either a work of fiction or nonfiction. She wrote her book drawing on memory or imagination; hence, it invites one to read it as a work of art and imagination.

Differentiating fiction and nonfiction also involves making a distinction between author and narrator. In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath is the author while Esther Greenwood is the narrator through whose point of view the events are filtered. According to Nielsen:

the distinction between author and narrator is . . . problematic. First, it tends, at least implicitly, to place an absolute barrier between fictional and nonfictional narratives, that is, between narratives with, and narratives without, a narrator other than the author.

Second, it encounters difficulties when facing a range of limit cases where the question of fiction remains difficult to decide. These problems notwithstanding, the distinction is fundamental to most classical as well as postclassical narratologies: in nonfictional written narratives the communication is taken to proceed from author to reader, in fictional ones (also) from a narrator to a narratee (276-277).

This distinction between fiction and nonfiction becomes difficult with texts such as Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*, which presents fictionalized events mixed with autobiographical episodes. His work was published as a memoir, and it was later discovered that some events reported in the narration are fictionalized. Readers were disappointed, and the controversy that followed opened a discussion on the limits of the memoir and the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Frey argued that it would be unfair to regard his novel as nonfiction as most events narrated are based on real life events. It is understandable to want a memoir to be entirely based on real events, but it may also be fair to grant a writer the freedom to express metaphorical or fictional truth.

Defending his novel from the attacks on the truthfulness of the events narrated, Frey argued, “I don’t think it’s fair to classify this ‘Million Little Pieces’ as fiction at all. It’s a memoir. A very small portion is in dispute [. . .] I couldn’t have written it if I hadn’t been through a lot of the things I talk about. You know, it’s a memoir. [. . .] I don’t think it should be held up and scrutinized the way a perfect non-fiction document would be or a news- paper article” (Frey qtd. in Nielsen 288). Notwithstanding the criticism, Frey keeps calling his book a memoir and seems to suggest that truthfulness does not lay in the accuracy with which the events are narrated but on what inspired the work. Although he might have exaggerated his experience, he still conveyed its spirit as he says that if he did not deal with certain situations the novel would have not been written. In the case of mental illness, invented truths are also true since mental disorders are about thought processes, and there is a subgenre to memoir or fiction, the first-person narrative of mental illness. In *The Bell Jar*, the fig tree metaphor Plath uses to convey Esther’s struggle is as authentic as an episode based on a real event would be since it serves as an expression of the thought processes of a mentally ill young woman. Anything in the novel which is not based on real events can still be considered truthful as an expression of the writer’s mental journey. There might also be the need to distort facts in order to convey emotional and spiritual truths. Therefore, texts like *The Bell Jar* offer an insight into what constitutes the contrast between fiction and nonfiction, allowing to talk about the role of mental illness in memoirs.

Expectations would vary depending on whether one reads *The Bell Jar* as a work of fiction or as an autobiography. Altogether, Plath’s novel already overturns expectations about novel and autobiography. Coslett writes:

The story of Esther Greenwood is presented by Plath as fiction, but from the first pages, Plath adopts a mocking and ironic tone towards her fictional self, which raises questions

about the identity of author and subject. In this disguise what emerges is a vivid piece of writing, which both subverts expectations about the novel and autobiography and yet extends the possibilities of both (79).

Plath makes a heavy use of metaphor and irony in the novel, giving voice to a character who casts doubts on the nature of the author and opening up new possibilities for the two genres. Whether *The Bell Jar* is read as an autobiography or a novel, the reader's expectations would change. If it is considered an autobiographical document, it would ask to be read diagnostically. In this case, the narrative would be read expecting accurate and truthful experiences and emotional truths. One would count on learning about Esther's mental illness' progression from a medical point of view. Still, considering that an autobiography of mental illness is inherently subjective, one would need to expect a distortion of facts for the sake of conveying emotional states. When reading *The Bell Jar* as fiction, one would still expect to read something that would strike as valid while also granting for a narration which is not based on the author's life. Hence, one could think of the expectations on novel and autobiography to differ on the level of truthfulness and honesty the reader expects from them.

In short, *The Bell Jar* follows Sylvia Plath's life so closely that one might feel more tempted to read it as an autobiography rather than fiction. The author's choice to publish the novel under a pseudonym might suggest that she wanted her book to be regarded as a fictional work due to its objectionable content, which opens a discussion on the nature of the autobiography during Plath's time. Notwithstanding Plath's intention, readers might be tempted to anatomize *The Bell Jar* by dividing it into autobiographical and literary parts, risking to overlook the poetic devices adopted by the author. Being a book about mental illness, Plath's novel can be expected to include fictional elements which are still authentic by describing mental processes.

Still, reader might expect a different amount of reliability whether they are reading fiction or nonfiction.

3. The Critique of American Society and Psychiatry in *The Bell Jar* and “The Yellow Wallpaper”

The figure of the mad woman who is oppressed by a male authority recurs many times in the literature of the 19th century. From *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason who lives in the attic where her husband imprisoned her, to Madeline Usher in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” confined by her brother. The figure of the mad woman has been a means to investigate the female condition. Indeed, the figure of the mentally ill woman who needs to be isolated conceals an oppression which emerges in these narratives. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* offer the point of view of mentally ill women who share their experience of oppression. “The Yellow Wallpaper” introduces a woman whose mental health deteriorates after her husband, a doctor, makes her follow a rest cure. *The Bell Jar* narrates of Esther Greenwood's mental struggles and its medical treatments in a society which is not designed for the wellbeing of women authors. In *The Bell Jar* and “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the secondary character of the mad woman becomes the first-person narrator in works that suggest that the suffering of mentally ill women is also related to the insensitive medical establishment to female patients and the limited social roles prescribed for them.

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath uses metaphors which convey Esther's struggle in growing up in an oppressive environment for women. Esther expresses the anxiety she feels about her future and the roles available to her through the metaphorical image of a “fig tree,” which functions as a symbol of her indecisiveness towards her future:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was

a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (81).

Here, Esther seems paralyzed before the different roles represented by the figs. She sees the choices as excluding one another, rather than being combinable. Hence, she cannot choose any fig as she seems to desire all of them. She cannot accept that she should be either a professor, a mother, or a woman with different lovers. This expresses her desire to experience all the different life paths available to her, without missing out on any aspect. However, her inability to choose also suggests a general discontent with the options before her. Perhaps this implies that women's mental distress is about vocation, about the roles they can and cannot have in society. Considering Esther's disposition, one can suppose that her incapacity to choose a career path might be influenced by her mental state. Her depression might be the cause behind her anxiety about the future and her inability to find full satisfaction in any of the life choices she considers. Still, Esther's pessimism and discontent regarding her future might not just be related to her depression but also to the limitations of being a woman in the 1960s. In fact, Esther "suffered from wanting so much in a world that did not allow women to want anything" (Wurtzel qtd. in

Gill 77). Being aware of the disadvantages of growing up as a woman in her time is enough to distress Esther's already fragile mental state. Moreover, Coyle notices that "In *The Bell Jar*, the young protagonist . . . cannot quite fit herself into the patterns that she sees as available to her. In looking at the future that her society seems to have planned for her, she realizes that if she embraces it, she will be 'growing up grotesquely'" (161). Being forced to conform to roles that do not satisfy her, such as wife, mother, waitress or secretary, Esther finds herself paralyzed before the fig tree which becomes a symbol of her inability to find happiness by choosing just one of the roles available to her.

Esther and Plath might be dismayed by the gap between the images in the magazines of the glamorous housewife and the lives of actual women that contradict those images. The *Mademoiselle* magazine presented the comportment and roles a woman living in 1950s in America was expected to display and it seems to have influence the characterization of Esther Greenwood. During her years at Smith College, Plath won a guest editorship for the women's magazine, *Mademoiselle*. Understanding the culture celebrated by the magazine offers an insight into Esther's struggles and society. According to Smith, "*Mademoiselle* magazine's pages were packed with 'How To' tips for its dedicated readers, promising women the answers with these instructional articles, at the same time, these articles would often provide their readers with dual messages, encouraging women to be self-sufficient while also offering them limited options for achieving self-sufficiency" (6). Just like the magazine promises women self-sufficiency while also preventing them from reaching independence, Esther longs for a multitude of experiences which she does not know how to obtain. She wishes to be independent by not living with her mother, but at the same time she does not want to learn typography and become a secretary. The *Mademoiselle* magazine embodies this oppression of women's freedom and "though attempting

to provide readers with choices, *Mademoiselle* simultaneously limits those choices and, at times, seems to discourage women's navigation beyond the private sphere" (Smith 7). Once Esther returns home from her internship at *Lady's Day*, the equivalent of Plath's *Mademoiselle* magazine, she is desperate to leave her home again, escaping from the domestic life she sees her mother live. As Smith writes, apart from advertising for clothing brands, giving fashion and cooking tips, *Mademoiselle* magazine praises women's independence and education while also sending the message that aiming for a career would interfere with relationship and family happiness. Hence, it is not surprising that Esther sees the role of mother and wife as separate from being, for instance, a famous poet or brilliant professor. A future as a wife cannot coexist in the same fig as "famous poet." Esther Greenwood's unhappiness in *The Bell Jar* and at *Lady's Day* can be analyzed in terms of the way critics have read *Mademoiselle* as a magazine full of contradictions, one that projects unrealistic promises of women being able to combine domestic and professional spheres of life. Smith describes an interesting image of a woman displayed in *Mademoiselle* which is reminiscent of Esther's dilemma expressed in the metaphor of the fig tree:

The woman appears clothed for some thing other than beating eggs, a potentially messy task. Here, our concept of domesticity is challenged; the woman we see associates herself with a traditionally female task (that of cooking), yet her personal appearance implies that she participates in important activities outside of the home. The text of the advertisement may further confuse our perceptions. It reads: 'She's the food editor on a well-known home magazine ... the food expert of a happy family in Chappaqua, New York. She's an expert on Chinese art with a curator's job at the museum ... an expert on American fashion who looks to L'Aiglon for smart clothes like this coatdress of Lorette' (34). The

text implies that this woman before us is every woman, capable of being any one of the many things listed above her; the choices, however, at once celebrate the woman's role as homemaker ('food expert of a happy family') while also challenging that role ('expert on Chinese art') (9).

Although it is impossible to know whether Plath has seen this picture, one can still argue that the "every woman" the picture in the magazine describes is the figure Esther wishes to embody. The different roles this woman represents remind of the figs Esther sees in front of her. Still, only by becoming such a figure as the "every woman" she would be able to be both a homemaker and a "Olympic lady crew champion" (81). As Smith notices, "both the advertisement and Esther not only seem to question the possibility of such an achievement but also which version of the 'proper' woman is more appropriate" (9-10). Indeed, becoming both a homemaker and an expert of Chinese art is as challenging as being a mother and being a "brilliant professor." Esther understands that the glamorous images in *Lady's Day* are contradicted by the actual lives of women like her mother. Moreover, there would be the risk of going against what is considered appropriate for a respectable lady. Overall, the influence of the models of femininity that a magazine like the *Mademoiselle* would have on women can be noticed in Plath's portrayal of Esther Greenwood, in the uncertainty she feels in front of the roles available to her.

Throughout the novel Esther reflects on the disadvantages of being a woman with regards to sexual freedom in a society where women are expected to marry for security rather than for love. Esther wishes to have sexual experiences and, in turn, a transformation within herself. At the same time, she does not want to be less sexually experienced than a man like Buddy Willard, the medicine student she is expected to marry. He seems to be someone she is in a relationship with to satisfy expectations. When Esther discovers that he had an adventure with

a waitress, she loses her admiration for him. It is not a matter of sexual infidelity since the two were not in a relationship at the time. Perhaps she was never in love with him anyway and only accepted him as part of what is expected of her by her mother. Therefore, it is not felt by Esther as an emotional betrayal but as an act proving Buddy's "hypocrisy" since in his attitude to her he made her feel more sexually experienced than he was. She finds the thought that he could be more experienced than she is unbearable. Hence, she decides that she will not be inferior in sexual experiences by seeing other men. However, Esther is aware that Buddy can have the experiences she craves without having to face the public disapproval. She is disturbed by her mother's conception of the relationship between man and woman. Mrs. Willard thinks, "What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security," or that "What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from." This mindset was not uncommon in Esther's society, to which she cannot be indifferent and rebels against in the name of personal growth. She looks for sexual experiences in the figure of Costantin, the translator Mrs. Willard introduces her to, and ultimately in Irwin, the mathematics professor she will lose her virginity with. Esther does not desire to form an emotional bond with these men since she is only looking for experiences that can transform her, something that a respectable woman in the 1950s would not admit. For instance, she looks forward to losing her virginity hoping the experience will cause a "spectacular change" in her (86). She does so without being conditioned by the mindset of women such as Mrs. Willard. Indeed, Esther thinks, "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not" (86). Here, she condemns the double standards dominating in her society. Men can pursue sex for its own sake while women are supposed to seek family, to become wives and mothers. Moreover, Marco, the "woman-hater," is the character who more

than anyone else in the novel embodies this habit of seeing women as being either pure or dirty, virgins or sluts. He goes on a blind date with Esther and sexually assaults her. While a few moments before he was talking about the woman he loves, his beautiful cousin who is destined to become a nun, he later tries to rape Esther saying “sluts, all sluts.” Marco seems to share the ideology of the time, that women either exist in the respectable form of a “nun” like his cousin or as “sluts” like Esther. This dualism also exists in Esther’s mind who sees a “nice blonde girl” and a “sexy black-haired girl” (44) when she goes to see a movie at the theater. She seems to see the two girls through the contrast of the “nice girl” who conforms to society’s expectations and the sexual girl who goes against what is expected of her. Esther explains that she knows how the movies will end by thinking:

Finally 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 and was now packing off to Europe on a single ticket (44).

She seems to be used to these narratives which keep trying to impart moral lessons on women, that being a woman like the “sexy black-haired girl” will mean not finding a husband, which is portrayed as the most valuable thing a woman could miss in her life. Therefore, Esther Greenwood’s point of view on 1950s America informs on the oppression of female sexuality which inevitably affects the narrator’s consciousness.

In *The Bell Jar*, the limited opportunities available to women can affect the sanity of girls like Esther who cannot conform to societal expectations. The young woman cannot be satisfied with being just a wife. After waking up in bed with Costantin, whom she went out to eat out with, she tries to imagine what it would be like to be married with him. She supposes:

It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curlers after he'd left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he'd expect a big dinner, and I'd spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted (89).

This is what Esther imagines being married implies. The entire day would consist of serving her husband and taking care of the house by making the bed and washing dishes. This life is certainly not exciting for a woman who dreams of a life of exciting prospects. Esther knows that if she embraces roles she cannot enjoy, she would be miserable. In fact, as Coslett points out:

In order to maintain this society, women are expected to maintain a precarious balance between the appropriate appearance of 'normal' heterosexuality and rigidly policed boundaries about sexual availability. Little wonder, as Esther Greenwood points out more than once, that these contradictions make people (and particularly women) go mad. In a society which refuses ambiguity and diversity, the only way to articulate difference is through refusal and the explicit rejection of the models of success which are conventionally available (80-81).

Esther rejects the models that are available to her, and in return, she is hospitalized after a few minutes of conversation with Doctor Gordon, who notices from just her look that she does not conform to the traditional ideals of womanhood. Still, Esther is not satisfied with her life and what the future holds for her, rather committing suicide than having to grow up miserably by conforming to societal expectations.

The medical help that Esther seeks since she cannot sleep or write offers an insight into the treatment of mental illness in Plath's society. Once at home from the internship, Esther loses

the will to carry out everyday tasks such as washing her hair or her clothes since doing it “seemed so silly” (135). Therefore, she does not see the point in taking care of herself, and it makes her “tired just to think of it” (135). Here, Plath hints to some of the symptoms of depression. Esther does not see the point in carrying out simple everyday tasks, such as taking care of her hygiene. Her sleep schedule changes, and she easily tires. From this point on, her mental health deteriorates so much that it induces her to seek help. When she visits Teresa, the family doctor, she explains, “I can’t sleep. I can’t read” (133). She will try to explain it to Dr. Gordon, the psychiatrist. However, she is disappointed by his visit. The first thing she notices in his office is a family photograph on his desk, which “for some reasons” makes Esther “furious” (136). According to Perloff, the “silver-framed family photograph, conspicuously placed on his desk facing the patient, is a tacit reminder that he, at any rate, is a ‘normal’ American male, dwelling in a world of suburban lawns, cute children, and golden retrievers” (517). In fact, Esther is disturbed by the family picture on his desk, as if questioning how a man with a seeming perfect family life could ever understand her struggle. She thinks, “how could this Doctor Gordon help me anyway, with a beautiful wife and beautiful children and a beautiful dog haloing him like the angels on a Christmas card?” (136). Esther is not at fault in her judgement of him since he does not give her any support. He makes inopportune comments about the girls at Esther’s college during his university years and asks her what she “thinks” is wrong with her. This upsets her since it “makes it sound as if nothing was *really* wrong,” as if she “only *thought* it was wrong” (137). The visit lasts only a few minutes, Doctor Gordon only commenting on Esther’s college and ends without him offering her the diagnosis she desires or a treatment. Had she received a proper visit, she might have not felt as hopeless about her life. In short, the inadequate help provided to Esther offers a critique of the medical establishment.

From the society vengeful response to the Rosenberg's execution to Doctor Gordon's insensible treatment, Esther finds herself living in a community which is not supportive nor equipped to understand her. The novel opens with a reference to the electrocution of Julius and Ester Ethel Rosenberg, husband and wife who were sentenced to death since found guilty of being spies for the Soviet Union. When Hilda, an intern at *Lady's Day*, comments on the electrocution of the Rosenbergs by saying, "I'm so glad they're going to die," Esther cannot avoid dwelling on it (105). The novel opens with her wondering how it must feel to be electrocuted, a feeling she will experience with the shock therapy. Gill writes:

Ethel Rosenberg forms a kind of double to Esther. Deborah Nelson points out that Ethel's full name was Esther Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg, thus her maiden name, Esther Greenglass, offers an uncanny parallel to Esther Greenwood's. Both women, one might argue, suffer for their nonconformity to the feminine ideals which dominated Cold War America. Both are portrayed as outsiders or alien others (79).

The Bell Jar causes one to consider whether Esther Greenwood and Esther Ethel Greenglass are both given electrical shocks by the establishment that wants to either rehabilitate or punish them. At the same time, both women do not receive any sympathy for their condition. Just like Hilda is happy that the Rosenbergs are going to be executed, Esther is treated with scorn by the nurses that assist her at Doctor Gordon's hospital, as an inferior outsider who does not deserve their respect. When she is at the hospital after her suicide attempt, the nurses treat her as a "zoo animal" and "a dull child" (82). Moreover, after her electroshock therapy, the conversation between Doctor Gordon and Esther shows his lack of interest in her wellbeing:

“How do you feel?”

‘All right.’

But I didn't. I felt terrible.

'Which college did you say you went to?'

I said what college it was.

'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?'" (152-153).

Doctor Gordon had asked the same question about Esther's college during their first visit, to which the girl responded saying she did not know. By asking the same question again, after she had just had the treatment, Doctor Gordon becomes the embodiment of a community that is not able to show understanding or support to those suffering from mental illness. Even Esther's mother is not able to understand her daughter. After her first treatment, Esther tells her mother that she is not going to have the electroshock therapy another time, her mother answers:

"'I know my baby wasn't like that.'

I looked at her. 'Like what?'

'Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital.' She paused. 'I knew you'd decide to be all right again'" (154).

Here, Mrs. Greenwood implies that Esther chooses what to feel since she thinks her daughter might simply "decide" to feel better again. This is one of the main misconceptions about mental illness, the idea that one can choose what to feel. Mrs. Greenwood believes that Esther can get herself out of her condition through willpower. She also labels the patients of the hospital as "awful people," as if their being "awful" (154) is the cause behind their mental state and residence at the hospital. Hence, Esther lives in a community that does not offer her sympathy or understanding, leaving her alone in a world she already perceives as threatening.

Esther's diagnosis as mentally ill and her stay and treatment at the mental hospital also informs on the inequality lived by the women who were hospitalized in the 1950s. The criteria applied to men and women with regards to their diagnosis and their possible hospitalization were not the same. When women were examined their level of conformity to the ideals of femininity of the time were taken into account. According to Ferreter:

Over and over again in the writings and records of hospitalised women, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one sees the equation in the ideas and practices of the clinicians responsible for their care of mental health in women with cultural norms and stereotypes of femininity . . . The roles of wife and mother were not the only aspects of femininity that were taken to be signs of mental health for women by clinicians during the period of Plath's encounter with the psychiatric institution. Women were expected to be docile, submissive and obedient if they were to be regarded as mentally healthy (130-131).

This might justify the immediate hospitalization of Esther, who was labelled as mentally ill after just two short visits in which she did not reveal much about herself. Ferrer notices that "it takes just this one incident for him to conclude that she is mentally ill and needs the physical intervention of ECT" (129). Doctor Gordon decides to talk about the treatment with Esther's mother after he sees the scattered letter she tried to write for Doreen. However, he also had way to see that Esther has stop taking care of herself as she does not wash her hair anymore. She also only complains about not being able to read or write, the two most important things to her. This is enough for Doctor Gordon to realize that she is a girl who does not conform to the feminine roles of Plath's time. As Ferrer explains, "Her [Esther] intelligence and ambition, as shown by her frustration at not getting into the prestigious writing class at Harvard summer school and at

her inability to write a thesis on *Finnegans Wake*, would have been characteristic signs to a young, self-confident male psychiatrist of a young woman pathogenically rejecting her feminine role” (132). Indeed, Esther rejects the feminine roles available to her, such as becoming a mother, wife or secretary, since she does not recognize herself in them. In addition, it is significant that after her first shock treatment she thinks, “I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done” (152). The experience is so terrible for Esther that she felt as if her “bones would break” (151), and she dreads the possibility of having to go through the treatment again. She even interprets the therapy as a punishment. In fact, Ferrer writes, “What Plath’s account shares with those of other patients . . . is that Esther interprets the experience as a punishment for transgressing her feminine role” (136). Unlike other women her age, Esther is mainly interested in writing courses and her academic career, not wanting to marry or have children, while also longing for sexual experience outside marriage. Overall, Esther’s diagnosis gives way to discuss the treatment of gender inequality which dominated even in the mental evaluation criteria.

In *The Bell Jar*, there is a sense that male doctors are out of touch with the feelings of women, which is counteracted by the sensibility of female psychiatrists. After Esther’s negative experience with Doctor Gordon’s treatment and public hospitals, she is moved to a private institution. She receives the attention of Philomena Guinea who offers to fund Esther’s stay at a private psychiatrist institution. Here, Esther meets Doctor Nolan, the first female doctor she is introduced to in her journey. Meeting her new doctor, Esther expresses her astonishment by thinking, “I was surprised to have a woman. I didn't think they had woman psychiatrists” (196). Doctor Nolan asks her new patient how she felt about her previous treatments and, hearing about Esther’s negative experience, she promises the college student that it will be different this time. The doctor tells the narrator that the electroshock therapy is “like going to sleep” (199) if done

properly and that she will always tell her beforehand if she has to undergo it. This is reassuring to Esther as she dreads the electroshock therapy. It is also significant that it is a female psychiatrist who offers Esther sexual freedom by scheduling her a doctor appointment to get the diaphragm placed. A possible pregnancy is one of Esther's major concerns and prevents her from living her sexuality freely. Getting pregnant would mean getting imprisoned in marriage and the domestic life she fears. Coslett points out how Doctor Nolan not only allows Esther the freedom to indulge in sexual activities without the anxiety of getting pregnant, but she also permits her to distance herself from the gender oppression her mother symbolizes:

Significant female characters in *The Bell Jar* deny Esther the right to sexual relationships, but it is finally a female doctor who allows Esther to begin a life of sexual activity. When Doctor Nolan 'allows' Esther Greenwood to hate her mother, she also allows her to escape from her mother's control. Achieving this separation is part of Esther's emancipation from her mother's expectations (85-86).

Doctor Nolan not only counteracts the figure of the indifferent male doctor by being a compassionate figure in the unresponsive male dominated psychiatrist institution, but she also offers Esther the possibility to overcome oppressive conditions by allowing her to "hate" her mother. After Mrs. Greenwood visits her daughter at her new psychiatrist institution, Esther tells Doctor Nolan that she hates her mother, at which the psychiatrist smiles answering, "I suppose you do" (24). Hence, she does not try to change her patient's attitude. Mrs. Greenwood represents a figure who encourages the domestication of women by pressuring her daughter to learn shorthand and sending her articles which disapprove of premarital sex. Shorthand would bound Esther to a typical female occupation which is working as a secretary. Doctor Nolan not only reassures her patient that there is nothing wrong in premarital sex, but she also allows her to

distance herself from her mother's oppressive expectations. Therefore, in its critique of the psychiatrist institution, *The Bell Jar* also leaves space for a reflection on the contrast between female and male approach to the struggles of women in the America of the 1950s, denouncing the insensitivity of men psychiatrists.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is another crucial text to consider when discussing the ways in which the medical establishment has been mistreating rather than treating female patients. Like *The Bell Jar*, Perkins Gilman's short story introduces the point of view of a woman's experience of mental illness and its treatment. Her story expands the use of the diary as a fictional form since she uses the diary or mad monologue as a vehicle for describing mental illness from the point of view of the patient. The narrator is a woman who writes journal entries narrating of her stay in a mansion where her husband, his sister and her moved to spend the summer. She has just given birth and is suffering from what her husband, a physician, describes as a "temporary nervous depression — a slight hysterical tendency" (4). Her treatment consists of a rest cure which she describes by writing, "I take phosphates or phosphites— whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to 'work' until I am well again. Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" (4). She cannot rebel against the treatment imposed on her by her husband and focuses on the yellow wallpaper of her bedroom. Its pattern catches the attention of the narrator who obsessively studies it until she sees a woman entrapped in it. By the end of the story, she is completely insane thinking she is the woman behind the wallpaper and tears it apart trying to save herself. Hence, through this story, the author uses the point of view of a young woman to critique the role of the medical establishment in worsening the condition of female patients.

Perkins Gilman's story is also based on her personal experience with mental illness and its treatment, which she openly denounces in her short story. Like the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the author suffered from depression after giving birth. She was treated by the physician Silas Weir Mitchell, who prescribed her a "rest cure." The treatment involved abstaining from any kind of work, to "live as domestic a life as possible and never to touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live" (Harris 37). Perkins Gilman found this cure to worsen her condition and wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1890 to save women from such a dangerous treatment for their mental health. Bergman writes that "Mitchell's views on women were always objectionable. The psychiatrist considered women to be patently inferior, objects to be coddled and condescended to." Still, he received a copy of "The Yellow Wallpaper" from Perkins Gilman who succeeded in her aim since the physician later changed his treatment. She explains the reason for writing her short story in its introduction:

The little book is valued by alienists and as a good specimen of one kind of literature. It has, to my knowledge, saved one woman from a similar fate—so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and she recovered. But the best result is this. Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked. Hence, Perkins Gilman succeeds in using literature to make the medical profession more sensitive to the needs of female patients. As Horvitz puts it, Gilman's aim was that "of exposing the patriarchal 'mental health' system, which institutionalizes, sanctions, and sometimes even promotes, the captivity of women" (101). Therefore, the author bases her short story on her experience with the treatment of mental illness with the aim of exposing its oppressive methods.

Like Doctor Gordon, the narrator's husband is an insensible physician who is not understanding of his wife's suffering. Although the young woman complains about her condition, her husband underrates it by simply ordering her to rest. She expresses this by writing, "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no REASON to suffer, and that satisfies him" (6). The fact that he thinks there should be a reason to suffer and that he would be aware if there was one, informs on the general ignorance regarding mental health issues. He also threatens his wife since she expresses her anxiety by writing, "John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!" This is a direct reference to Perkins Gilman's physician which the narrator describes to be as terrible as her husband. Thus, John is as an authoritarian figure to the narrator as Weir Mitchell was. In addition, his authority and oppression in front of the wishes of a sick wife are expressed as follows:

Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia. But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished (10).

Although the narrator thinks the visit would benefit her, John is sure he knows what is best for his wife and will not let her leave the house. Even when his wife begs him to return to their home, he responds saying he does not understand the reason since he knows she got better. He says, "I am a doctor, dear, and I know" (11). The narrator argues that she is "better in body perhaps" but is prevented to continue since she "began, and stopped short, for he [John] sat up

straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word.” (11). Here the wife cannot even express the way she feels in front of the authority of her husband since he thinks he knows better and will not listen to her. He does not even think of her as an adult as he keeps calling her “little girl” (11) or “little goose” (7). For this reason, when the young woman contradicts her husband saying that she is still ill, he answers saying “she shall be sick as she pleases” (11), as if his wife is a child playing an act. No wonder then that John does not consider his wife worth of knowing the way she feels. He thinks her condition “is a false and foolish fancy,” and he repeats “Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?” (11). In short, Perkins Gilman portrays the figure of John as husband and physician as an arrogant and authoritative man who is not able to validate women’s experiences.

The narrator’s progressive madness can be interpreted as a means to rebel against the authority of her husband and physician. While narrating of her condition, the young woman keeps lamenting her situation, her diagnosis as suffering from a simple “hysterical tendency” (1) and its treatment which prohibits her from writing by repeating “and what can one do?” (101). The only thing she can do is embracing her “madness” and, in this way, address and figure out her anger without any constraint. After all, to speak freely against oppression would only be expected by a woman considered insane. According to Showalter, “The frequency with which one encounters madness in the heroines and in the lives of women writers seems to suggest that for them it is a form of genuine self-expression, sometimes the only one possible” (211). In fact, through madness women can express themselves without being accounted for what they might reveal. Anything they might express while “mad” would be considered the result of insanity rather than of a real, deep social issue. Regarding the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” “in the role of madness, she can express her aggressions against her husband; and when at last he

breaks into the room, and faints in shock at the sight of her, there is a triumph in her narrative. Yet she is truly mad; she has defeated him only by destroying herself” (210). Once John can enter in the room where his wife locked herself to tear down the wallpaper, he faints at the horror he witnesses. His collapsing on the floor followed by his wife exclaiming that now she will have to crawl over him every time she wants to leave the room seems to suggest she is finally able to overcome his authority. Once she has crawled over him, she will find herself free to move around as she pleases. According to Bruce “now that she has to crawl over him – and now that he lies directly in her path, the man who could once say with such authority, ‘I am a doctor and I know’ - the narrator produces the final act of unsettling the authority of the medical profession.” Still, she has lost her mind in the path towards freedom. In a way, it is the wallpaper that allowed the narrator to express her anger towards her husband. According to Hochman, “the wall-paper is not always taken as a constricting or constraining text; sometimes it is seen as one that enables the narrator to confront her own situation and gain access to long-suppressed feelings” (131). In fact, the insanity that the wallpaper allows her to express also leads to the confrontation of her anger, “she reflects the anger onto the wallpaper, rather than directing it at John” (Jean 75).. She herself exclaims “I get positively angry with the impertinence of it [the wallpaper], and the everlastingness” while also confessing “I get unreasonably angry at John sometimes. I’m sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition” (5). Although the narrator thinks her anger has no reason to exist, the reader can perceive that its cause is related to the treatment of her husband. Therefore, the insanity which results from obsessing over the yellow wallpaper allows the Perkins Gilman’s narrator to express the anger she feels towards her husband and the medical establishment.

Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman offer the point of view of the mad woman to express their feelings towards their personal experience with the psychiatrist institution. *The Bell Jar* and “The Yellow Wallpaper” show how literature enables the patient to talk about mental illnesses where women authors share their experiences. Both Esther Greenwood and the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” live in an oppressive community which is unresponsive to the feelings and thoughts of female patients. The two texts have many purposes but some of them are to create a community and advocacy.

4. The Critique of the Psychiatrist Institution in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Mrs. Dalloway was published in 1925, six years after the end of the First World War and when a new world was emerging. Virginia Woolf tries to represent this new dimension characterized by the introduction of Freud's psychoanalysis and transformations in technologies, philosophy and arts. One of these innovations was the invention of the stream of consciousness developed by the psychologist William James to describe the way the mind works. Woolf uses this technique to represent the workings of the mind moment by moment. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, she uses it to explore the consciousness of the characters she follows around the city of London. Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith are the two main figures Woolf characterizes in the novel, a woman who prepares for her party while looking back at her life choices and a man victim of shell shock. Septimus is the symbol of something new in Woolf's society, a man carrying a suffering which the society of the time was not prepared to deal with. Like in *The Bell Jar* and "The Yellow Wallpaper," in *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is a critique of the medical establishment that was not able to assist Septimus Smith and prevent his suicide. Woolf had negative experiences with the treatment of mental illness and in this novel, she uses the point of view of a man who deals with the consequences of gender norms and an unsupportive medical establishment.

Virginia Woolf's experience with mental illness influences her characterization of the medical establishment in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Her negative portrayals of doctors such as Dr. Holmes

and the psychiatrist Sir William Bradshaw are influenced by her own personal experience with mental illness. Woolf, like Septimus, committed suicide, not being able to find comfort in the psychiatrist institution. She underwent painful and ineffective treatments and dreaded the rest cure. According to Leese, “Septimus Smith’s symptoms ‘resemble those of traumatic neurosis; his treatment is a composite of Woolf’s experience with Dr. George Savage and Sir Maurice Cray, both of whom were in some way involved in the treatment of traumatic neurosa during the war.’ Holmes, Smith’s doctor, is also a composite of physicians of the time and their manner of treating patients” (Leese qtd in Church 56). George Savage was a successful and renovated psychiatrist receiving clients from the wealthy society of London. Virginia Woolf was one of his patients and it is believed that the character of Sir William Bradshaw is based on him. Therefore, like in the writings of Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf also characterizes the psychiatrists she portrays in her novel on her personal experiences.

The portrayal of Septimus’s suffering informs on the trauma that affected the soldiers of the First World War while also showing how significant it is for them to recognize and address it. Septimus Smith’s trauma manifests in moments of depression, delirium or hallucinations. These are often tied to the image of his companion and friend Evan, whom Septimus saw dying in mission. In one of his hallucinations, he sees his dead companion while he is walking with his wife, Rezia, “the branches parted. A man in grey was actually walking towards them. It was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed.” The image of Evan keeps haunting Septimus who cannot get over the experience he lived during the war. Nowadays, such a trauma would involve facing it through therapy, but what Rezia does under the advice of Dr. Homes is trying to distract her husband. When the couple is at the park, she tries to get Septimus to look at an airplane, “‘Look, look, Septimus!’ she cried. For Dr. Holmes had told her to make

her husband (who had nothing whatsoever seriously the matter with him but was a little out of sorts) take an interest in things outside himself” (22). Not only Dr. Holmes thinks there is nothing wrong with Septimus even though he lives in his own world, but he also thinks that distractions would be the right remedy to his condition. Still, Septimus cannot see the world rationally and sees only what his altered mind suggests. He watches the airplane and sees that it is signaling to him, and his eyes get filled with tears. The novel shows “not only what the characters do but also how they perceive their world and how their perceptions touch the inner recesses of their consciousness” (Payne 5). By entering the consciousness of Septimus, the reader can feel his struggle and how he tends to keep his entire suffering inside, without ever being able to explicitly express it. According to DeMeester, “Virginia Woolf’s characterization of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* illustrates not only the psychological injuries suffered by victims of severe trauma such as war but also the need for them to give meaning to their suffering in order to recover from the trauma.” Septimus does not have the means to give expression to his trauma without an external help, but his community is unsupportive. Rather than allowing him to express his trauma in every possible form, those around him suppress any behavior that deviates from the norm and what is acceptable. Thus, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf characterizes Septimus Smith by displaying how trauma works and how important it is to address it to possibly save lives.

The novel suggests that Septimus Smith has to adhere to a code of masculinity by suppressing anything that might signal interior suffering. The language used in *Mrs. Dalloway* seem to suggest that Septimus’ behavior is only manly enough. According to Parui, “shell shock . . . problematised the socially circulated and consumed notions about military masculinity and may be considered a form of epistemic crisis in post-war British military culture that

contemporary medicine struggled to redress.” (120). Septimus image changes from being tied to values of bravery and strength during his war service to one of a man who cries and threatens to kill himself. Woolf describes his conduct in the battlefield writing, "he developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name.” This is the sort of behavior in a man which is praised with awards and celebrated by everyone. A man who shows signs of weakness like Septimus in his state of trauma becomes a problem. Rezia is ashamed of her husband, and she tries to hide his condition. She tells her family there is nothing wrong in him, that “Septimus has been working too hard— that was all she could say to her own mother. To love makes one solitary, she thought. She could tell nobody” (23). Letting people know would be to admit that her husband failed in acting manly. She is as ashamed and in pain in seeing her husband in such a condition that “Far rather would she that he were dead!” (23). She cannot understand the reason behind such a behavior and “Looking back, she saw him sitting in his shabby overcoat alone, on the seat, hunched up, staring. And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now” (24). Rezia associates her husband’s mental struggle and suicidal tendencies to cowardice. To say he wants to kill himself, Septimus would contradict the bravery he showed during his service. Rezia does not even recognize him in this state, refusing to accept that a man who has fought, and who should then be invulnerable, could wish to die. She rather prefers to think this is not the Septimus she knows anymore. Woolf shows how hard it was to offer help to mentally ill men when they are not even allowed to give signs of suffering without having their masculinity questioned. This signals a problem with gender in Woolf’s society which does not only affect women but also men. Czarnecki points out, "Septimus earned awards, which later earns the respect of his employer, Mr. Brewer, for before the war, Brewer had worried about Septimus's

disinclination for sport and interest in poetry. Yet when Bradshaw questions him about his war experience, Septimus does not answer. Lest Bradshaw doubt his bravery, Rezia quickly assures him that her husband served with distinction” (57). Mr. Brewer is Septimus’s boss and his concern at Septimus not being interested in sports is tied to gender presupposition that men should like such activities, not preferring poetry like the war veteran does. By serving as a soldier and showing courage and determination, Septimus regains the respect of Mr. Brewer, who does not need to worry about his masculinity anymore. It is also worth noticing that Rezia “quickly assures” Brewer of her husband serving with distinction, lest that someone might think he acted cowardly. Hence, Woolf suggests that the languages used to refer to Septimus highlights the gender codes men had to adhere to even though these prevents them from facing their trauma and heal.

Woolf’s critique of the medical establishment is similar to that of Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her portrayal of psychiatrists as unresponsive to the needs of their patients. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus is visited by two doctors, Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw. The former insists that the veteran is suffering from “nerve symptoms and nothing more” (101). He thinks that his patient just needs to find a hobby, to distract himself. Woolf characterizes the doctor by writing, “Some hobby, said Dr. Holmes, for did he not owe his excellent health (and he worked as hard as any man in London) to the fact that he could always switch off from his patients on to old furniture? And what a very pretty comb, if he might say so, Mrs. Warren Smith was wearing!” (102). Not only his advice is pointless, but he is as clueless to think he can compare his situation to that of a man who fought in the war and is visibly traumatized. Woolf’s novel shows how during her time the mechanisms of the mind were still being studied, Freud already introducing new developments. Dr. Holmes’s compliment of Mrs.

Warren's comb, which reminds of Doctor Gordon's comment on the girls at Esther's college, shows his unconcern and lack of true interest in Septimus's condition. Since his health does not improve through Dr. Holmes' visits, Rezia and Septimus meet with the notorious and overconfident psychiatrist Sir William Bradshaw. Woolf describes the nature of his treatments by writing:

To his patients he gave three-quarters of an hour; and if in this exacting science which has to do with what, after all, we know nothing about – the nervous system, the human brain – a doctor loses his sense of proportion, as a doctor he fails. Health we must have; and health is proportion; so that when a man comes into your room and says he is Christ (a common delusion), and has a message, as they mostly have, and threatens, as they often do, to kill himself, you invoke proportion; order rest in bed, rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months' rest; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve (110).

Proportion seems to be at the basis of Bradshaw's approach to psychiatry, which shows his highly technical vision of human consciousness. He explains that to a man threatening to commit suicide, he would simply prescribe rest, alluding to the much-feared rest cure. Septimus is aware of the inefficiency of Bradshaw's counsel, not believing that he can be of help. When Rezia informs her husband that he must be transferred to a psychiatrist institution, he shows his diffidence towards the doctor by thinking, "'Must,' 'must,' why 'must'? What power had Bradshaw over him? 'What right has Bradshaw to say 'must' to me?'" (165). In addition, Septimus's suicide represents a message to the psychiatrist institution, "Holmes was at the door. 'I'll give it to you!' he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings" (168). The veteran seems to suggest that he would rather have the two doctors deal

with his body rather than his consciousness. In this sense, his suicide can be read as an affront to the community that was unable to read his suffering. Thus, Woolf presents a commentary on the medical institution through the relationship between Septimus Smith and the two doctors visiting him.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is a critique the psychiatrist institution of the 1920s through the point of view of a World War I veteran dealing with shell shock. By giving voice to Septimus Smith, Woolf is able to express a complaint which is also based on her personal experience dealing with mental illness. Characterizing Septimus also means addressing the codes of masculinity which see men suffering from trauma as weak and unmanly. Rezia is affected by these gender norms as well since she is worried about the image of her husband and cannot understand how a man who fought in the war can act so “cowardly.” This treatment of mentally ill men like Septimus is worsened by the medical establishment represented by Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw which in their superficial cures fail in taking care of their patients.

5. Conclusions

Sylvia Plath, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf use fiction to share their personal experiences with mental illness through a first-person point of view. *The Bell Jar* follows Plath's life as closely that one might be tempted to read it as an autobiography. This allows one to reflect on the nature of a memoir on mental illness and on the expectations a reader might have when reading fiction or nonfiction. Plath and Perkins Gilman transform their experience in fiction, making a commentary on the unsympathetic American society and the psychiatrist institution of their time. Woolf uses the point of view of a man suffering from shell shock to write about her experience with mental illness, which is similar to the one described in *The Bell Jar* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" in its critique of an insensible medical profession.

The Bell Jar, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Mrs. Dalloway* were also instrumental in raising questions about whether the medical treatment of mental illness was sexist. They trace a history of medicine in which nervous disorders were part of a misogynistic construction of gender. Overall, these authors use literature as a means through which one can advocate for medical reform, to make the profession more sensitive to the needs of female patients. Plath, Perkins Gilman and Woolf share their experiences with other women, creating a reassuring bond of mutual understanding.

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