

Revisiting Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as a feminist response to McCarthyism

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The present article introduces a feminist and political analysis of Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, considering it a cultural response to McCarthyism. In order to do that, the article focuses on the importance Plath gives to the Rosenberg's case in the novel and particularly in the relevance Ethel Rosenberg's death sentence had to awaken a female consciousness for the women of the 1950s in America. The female body turns fundamental for a feminist struggle that Plath creates in the novel to deconstruct the imposed female roles that helped McCarthy control the private lives of the Americans. Sixty years after Plath's death and its publication, *The Bell Jar* becomes a fundamental text for understanding contemporary feminist literature.

Keywords: Women's literature; Feminist theory; Gender Studies, McCarthyism; Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) became, at the controversial time of its publication, a key text to understand her life as a woman writer. Since then, the novel has been object of interpretation from several and distinct critical perspectives, especially in its contribution to the feminism of the 1950s and its response to Betty Friedan's remarkable work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Among the many critical interpretations given to the novel, *The Bell Jar* is considered a "classic Cold War text for which a denunciation of suburban, white, middle-class female constraint might seem to be the appropriate frame" (Baldwin 2004, 23). From this political perspective, the critic Kate A. Baldwin also asserts that "*The Bell Jar* shows us how the fiction of an integrated American female selfhood (and its inadequate achievement) was correlated with those of designated Cold War others, such as Russians and African Americans." (Baldwin 2016, 55). However, and in the context of Cold War literature, *The Bell Jar* can also be analyzed as a feminist response to the earliest period of the Cold War times and concretely to the communist hunt initiated by Senator Joseph McCarthy, a period later known as McCarthyism. Plath starts the novel by mentioning the Rosenberg's case and, with it, contextualizes her novel in a concrete historical and social period of the United States, emphasizing throughout the novel the relevance Ethel Rosenberg had for the women of the 1950s and for the protagonist in particular. The intention of this article is to contribute to the wide literary critical corpus of Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* by analyzing the importance and impact the Rosenberg's case has on the protagonist of the novel, Esther Greenwood, and how Plath responds to that effect with a feminist discourse that considerably influenced on the reconfiguration of female consciousness and the construction of a modern and postmodern female subjectivity. In this context, Plath's novel popularity and relevance 60 years after its publication and 60 years after her death indicates its contemporaneity in feminist and ideological terms.

1. Sylvia Plath and McCarthyism

The suffocating atmosphere created by McCarthyism and Cold War times is present in most of Plath's writings produced since 1950. As biographer Heather Clark explains, Plath was very aware of the oppression for "subversive artistic expression—especially from women" (2022, 62)—created in McCarthy's times, something that motivated her artistic exile to England. Clark points at Plath's first direct experience with McCarthyism through her writing teacher Robert Gorham Davis, investigated by the HUAC "for his communist affiliation in the 1930s" (2022, 191). Together with Davis, other professors were investigated and, as Clark accounts, they openly talked about the hearings in their classes (191). Plath, as a result of this experience that summer, wrote her short story "Initiation" (1935) in which she narrates the

difficult and complex experience a college girl goes through to pass the “trial” to become a sorority member. In the winter of 1950, her first winter at Smith College, Plath already manifests her concern about the dark times the United States and her generation were going through:

People live in war time, they always have. There was terror down through history [...] But though they live and died in fear, I am here; we have built again. And so I will belong to a dark age, and historians will say “We have a few documents to show how the common people lived at this time. Records lead us to believe that a majority were killed. But there were glorious men.” And school children will sigh and learn the names of Truman and Senator McCarthy. Oh, it is hard for me to reconcile myself to this. (Plath 2000, 32)

Plath explicitly shows her discontent with both Truman and McCarthy and their legacy in American history. On the 19th of June of 1953, the day the Rosenbergs were executed, Plath dedicates one of her journal entries to express her feelings in relation to the case:

All right, so the headlines blare the two of them [the Rosenbergs] are going to be killed at eleven o'clock tonight. So I am sick at the stomach. I remember the journalist's report, sickeningly factual, of the electrocution of a condemned man, of the unconcealed fascination of the faces of the onlookers, of the details, the shocking physical facts about the death, the scream, the smoke, the bare honest unemotional reporting that gripped the guts because of the things it didn't say. (Plath 1991, 80)

This fragment of her journal reverberates at the beginning of Plath's novel and explains the asphyxiating atmosphere she depicts throughout the whole text. Also, by dedicating one of her journal entries to the Rosenbergs not only does Plath manifest the great influence this case had in her life and her emotional state, she also describes very well the fear and paranoia installed in American society that culminates with the death of the Jewish couple. In this same journal entry, Plath expresses her feelings of rejection towards the execution:

There is no yelling, no horror, no great rebellion. That is the appalling thing. The execution will take place tonight; it is too bad that it could not be televised...so much more realistic and beneficial than the run-of-the-mill crime program. Two real people being executed. No matter. The largest emotional reaction over the United States will be a rather large, democratic, infinitely bored and casual and complacent yawn (1991, 81).

Here, Plath puts the attention on the passivity American population shows with such a serious incident and, moreover, refers to the risks and dangers these political actions could have for everyone. According to Clark, “the 1953 electrocution of the Rosenberg’s symbolized, for Plath, other victims of repression—radicals, Jews, homosexuals, dissidents, artists” (2022, 549) and, of course, women. Plath deconstructs the gendered morality of the cold war politics, and concretely of McCarthyism, in *The Bell Jar* through the character of Esther Greenwood, who “must re-solve gender itself. She must reconcile herself as both moral subject (heroine and narrator of her own story) and amoral object (her femininity is defined by her body). To be whole, she must re-solve [...] the nature of femininity (Is it amoral?)” (MacPherson 1991, 37). In this sense, the deconstruction of the McCarthyist gendered morality is reaffirmed with the parallelism established between Esther and Ethel Rosenberg, whose execution was mainly based on her wrong performance as a woman of the 1950s.

2. Esther Greenwood and Ethel Rosenberg

From the beginning of the novel, Plath creates an asphyxiating and dreadful atmosphere introducing the Rosenberg’s case:

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York. I’m stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that’s all there was to read about in the papers—goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. (2001, 1)

Through it, the reader knows the novel takes place in June 1953 and concretely before and after the 19th of June, the day Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed. The presence of the Rosenbergs, specifically of Ethel Rosenberg, becomes permanent throughout the whole novel from a historical and political describing perspective but also from a metaphorical perspective. Plath introduces the figure of Ethel Rosenberg and her death sentence by electrocution as a way to explain Esther’s gender roles’ deconstruction and consequent mental breakdown. Moreover, the presence of Ethel in Esther’s narration explains the importance of her feminine mystique and the role of women for Cold War America, concretely, the relevance women had for McCarthyism.

The beginning of the Cold War period is marked by the presence and practices of the Wisconsin Senator at the time, Joseph McCarthy, who served

from 1947 to 1957. He became popular in 1950 when, in a famous speech to the Republican Women's Club at Wheeling, West Virginia, he claimed he possessed a list with the names of 205 communist people who were working for the State Department. From then on, he started a communist hunt against any kind of activity that could be considered anti-American and of course against any kind of communist espionage. Essentially, communism became an excuse to control and manipulate most strata of society and mainly American's private lives. By controlling the private lives of the Americans, McCarthy saw the way to control public life and, in that sense, preserve the most conservative values of American society intact. McCarthy's exercise of power can be explained through Foucault's words as he created a "total structure of action brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely" (1982, 789). In relation to this, Richard Hofstadter points at McCarthy's unclear political methods the basis of its strong powerful structure induced to control the population:

To McCarthy's true believers what was really appealing about him were his methods, since his goals were always utterly nebulous. To them, his proliferating multiple accusations were a positive good, because they widened the net of suspicion and enabled it to catch many victims who were no longer, had never been, Communists. (1963, 41)

McCarthy's communist hunt became, as many historians have pointed out, a red scare that immersed American society in a fearful and paranoid atmosphere aggravated by McCarthy's creative talent in relation to distortion and reinterpretation of possible communist un-American activities (Reeves 1973, 30). This takes us back to the beginning of the novel and to Esther's words when she states that the Rosenberg's case "had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves" (2001, 1). Indeed, throughout the novel, Esther experiences different situations as a woman that connect her with Ethel Rosenberg's experience to such an extent that she will suffer how it feels like to be "burned alive all along your nerves" in her ETC treatment.

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were a Jewish-American couple who lived in New York and who were accused of "conspiracy to spy for the Soviet Union in violation of the Espionage Act of 1917" (Kobrick 2013, 3). Judge Irving Robert Kaufman sentenced the couple to death and accused them of "trying to destroy the United States, characterizing their crime as "worse than murder" (Kobrick 2013, 6). He also assigned them at least partial blame for the outbreak of the Korean War, "with the resultant casualties exceeding 50,000 and who knows

but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason” (Kobrick 2013, 6). According to Kobrick, the testimony of David Greenglass, Ethel’s brother, became fundamental for the couple’s death sentence. In his testimony, prepared by McCarthy’s assistant Roy Cohn, he accused Julius Rosenberg of sending information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union and Ethel of typing all that information. As Jonathan Michaels asserts, “the arrest, conviction and ultimate execution of Julius Rosenberg for passing classified information to the Soviet Union bolstered the credibility of McCarthy’s charges against the State Department” (2017, 163). Bearing in mind that Roy Cohn’s “most significant contribution to the trial was his direct examination of key witness David Greenglass, which produced testimony devastating to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg” (Kobrick 2013, 35) and became chief counsel of McCarthy’s Senate investigations subcommittee, it could be argued that the distortion and manipulation of David Greenglass testimony was definitively to benefit McCarthy and McCarthyism. Especially in 1995, when declassified documents from Soviet archives were published and revealed that “a soviet cable from 1944 stated that Ethel was “sufficiently well developed politically” and that she knew about her husband’s espionage activities, but noted, “in view of delicate health [she] does not work” (Kobrick 2013, 10). In 2001, David Greenglass, the most important witness for the Rosenberg’s execution, confessed that he lied in relation to the implication of his sister Ethel in communist espionage and especially in her collaboration typing the information about the atomic bomb. Even though Julius’ collaboration with the Soviet Union was confirmed in the declassified documents published in 1995, neither of them sent information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union, the reason why they were sentenced to death.

From the beginning of the case, the implication of Ethel in communist espionage was not easy to prove. At the beginning, the government used Ethel as a way to extort Julius and make him confess about his implications with communist espionage. However, as Mary Ashe explains, “Ethel Rosenberg’s maternal status, and an interpretation of her performance as failing to satisfy 1950s models of motherhood, worked to justify the imposition of the death penalty” (1995, 217). Judge Irving Kauffman insisted in his sentence that Ethel’s love for the communist party was greater than her love for her children (Ashe 1995, 217), basing his decision on Ethel’s supposedly inappropriate behavior with her children. Ethel’s construction as a bad mother was not limited to Judge Kauffman. In fact, President Eisenhower denied presidential clemency to the Rosenbergs putting the focus on Ethel as the leader of the two and supporting his argument on the fact that she was particularly evil: “it is the woman who is the strong and recalcitrant character, the man who is the weak one. She has obviously been the leader in everything they did in the spy ring” (Ashe 1995,

218). As a communist, she had deprived her children of a good home in order to provide the world with a "good home" (Ashe 1995, 218). In this sense, Ethel was judged for her performance as a mother and as a wife and sentenced for not accomplishing the female roles of a 1950s American woman. This shows the importance of women and their domestic roles for the control of the private lives of Americans and, hence, for McCarthyism. In relation to this, Deborah Nelson asserts that "Women and especially mothers in cold war culture often functioned as metaphors of a highly unstable border between public and private, a possibly treacherous incapacity to defend the boundaries of home and nation" (2002, 114). Unable to demonstrate she was a good mother, Ethel Rosenberg transgressed the limits of her home and, accordingly, of her nation and was sentenced to death. This evidently takes suspicion, fear and paranoia, recurrent themes of McCarthyist literature, to a different social level. Practicing un-American activities, such as not being a good mother according to the standards of 1950s America, could be considered the justification for a future crime. McCarthyism's success with this case was not only proving its communist hunt, it installed fear and a powerful control in American society. The death sentence became a lesson for American population and in particular, for those women who were nonconformists to the gender norms of the time.

In this context, the parallelism between Esther and Ethel becomes fundamental in terms of understanding how Esther deconstructs the conservative gender roles imposed on her and how society punishes her for rejecting them as Ethel did. Ethel Rosenberg was partly judged for her female performance and this is why many women writers of the time responded with their literature to the Rosenberg's case and concretely to Ethel's situation. Women writers such as Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich talked openly about the influence the Rosenberg's case had for them and their works. Lorde, as Plath, expresses the fear and paranoia the execution ingrained in American society and how that affected to her gender identity and her condition as a lesbian woman and writer:

Meetings where frightened people tried to keep some speck of hope alive, despite political disagreement, while all around us was the possible threat of dying like the Rosenbergs, or at least the threat of losing jobs or being fingered for life. Downtown at political meetings and uptown at the Harlem Writers Guild, friends, acquaintances, and simple people were terrorized at the thought of having to answer, 'Are you or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?' The Rosenberg's struggle became synonymous for me with being able to live in this country at all, with being able to survive in hostile surroundings [...] one day asking me accusingly, 'Are you or have you ever been a member of a homosexual relationship?' (2018, 173-74)

As Carol Hurd Green points out, “For Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, young women in the 1950s, the death of Ethel Rosenberg became a piece of their emerging female consciousness” (1995, 191). In her poem “For Ethel Rosenberg” (1981), Adrienne Rich creates a poetic voice that identifies with Ethel Rosenberg’s fate in relation to marriage and motherhood. She talks about marriage as a question of loyalty or punishment, she describes her as a bad mother and daughter and declares how society needed Ethel to be a female monster (2020, 541) but “she, actually wishing to be an artist/wanting out of poverty/possibly also really wanting revolution” (2020, 541). Ethel Rosenberg awakened a revolutionary spirit in some women who started to question the 1950s American female values.

3. Abject Doubles

The relevance of Ethel Rosenberg’s presence in Plath’s novel relies on her metaphorical effect in the construction of Esther Greenwood as a character in order to express her transgression of gender roles and, specifically, how she deconstructs motherhood, marriage and housewifery. As Mary Ashe explains, the name Plath chooses for her protagonist, Esther Greenwood, can be analyzed as a reconfiguration of Ethel Rosenberg’s former name, Esther Ethel Greenglass. By changing Greenglass to Greenwood, Plath erases any connection of her character with Julius Rosenberg and Ethel’s brother David Greenglass (whose false testimony sent her to the electric chair) and, consequently, with her roles of wife and mother: “the “Greenwood” variation of “Greenglass” can be read as preserving only those features of Ethel Rosenberg that are most purely “private”” (1995, 216). However, Robin Peel points at Plath’s grandmother, Victoria Lucas Schober, as the source of inspiration to name the protagonist of the novel. Indeed, he explains that “Plath changed the name of her protagonist Victoria Lucas to Esther Greenwood quite late in the publication negotiations” (2019, 206). Even though Esther Greenwood was not Plath’s first choice to name her protagonist, the truth is that she finally does, establishing another link with Ethel Rosenberg.

In Plath’s project to deconstruct gender roles, motherhood becomes a fundamental topic of her novel. One of the most famous and remarkable passages of the novel takes place in chapter six, when Esther goes with her boyfriend Buddy Willard to witness the dissection of a corpse. It is there where Plath shows the opposite emotion to what a baby, and motherhood, should provoke in the reader. If a baby means tenderness and the right beginning of life, she describes how the hospital keeps dead babies of different sizes in bottles:

Buddy took me out into a hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born. The baby in the first bottle had a large white head bent over a tiny curled-up body the size of a frog. The baby in the next bottle was bigger and the baby next to that one was bigger still and the baby in the last bottle was the size of a normal baby and he seemed to be looking at me and smiling a little piggy smile. (2001, 59)

Right after this, Esther witnesses a labor that Buddy warns her not to as “You oughtn’t to see this’[...] ‘You’ll never want to have a baby if you do. They oughtn’t to let women watch. It’ll be the end of the human race’ (61). When asked about this experience, Esther answers “Wonderful” “I could see something like that every day” (63). Plath approaches motherhood from an abject perspective, from the dead, from a life that is not accomplished and also from the perspective of a mother and a motherhood that will never occur. Undoubtedly, this idea connects again with Ethel Rosenberg and how her execution prevented her from being a mother. Some pages after this, Esther relates motherhood with Eisenhower: “On a low coffee-table, with circular and semi-circular stains bitten into the dark veneer, lay a few wilted numbers of *Time* and *Life*. I flipped to the middle of the nearest magazine. The face of Eisenhower beamed up at me, bald and blank as the face of a foetus in a bottle” (85). The association of Eisenhower with the bottled dead babies refers back to Ethel and Eisenhower’s statement about her culpability in the case.

Later in the novel, Plath again links Eisenhower with maternity. In the waiting room of a clinic, she reflects on motherhood and her obvious rejection towards it:

I leafed nervously through an issue of *Baby Talk*. The fat, bright faces of babies beamed up at me, page after page—bald babies, chocolate-coloured babies, Eisenhower-faced babies, babies rolling over for the first time, babies reaching for rattles, babies eating their first spoonful of solid food, babies doing all the little tricky things it takes to grow up, step by step, into an anxious and unsettling world. (2001, 212)

Esther’s perception of “Eisenhower-faced babies” refers to Eisenhower’s statements about Ethel abandoning her children for communism. As Jo Gill affirms, “Esther’s repeated disavowal of any maternal instincts and her obvious distaste for children suggests a replication of Ethel’s perceived position” by Eisenhower and also Judge Kauffman. This reminds us that Ethel’s and Esther’s crime lies in their “interpretation (or misinterpretation) of femininity which is perceived to be a fault” (Gill 2008, 80). This idea explains Esther’s impressions of the waiting room:

I smelt a mingling of Pabulum and sour milk and salt-cod-stinky diapers and felt sorrowful and tender. How easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to a baby after fat puling baby like Dodo Conway? (2001, 212-13)

Dodo Conway, Mrs. Greenwood's neighbor, represents the perfect mother and the baby boom after the second world war. Esther shows her difficulties to adapt to this kind of life throughout the whole novel as part of her intentions to develop her career as an artist. Motherhood would be the main factor that would limit her artistic career (2001, 81), an aspect she recurrently mentions in the novel: "And when I had told the poet I might well get married and have a pack of children some day, she stared at me in horror. But what about your *career*? she had cried" (2001, 211).

Marriage becomes another crusade in Esther's deconstruction of conservative gender roles and reinterpretation of 1950s femininity. She openly talks about her rejection towards marriage and how the pressure society and, concretely, her mother put on her contribute to her final mental breakdown. In one of the passages, Esther's mother gives her a Reader's Digest's article titled "In Defense of Chastity" that "gave all the reasons why a girl shouldn't sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married" (2001, 76):

The main point of the article was that a man's world is different from a woman's world and a man's emotions are different from a woman's emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds and the two different sets of emotions together properly. My mother said this was something a girl didn't know about till it was too late, so she had to take the advice of people who were already experts, like a married woman. (2001, 77)

In this fragment, Plath shows very explicitly the heteropatriarchal centered ideology that imposed women adjust their lives to the men's needs. Esther's rejection towards marriage increases the possibilities of letting her mother and American society down: "That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (2001, 79). Esther's desire for autonomy places her in a very difficult position of total incomprehension and mental instability. In fact, when she informs Buddy Willard that "I'm never going to get married" (2001, 89), his immediate answer is "You're crazy', Buddy brightened, you'll change your mind' (89) but Esther replies "No. My mind's made up" (89). Certainly, Esther's rejection towards the imposed gender roles

and her eagerness to live a different life take her to a mental breakdown and ETC treatment, a therapy that resembles Ethel's way of dying. This takes Esther back to the beginning as her feeling of the Rosenberg's case "had nothing to do with me" suddenly does in metaphorical terms. Through this, Plath shows McCarthyism's punishing methods to women, victims also of strong controlling medical presence and constant public surveillance and judgement (MacPherson 1991, 3).

4. Ethel, Dead Woman Muse

Elisabeth Bronfen in her book *Over her Dead Body* (1992) discusses the importance of death in female texts and how dead women became, for some women writers, "the rhetorical figure of the muse" (1992, 398). In the case of Sylvia Plath, she argues that as a twentieth-century woman writer, she "resort [s] to the topos of the dead woman as a muse" (401). Certainly, she emphasizes the importance death and suicide have in Plath's works and, especially, in *The Bell Jar*, "death increasingly emerges as the solution to her dilemmas. Suicide, she believes, will foreclose the need to make a decision and appears as the sought for the release from conflicts" (408). However, she points out to the fact that Plath's dead woman muse is herself. Understanding Ethel Rosenberg as Esther's double and the importance Ethel's death has for Esther's female consciousness, it could be argued that from this perspective, Ethel Rosenberg becomes a dead woman muse in terms of "feminine death as the creative resurrection of the represented woman" (Bronfen 1992, 401). Ethel's death and the way she was killed is intimately related to Esther's suicidal attempt and her consequent ETC treatment. So, from a feminist perspective, Ethel represents the "dead, absent woman" who is "simultaneously addressed to a community of women listeners who are implicitly present and whose function is precisely to actualise the absent but potential feminine voice" (398). Plath's use of death is aesthetic and feminist and, in this context, the introduction of Ethel's death as a metaphor "serves to articulate another meaning, namely feminine power, buried beneath woman's social deformation by cultural representations" (412).

In chapter 9 Plath mentions again the Rosenbergs, after Esther already knows she was not accepted in the summer course, a situation that provokes a profound depression in her. One of the girls at the Amazon, Hilda, celebrates the Rosenbergs' execution: "I'm so glad they are going to die" (2001, 95). This incident is a recreation of a real experience lived by Plath with one of the editors at *Mlle* magazine written in one of her journals: "The tall beautiful catlike girl who wore an original hat to work every day rose to one elbow from where she had been napping on the divan in the conference room, yawned, and said with

beautiful bored nastiness: “I’m so glad they are going to die” (1991, 80). As Ashe explains, “Hilda’s naming the execution as good is experienced by Greenwood as a horrifying enunciation” since “it emerges from a place of darkness that is particularly disturbing because of its defiance of gender categorization” (1995, 219). This sentence resonates in Esther’s head and makes her establish a parallelism between Ethel’s dead walk and punishment with hers: “My penalty was the long, dead walk from the frosted glass doors of the Amazon to the strawberry-marble slab of our entry on Madison Avenue” (2001, 95). Esther already feels sick and trapped in this fake world in which it is more important her role as a woman than her poetic work. Almost on the verge of a mental collapse, Esther narrates all her perceptions of the world with a constant presence of death that, from this part of the novel onwards, culminates in a suicidal attempt. In fact, she introduces the figure of the dybbuk to describe her friend Hilda, who, in Esther’s eyes, “moved like a mannequin the whole way” (2001, 95). Some lines after, Esther talks about the figure of the dybbuk she saw the previous night on a play and believes “Hilda’s voice sounded just like the voice of that dybbuk” (96). The presence of death in Esther’s description comes not only from Hilda’s automatism and explicit desire for the Rosenberg’s execution, it is also present in Esther’s comparison with the dybbuk, a bad ghost according to Jewish mythology that possesses the bodies of the living. Esther insists on the Rosenberg’s case in order to find some empathy from Hilda:

So I said, ‘Isn’t it awful about the Rosenbergs?’

The Rosenbergs were to be electrocuted late that night.

‘Yes!’ Hilda said, and at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat’s cradle of her heart. It was only as the two of us waited for the others in the tomb-like morning gloom of the conference room that Hilda amplified that Yes of hers (2001, 96)

As shown in the fragment above, Esther’s narration turns uncanny in the sense that it “refers to moments where the question whether something is animate (alive) or inanimate (dead), whether something is real or imagined, unique, original or a repetition, a copy, cannot be decided” (Bronfen 1992, 113). The constant presence of death turns the narration uncanny, Hilda’s automatism (moved like a mannequin) and Esther’s sense of invisibility (“She stared at her reflection in the glossed shop windows as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to exist” (96)) blur the limits between reality and fantasy, related to Esther’s mental instability. But, more importantly, the limits between the dead and the living. The asphyxiating atmosphere of the first lines of the novel

is transformed into a “tomb-like morning gloom”, both due to the Rosenberg's imminent execution and Esther's anguished existence. The conversation with Hilda continues in relation to the Rosenbergs:

‘It's awful such people should be alive.’

She yawned then, and her pale orange mouth opened on a large darkness. Fascinated, I stared at the blind cave behind her face until the two lips met and moved and the dybbuk spoke out of its hiding place, ‘I'm so glad they are going to die.’ (2001, 96)

As Nóra Séllei argues, “at this moment, Hilda appears dwarfed in her humanity since she becomes the mouthpiece of the dominant discourse of power, of cold war ideology” (2003, 137). Again, Esther's automatized and dehumanized description of Hilda creates a distance in Esther's perception of reality. Hilda's final statement in favor of the Rosenberg's execution leaves her even more detached from reality but closer to the world of the dead and to Ethel. Considering Ethel Esther's uncanny double, “this doubling, dividing and exchanging can, furthermore, involve the subject in his relation to others as he either identifies with another, as he substitutes the alterior self for his own, or as he finds himself incapable of deciding which of the two his self is” (Bronfen 1992, 113). It is at this point of the novel in the very day Ethel will be electrocuted that Esther feels closer to her and to her ETC treatment.

According to Hurd Green, Ethel Rosenberg's body “was tortured in a particularly modern way: by negation, by sexual deprivation, by refusal of the sensate and of connectedness—with her husband, her children, and with her voice, which fell silent many months before it was silenced” (1995, 187). For some women writers such as Adrienne Rich and Plath herself, the image of Ethel's burned body became the punishment some women had to suffer for their “refusal to act as she might have been expected to” (Hurd Green 1995, 188). One of the details that became known in relation to Ethel's execution was the fact that she needed more electricity to die than her husband, something that makes the execution even more tragic. As Hurd Green explains, “Ethel Rosenberg died twice, terribly. Subjected in death to further indignity, her body became an ironic collaborator in her condemnation. Its unwilling resistance to the multiple volts of electricity sent through it by the executioners has provided evidence to those who sought it of her unseemly will” (1995, 186). Ethel's punishment is above all a corporeal torture symbolized in her female body and her physical resistance to end her feminist fight. Hurd Green narrates Ethel's last moments before arriving at the death chamber and how she asked for bodily contact:

Ethel Rosenberg's last two willed acts, a letter and an embrace, had been acts of love and connection. In her final gesture, she reached out for comfort to another woman. [...] As she entered the death chamber, she turned, stopped, and embraces the matron who had accompanied her there, expressing a final connectedness, body to body (1995, 186-87)

A similar situation takes place right before Esther receives her first ETC treatment:

The nurse started swabbing my temples with a smelly grease.
As she leaned over to reach the side of my head nearest the wall, her fat breast muffled my face like a cloud or a pillow. A vague, medicinal stench emanated from her flesh.
'Don't worry,' the nurse grinned down at me. 'Their first time everybody's scared to death.' (2001, 138).

The physical contact with the nurse creates a fake atmosphere of comfort and care that contrasts with Esther's fearful bodily response to the situation. Ironically, the image implies certain maternal and nursing tone right on the verge of electroshock as if, like Ethel, asking for "comfort to another woman" (Green Hurd 1995, 186). As Sara Ahmed explains in her work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) "in fear, the world presses against the body; the body shrinks back from the world in the desire to avoid the object of fear. Fear involves shrinking the body; *it restricts the body's mobility precisely insofar as it seems to prepare the body for flight*" (2004, 69). The transformation fear provokes in the surface of Esther's body "my skin had gone stiff, like parchment" (Plath 2001, 138), explains how the object of fear "impresses upon us in the present, as an anticipated pain in the future" (Ahmed 2004, 65). Also, certain objects contribute to Esther's bodily response to fear and transformation of her body as "bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others" (Ahmed 2004, 1): "Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal plates on either side of my head. He buckled them into place with a strap that dented my forehead, and gave me a wire to bite" (Plath 2001, 138). Unavoidably, this description reminds the reader of the preparation of the bodies of both Ethel and Julius Rosenberg for their execution (Ashe 1995, 226). In relation to this, fear is one of the literary elements that Plath uses as a way to respond to McCarthyism. If both fear and paranoia were instruments addressed to control society and the Americans' behavior, in the text they become literary elements to construct Esther's character. Doctor Gordon, as a representative of a mental institution, also stands for how the system could manipulate and act against Esther's integrity. The metal plates, the buckles, straps and wires materialize their action in Esther's body and anticipate pain.

Esther's stiff skin and the contact of her body with the ETC treatment objects prepare her body for the pain:

I shut my eyes.

There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath.

Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a splint plant.

I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done. (2001, 138)

Esther uses the metaphor of a plant to describe the feeling of something breaking inside her, the bodily transformation that Esther suffers provoked by the therapy and pain implies also a cultural transformation. The treatment reshapes her identity and miscarried behavior since "pain involves the violation or transgression of the border between inside and outside, and it is through this transgression that I feel the border in the first place" (Ahmed 2004, 31). Esther's still and manipulated body becomes a "passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed" (Butler 1992, 12) and, therefore, "the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related" (Butler 1992, 12). Thus, Esther's treatment and bodily pain work to reconfigure her social and cultural interaction with herself and others. If pain is "bound up with how we inhabit the world, how we live in relationship with the surfaces, bodies and objects that make up our dwelling places" (Ahmed 1992, 31), then the pain in Esther's body becomes a punishment that pushes her to reconfigure her space in society.

As a result of this painful experience, she wonders "what a terrible thing it was that I had done" (2001, 138), a reaction that makes her understand the whole ETC treatment not as a cure but as a punishment. This statement introduces in the text the idea of betrayal essential in McCarthyist literature. Part of *The Bell Jar*'s plot is structured on the theme of betrayal. Although Jo Gill understands that "the Rosenberg analogy also throws up the theme of betrayal, a theme which reemerges in Esther's eyes in the actions of her second psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan" (2008, 80), from a McCarthyist perspective, Esther is not only the betrayed one but the betrayer. Gill explains how Esther feels betrayed by her second psychiatrist when he does not let Esther know about this first ETC treatment in advance, as he promised (Plath 2001, 138). Even though Esther's reflection could be understood as her disappointment with Dr. Nolan for not keeping his promise, Esther not understanding "what a terrible thing it was I had done"

(138) has an explanation in terms of how she had betrayed her role as a woman of the 1950s. Esther, as Ethel, betrays American society and American values in her transgression of gender roles. Like Ethel, she is punished and treated to cure her deviant behavior.

The ETC treatment does not work for Esther and she finally tries to commit suicide, “I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water, one by one by one. At first nothing happened, but as I approached the bottom of the bottle, red and blue lights began to flash before my eyes” (2001, 163). Esther’s choice to die brings her closer to Ethel’s destiny and to the acceptance of her punishment. Indeed, Luke Ferretter concludes that “Esther’s suicide attempt which most closely expresses her sense of identification with the Jewish couple, in that she comes to see herself as she sees them, people whose true thoughts and feelings simply have no place in American society. Esther’s sees in the Rosenbergs her own fate—pretend to be someone else or die” (2010, 105). However, Esther comes back from the dead and her grotesque body shows the materialization of death:

You couldn’t tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person’s face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person’s mouth was pale brown, with a rose-colored sore at either corner.

The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colors.

I smiled

The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin. (2001, 168)

These lines, reminiscent of her poem *Lady Lazarus* (1965), show the physical appearance of a resurrected genderless Esther. She comes back from the dead with a body deprived from any gender construction. According to Bronfen, “a colloquial understanding of the corpse is that it is not gendered, that it is an anonymous, inanimate body, pure materiality without soul or personality” (1992, 63-64). This abject Esther shows how “the construction of gender operates through *exclusionary* means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation” (Butler 1996, xvii) and how through death she has put an end to gender differentiation (Bronfen 1992, 64). Esther’s cadaverous resemblance erases all female traces from her body and, therefore, all the gender socially and culturally constructed impositions. Bronfen explains that “because the corpse is a figure without any distinguishing facial

traits of its own, one could say that semiotically it serves as an arbitrary, empty, interchangeable sign, an interminable surface for projections" (1992, 64) which reflects in Esther's colorful face and inhuman features in the "supernatural conglomeration of bright colors" (Plath 2001, 168). Esther's inability to recognize herself in the mirror symbolizes a process of deconstruction and erasure of her former self that firstly works as a revenge to the system. As Séllei affirms, "this disintegrated body and these body images could be considered as the location to resist and subvert the dominant discourses" (2003, 144). Esther attempts to destroy that part of herself that condemns her to be the woman she does not want to be and materializes that destruction in her featureless and genderless abjected body. Esther uses her tortured and manipulated body to fight against patriarchy but also McCarthy's power structure. As Foucault explains, "every power relationship implies, at least *in potential*, a strategy of struggle, in which the two forces are not superimposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused. Each constitute for the other a kind of permanent limit, a point of possible reversal" (1982, 794). Thus, Esther attempts to commit suicide and transforms her abjected ungendered body in a feminist resistance and as an escape from this McCarthyist power relations structure.

However, as Ashe concludes, "Plath makes clear very early in the novel that Esther Greenwood's experience will record a successful navigation through constraints and challenges, culminating in a "recovery," a restoration to well-being, that involves the assumption of marriage and motherhood" (1995, 218-19). In this sense, Esther's resurrection immerses her again in the system she wanted to escape from so eagerly. Even though her abjected and genderless body can be understood as a direct attack on the heteropatriarchal system, there is no other alternative for her but to remain in the system that punished her for rebelling against the imposed female roles: "wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (2001, 178). Esther's resignation shows the impossibility to free from the asphyxiating patriarchal impositions, the same that sentenced Ethel Rosenberg to the electric chair.

To conclude, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* can be read as a cultural and feminist response to McCarthyism in terms of how women became the pillars of the American society of the 1950s and, particularly, of the family and the domestic space. Great part of McCarthy's communist hunt was also based on anti-American activities and behaviors that could put in danger the essential values of American society. Marriage, motherhood and housewifery became the destiny of the women of the 1950s who, at the same time, in these conservative gender roles, sustained American consumerism and capitalism. Plath introduces in her novel the figure of Ethel Rosenberg as a fundamental influence for the protagonist of

the novel, Esther Greenwood, as a way to contest the gender constraints suffered by the women of her generation and future ones. Ethel Rosenberg's fight and death sentence awakened a feminist conscience in the women of the 1950s like Plath and her protagonist, which pushed them to question their roles in society and rewrite their female identities. Ethel's and Esther's betrayal to American society in their rejection to accomplish the imposed female roles contributes to their anti-American behavior and the conspiracy plots so common in the literature related to the McCarthy era. Sixty years after Plath's death, *The Bell Jar* is still contemporary as a feminist response to the conservative gender roles rooted in society and a visionary text in terms of how women and their inflicted patriarchal roles in society sustain contemporary capitalism. In this sense, Plath contributed with this novel not only with a cultural perception of feminism but, more importantly, with a political one understanding gender as a subject category that intersects with other social aspects. Plath's *The Bell Jar* stands as a literary text representative of McCarthy's times and a basic feminist novel to understand contemporary feminist literature.

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