

Torn Together

An Analysis of Internal Conflict and Feelings
of Guilt as Components of Sylvia Plath's *The
Bell Jar* and *Johnny Panic and the Bible of
Dreams*

Elena Lui



A Thesis Presented to The Department of Literature,
Area Studies and European Languages In Partial
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Master's Degree
in English Literature

University of Oslo

Fall 2016

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<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Print: Copylab, Ferrara, Italy

Abstract

My thesis focuses on the aspects of internal conflicts and feelings of guilt as a lens to read Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and selected short stories from the prose anthology *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. My aim is to give a different perspective on Plath's works from the point of mental struggle and analyze any new points of view that develop from the topics of inner struggle and guilt.

The relationship of the female protagonists with the male figures raises questions about the double standards and differences between the sexes in a patriarchal family-centered society. This is so widespread and rooted that it becomes normality for women. Dissenting reactions are habitually met with exclusion, so control and suppression of real emotions becomes normality for them. The characters know that they cannot freely express themselves, and this lack of autonomy also leads to mental strain. They are constantly torn between the yearning to rebel and to belong to the community at the same time. As a consequence the female characters play a role to hide their uniqueness, which results in problems such as the need of control, the pursuit of perfection and frequent self-sabotage.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Rebecca Scherr, for her teachings, guidance and patience throughout this journey.

A heartfelt thank you to my whole family for their constant support; the most special thanks is for my mum, Amalia, for her support, help and unconditional love. To my grandpa Mario, for always watching over me.

To my wonderful partner Andrea, thank you! I just cannot sum up here everything you have done.

And thank you to all my beloved friends for their support, jokes and comfort through thick and thin.

To Professor Randi Langen Moen from the University of Bologna, a heartfelt thank you for your help from the very beginning and for inspiring me with your lectures.

Writing this thesis has been a long and difficult journey out of a bell jar of my own, but this process has definitely taught me a great deal about myself.

A mio nonno Mario
To my grandpa Mario

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	VI
Acknowledgments.....	VIII
Table of Contents.....	X
Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: Relationship with Male Figures.....	12
1.1 Father Figure.....	12
1.2 Partner Figure.....	21
1.3 Authority Figures.....	34
1.4 Minor Figures.....	43
CHAPTER TWO: Fitting In and Sticking Out – The Ambivalent Desire Between Conforming to the Group and Being Unique.....	47
2.1 Conforming and Rebelling.....	48
2.2 Ambivalence and Choices.....	52
2.3 Self-Sabotage.....	67
2.4 Strong Pressure.....	72
CHAPTER THREE: Consequences of Ambivalence and Guilt.....	78
3.1 Pursuit of Perfection.....	79
3.2 Suffocate Eccentricity.....	84
3.3 Play a Role.....	93
3.4 Need of Control.....	99
Conclusion.....	109
Bibliography.....	116

Introduction

My thesis focuses on the aspects of internal conflicts and feelings of guilt in Sylvia Plath's prose works *The Bell Jar* (1963) and *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1977). My aim is to analyze how those features and their interaction play a crucial role in Plath's novel and anthology of short stories and prose writings. They are useful tools to observe her narrative from different perspectives that center on ambivalence and dichotomy as well as seeing new angles of her narrative. For instance, the relationship with male figures and patriarchal society is seen under the lens of dichotomy and conflicts; the focus is both on the role of women and on women being torn because of internal conflicts about their choices, which generate mental struggle. Moreover analyzing Plath's prose from the point of view of ambivalence and guilt adds the elements of an existence based on conflicts and the consequences on a split self to Plath's scrutiny. Indeed, themes related to female identity and its relationship to society develop from the topics of inner struggle and guilt. Plath's works have been extensively analyzed, especially her poetry and *The Bell Jar*, but I have not come across many comparisons of her most famous novel and collection of short stories.

The compare and contrast analysis of Plath's prose works is from the perspective of feminist and psychoanalytic criticism. However, it is important to underline that a psychoanalytic critique does not entail psychoanalyzing Plath. Pamela Ryan underlines "that I am using psychoanalysis not as a

diagnostic but as an interpretative tool. In other words, I am not presuming to put Plath on the couch" (8). Basically, I certainly do not want to examine the reasons behind the author's mental strain. What I would like to achieve is observing some of the characteristics of her work that are related to mental health issues, something the author knew about first hand.

The historical context is just as important. The author's point of view is that of a white middle class woman, therefore when I generally speak about females in the thesis I mean just that. I am going to examine the narrative of a female author writing in the 1950s; society, its norms and attitude towards women play a relevant role in Plath's writing. Indeed society actively contributes to the internal conflicts, guilt and resulting mental struggles of Plath's characters. And writing about this becomes important in terms of representation and elucidation of women's condition and what society's pressure on them generated. The patriarchal control of women "kept women in the dark – that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute-" (Cixous 876), which is also a common theme of the two works. Plath's themes based on dichotomy and guilt spread awareness not only on anxiety and depression, but also on the division that yearning for two opposite things such as both belonging and rebelling that women felt due to the demands of society.

The internal conflicts of the female protagonists mainly develop from the divergence between societal expectations for women and their individual desires. The key issue is that they aspire to more than what is

demanded from them, but following an independent path is stigmatized, hence society redirects women towards what is deemed appropriate by the majority. Then that unconstrained desire becomes guilt-laden, because it strays from what is judged ideal. Hence self-reproach becomes a relevant and recurrent feature in women's lives. Betty Friedan and Elaine Tyler-May paint a picture of the 1950s as a time characterized by focus on "containment" (Tyler-May, 16) and family life. *The Feminine Mystique* and *Homeward Bound* include numerous and varied examples of the struggle and of the psychological problems that arise from a situation of control and repression.

Naturally, depression and psychological problems might have several causes, and some of them and their interaction are still a topic of research. Grohol states that "it is generally believed that all mental disorders – including clinical depression – are caused by a complex interaction and combination of biological, psychological and social factors" (<http://psychcentral.com/lib/the-causes-of-depression>). Hence there are different possible reasons for inner conflicts, but it is clear from the numerous examples in Plath's narratives that her contemporary society played an important role.

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston in 1932 from Otto and Aurelia Schober Plath (Wagner-Martin *Two Views* http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/twoviews.htm). An important fact of her biography is that her father died when the author was

eight years old (Wagner-Martin *Two Views* http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/twoviews.htm). This influenced her whole life, her writing included. In the first chapter of the thesis I will analyze how childhood bereavement is a factor of depression, which leads to internal conflicts and guilt (DSM-V 161, 820), something Plath dealt with during her whole life and is a topic of her narratives. Plath, according to Holmes, is "culturally divided between America and England, as she was divided by so many other identities and roles" (<http://find.galegroup.com>). Childhood bereavement is unlikely to be properly dealt with by children on their own. The severity of the event marks the child and possibly causes an inner crisis, which continues later in life and is a cause of internal struggle. In addition, the complexity of childhood bereavement also consists of a division in the child between sorrow and anger towards the deceased parent. So division follows Plath's characters throughout their entire lives. Ambivalence and dichotomy structure Plath's prose works, even though the author deals differently with them in *The Bell Jar* and *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. In the latter work there is an opening to see eccentricity and a more autonomous existence as an opportunity for the development of the female character instead of a negative feature that results in exclusion. In both works there is a critique to a society based on the double standard and control; although in the prose anthology the critique is somehow more straightforward. The shorter nature of the texts allows for a more direct approach to the subject matter.

Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* is a fictional autobiography published in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, which deals with events that happened in the 1950s to a scholarship girl doing an internship at a fashion magazine in New York (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Bell-Jar>). Mental struggle and depression are at the centre, as "Plath examines coming of age in a hypocritical world" (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Bell-Jar>). Indeed, in the novel, society's values and treatment of women show its flaws with the double standards and injustice towards them. Plath frequently deals with such topics, which are the basis for the development of other related themes such as identity and decision making issues.

Initial critics of Plath's novel had a confessional approach to the work, as Al Alvarez, M. L. Rosenthal, C. B. Cox and A. R. Jones did (Gill *Cambridge Introduction* 115-116). In other words, they saw Plath's work almost as one with her life, the fictional element of the works not being as significant to their analyses. Although the autobiographical elements are a part of Plath's texts, not considering the prevailing fictional element is limiting and leaves out a fundamental part of the critique. That is the reason why later critics tend to leave the autobiographical part to the side or refuse it completely. This is the case for Britzolakis, editors Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain, Cynthia Sugars, Luke Ferretter and several more. In the analysis of the reception of Plath's works Gill mentions the "study of mythical elements" (*Cambridge Introduction* 117) as well as a feminist (*Cambridge Introduction* 119) and psychoanalytical

approach (*Cambridge Introduction* 123). Other critics explore Plath focusing on an historical and political point of view (*Cambridge Introduction* 125).

For my analysis I use prevalently feminist and psychoanalytic criticism. I analyze the role of the woman in a patriarchal society and the relationship of the female characters to male figures in addition to exploring internal conflicts and feelings of guilt in ambivalent and split female characters; Plath's surroundings such as the society she is part of are also a focal point of my work. The element of mental illness in the form of internal conflict and guilt I chose as a basis for my work was a part of Plath's life as well as of her characters'. However, apart from a biographical foundation of some of the life episodes that are present in the two prose works, the biographical element ends here. I will be focusing on the mental strain as represented in the texts, on its link to society and on the topics that develop from this basis, not on Plath's psychological problems.

Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams is a collection of short stories, journal passages and prose in general published posthumously in 1977. Atwood is ambivalent about the work, comparing it to "rummagings in bureau drawers that the author, had she lived, would doubtless have kept firmly locked" (Atwood <https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/01/home/plath-johnny.html>).

Although she recognizes the value of the narrative and changes her initial claim that it can attract mainly Plath-interested readers (Atwood <https://www.nytmies.com/books/98/03/01/home/plath-johnny.html>). But at

first due to the nature of the pieces the anthology was not considered as influential as Plath's novel. Here Plath deals with themes and images that she uses in *The Bell Jar* as well. It is interesting to notice similarities and differences of focus, in addition to a varied perspective in this shorter prose fiction, which was not always intended for publishing.

The reception of this work presents the same questions about the autobiographical or fictional nature of the narrative that is also an issue in Plath's poetry. However, the main issue about the anthology is about its quality compared to Plath's other works of prose and poetry. It is the argument of Homberger's and Atwood's critique; both of them consider "the student" to be the core audience of the collected works (Homberger 281, Atwood <https://nytimes.com/books/98/03/01/home/plath-johnny.html>). The dilemma is not the quality of the work per se, but how it measures up to Plath's more famous and appreciated narratives.

Then further critique deals with different elements that can be found in the prose assortment. Although there is less criticism about *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* compared to *The Bell Jar*, the historical point of view is the main focus of critics. A psychoanalytical standpoint can be applied to the short stories as well, Dobson writes about mental illness in the short story *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1958), and combines it with the biographical element. The work is also analyzed from an ecocritical and postmodern position by Ragaiðiene. My aim is to compare and contrast

Plath's short stories with her novel from the point of view of internal conflicts and feelings of guilt.

In the prose works mental struggle comes in the form of internal conflicts and guilt. What is wrong with the protagonist? Betty Friedan calls it "the problem that has no name" (26), because even women themselves did not understand the real cause of their distress (26). The general life conditions for men and women improved, so it was deemed weird and questionable to be depressed. Better wages and governmental aids (Tyler-May 157) laid the basis for "the house and commodity boom" (Tyler-May 159); but this also contributed to further promote the long-established division between the sexes that sees the woman at home and the man working (Tyler May 163). The rigidity of this partition caused dissatisfaction and anxiety to women, so that mental struggle was a reality for many women in the 1950s. Kristeva claims that "within depression, if my existence is on the verge of collapsing, its lack of meaning is not tragic – it appears obvious to me, glaring and inescapable" (3). In other words, reality for a struggling person is the gloomy, empty life that lies before their eyes. What they see becomes the truth. Esther Greenwood and the majority of the female protagonists in the prose anthology acknowledge their dissatisfaction with some of their living conditions, but the conflicted feelings about most of the everyday occurrences represent their reality and do not induce any reflection about them or attempt to ameliorations.

The thesis is divided in three chapters. In the first I will deal with the protagonists' relationship with male figures. It is important to underline that the focus is not only on their conduct towards females, influenced by the patriarchal society, but also on the queries about individuality and the central characters' reactions to the male figures' roles in their lives. Both the stiffness of gender roles and the double standard between men and women were a cause of anxiety and general frustration that was not usually talked about or taken seriously when it happened: for instance the desire for a better balance between the genders was criticized, even if it was only a yearning for more equality regarding freedom and autonomy in everyday life. This combination develops into depression and feelings of guilt in women.

The second chapter is about conforming and rebelling against the majority. The protagonists' ambivalence towards fitting in or sticking out is an unsolved issue in most of Plath's prose, and from such a dichotomy other recurring topics develop. In Plath's prose the struggle in making choices, self-sabotage and the strong pressure females felt coming from the patriarchal society are additional points of view that are useful in order to observe her work from different angles. A constant ambivalence means internal conflicts in a divided self, a condition that increasingly undermines the individual. The situation is further complicated by the pressure women felt from society's relentless judgment of their personal choices.

The third chapter is about the consequences of ambivalence and guilt in the female characters' lives. The characters' individuality is damaged by

society's active pursuit of suffocating the uniqueness of the personality. The main problem is eccentricity, which is seen as an error to correct, because unconventional behavior means sticking out of the solid group. As a consequence the characters feel they must hide their real selves and they start to play a role. They believe that they need to pursue an unattainable perfection and overly control their lives in order to conceal the uneasiness they feel hiding their real personalities.

To sum up, the problematic relationship to the patriarchal society, here specifically represented by the male characters, brings awareness to the disappointment that women feel because they do not feel in charge of their decisions. The female characters feel the prying eyes of society on them, and this pressure from the outside soon becomes a pressure from within as well. As a consequence women hide their individuality behind a mask, since they feel that they are flawed, because of the idea that being different equals imperfection, which originates from society's judgment. In brief the accepted side can be safely exposed while the other must be kept hidden. The division the female characters always experience causes mental struggle, expressed through the internal conflict and the feelings of guilt analyzed in the thesis.

Plath's works are not only seen under the lens of depression, as Plath's works that deal with psychoanalytic examinations usually are, but specifically from the points of view of the characters being divided into contradictory alternatives, and the resulting feeling of guilt. Themes that explore the female protagonists' conflicted identities particularly develop from duality and guilt.

Those additional perspectives of Plath's analysis include her characters wearing the mask of the ideal woman in order to be able to function in society, and keeping their individual traits concealed or even trying to suppress them. In addition, the need to control and self-sabotage themselves due to the pressure from a controlling patriarchic society are all direct results of internal conflicts and guilt.

CHAPTER ONE

Relationship with Male Figures

The analysis of the female characters' relationship with the various male figures present and absent in their lives reveals their struggle with internal conflicts and feelings of guilt. Mostly those internal conflicts are not about the male figures themselves, but about the issues about feelings and individuality their role in the female's life reawakens. Plath's own struggles in real life are mirrored in the actions of her protagonists.

The relationship with male figures, which I divided into father figure, partner figure, authority figures and minor figures, brings to the surface feelings of internal conflict and guilt that challenge Plath's prose characters. This internal ambivalence is a part of their identity and a recurrent topic in Plath's prose works. It would be too simplistic to say that the characters' inner tension is only caused by the men in their life wronging them. Naturally, this can also be the case. Mostly though I think that ordinary everyday life events and the characters' reactions to them develop internal conflict and guilt in the female protagonists.

1.1 Father Figure

Both Esther and Alice, protagonists of *The Bell Jar* and *Among the Bumblebees* (Early 1950s), lost their father at a very young age, as Plath did.

The death of the father and his absence are determinant factors that will influence every child's development and its whole life. The trauma is too intense and deep for a child to process and overcome autonomously as an adult might do. For instance, Plath frequently experiences internal conflict between grief and anger towards her father (Rietz 417, Ramazani 1143-1149). Her inability to handle these feelings is one of the reasons of her mental problems. In the case of the relationship to the father figure, Plath puts her life into her work and her female characters reveal conflicting issues towards their fathers. Further on I will analyze how internal conflicts, followed by guilt, play a central role in the characters' mental issues.

The author herself defines her father as her "buried male muse" (*Journals* 223). After all, he is obviously absent and present and very much alive at the same time in both her poetry and prose. Not only does she frequently and openly write about him, but also about the scars left in the author related to her father having left her are revealed in her works. Otto Plath leaves a significant mark in his daughter's development and thus in her relationship with other people, society, and specifically with men. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther realizes she has never cried for her father's death (159), and having never been to the funeral made "the graveyard and even his death (...) unreal to me" (159). But with his tomb at last in front of her she has a "realization" her father really died, so she has a breakdown and cries uncontrollably. The relevancy of this episode is proved by Esther's suicide attempt with pills, which will be after her visit to the graveyard (*TBJ* 161). Esther

started to seriously consider the idea of ending her life after her return from New York (*TBJ* 131), but the final decision is made after she sees her father's tomb. As if Esther needed a sort of final proof that her father died. This confirmation seems to be the last straw for her already troubled mind.

Childhood bereavement is linked to depression and psychological issues in later life by many scholars. Guilt and internal conflicts are linked to depression. In the discussion about childhood mourning there are different schools of thought. Osterweis, Solomon and Green acknowledge that it "may precipitate or contribute to the development of a variety of psychiatric disorders and that this experience can render a person emotionally vulnerable for life" (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>). Basically, their point is that childhood bereavement and mental issues are directly related. Then other researchers maintain that variables like children's age when the loss occurs (Barry and Lindemann, Norton), or which parent dies (Altschul and Beiser) or even the type of mental illness the child will experience later in life (Barry, Remus-Araico), play the main role in their thesis. On the one hand, I agree that the combination of variables may change the situation of bereaved children. But on the other hand, in my opinion the really crucial idea is that early parental death is a prominent cause of mental impairment in different situations and stages of life.

The grief for their father's death is seldom openly mentioned in both of Plath's prose works, nonetheless the characters' struggle is evident. The "increased vulnerability to physical and mental illness" (Fulton, Bendiksen,

Markusen 110-117) that scholars focus on when dealing with childhood bereavement, in Plath's real life, becomes a diagnosed depression treated with therapy, medications and electroshock. Her protagonist Esther suffers the same fate, she experiences a breakdown, she does not feel like washing or sleeping, and she is mentally and physically unable to do anything that could relieve her level of stress and sadness. Such as writing or taking a summer course that could keep her out of her mother's house, one of Esther's biggest sources of anxiety. But *The Bell Jar* protagonist does not have the tools or the help to process the conflicting feelings in her mind and she goes through depression.

Differently from *The Bell Jar*, in *Among the Bumblebees* Sylvia Plath openly writes about losing a father at a young age. The short story revolves entirely around the intense relationship between father and daughter. The protagonist is Alice, a little girl who adores and idolizes her father, whose sudden brief illness and subsequent death leave the girl lost and wounded. The succinct span of the work is entirely occupied by Alice's strong feelings of love and then of fear and grief. The short story ends with Alice calling out for her unconscious father and receiving no answer (*JPBD* 266), her voice is described as "suppliant" (*JPBD* 266). The word choice is not casual; the author can only use a strong and evocative adjective to recall the most painful experience of her childhood. When the short story ends there is no mention of what will happen to Alice in the future. But the word choice used and leaving a disorientated little girl alone in such a significant moment

leaves the reader with a feeling that this episode will have a great relevance in Alice's life. Plath also writes that "she did not know then that in all the rest of her life there would be no one to walk with her" (*JPBD* 266). Especially with knowledge of Plath's life and other works, these words are from a person who knew exactly what was awaiting Alice.

The father figure is of the highest importance for a child's mental and emotional development and welfare. A considerable number of studies on the role of the father, even if focusing on different aspects of the paternal role, all agree on its importance in his offspring's life. Specifically, the father plays a decisive role in order to help his child to become an independent adult individual capable of properly functioning in society (Zoja 337- 340). Whereas the mother-child relationship, equally valuable, has a different kind of task; it is generally more exclusive and primarily includes mother and child (Zoja 340). Specifically mothers "are most often the primary source of physical comfort and safety for the child" (Mallers, Charles, Neupert and Almeida 3). Generally mothers are more nurturing while fathers are more prone to encourage challenges. In other words, the father assists his child in setting out on the journey that is life, specifically with the role of aid in overcoming autonomously difficult situations and building their own unique life experience. To take a case in point, Alice Denway's father is described throughout the story as a strong "awe-inspiring" (*JPBD* 262) person. He is "a giant of a man" (*JPBD* 259) and Alice "worshipped her father because he was so powerful" (*JPBD* 259). Her fears, whether of deep waters or storms and

lightning, gradually dissolve when he is with her (*JPBD* 263, 264). Plath's word choice underlines multiple times how, from the child's point of view, the father is seen as physically and mentally strong, to the point of being unbeatable. Consequently, if the father fails to give his child support in terms of coping with the external world so early in life, this may very likely cause problems to a person later in life, to the point of having psychological issues.

Due to the shorter length of a short story, in *Among the Bumblebees* Plath limits the focus to the moment of the father's death during Alice's childhood and does not show any additional consequences, but in *The Bell Jar* the author describes a young adult resenting it greatly. Esther is an exceptionally unresolved person. She is regularly ambivalent every time she has to make a decision. Buddy Willard is the one letting Esther know she has neurotic characteristics, she is aware of her constant ambivalence and declares: "if neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days" (*TBJ* 89). This admission gives a general picture of what goes on in Esther's mind. The episodes of her life frequently describe similar feelings.

Indeed internal conflicts are a substantial part of both *The Bell Jar* and the short stories in the *Johnny Panic* anthology. The guilt that follows is another recurring element in the prose works. As an illustration, the child has an irrational subconscious guilt of being in some way responsible for the death of the parent, or for not having prevented it. Even having survived and being

alive while the parent is dead is a part of the child's guilt. "Did I cause this to happen?" (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>) is likely to be the question bereaved children ask themselves according to Osterweis, Solomon, and Green. Regardless of the unfounded nature of this issue, obviously they cannot be responsible of an accident or an illness, this question is inevitably added to the trauma in the child's life. And it is combined with the sudden and absolute change of adjusting to life without a parent. To take a case in point, Plath's own words to her college roommate Nancy Hunter Steiner explain the ambivalence and guilt she felt towards her father. "I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged and died, I imagined that I had killed him" (Steiner 45). So the children's fantasy of partaking in some unexplainable way in their parent's death stays with them throughout their life and becomes real in their minds. Indeed in her *Journals* Plath mentions dreams and fantasies about having been involved in Otto Plath's death (301). If never disproved, this vision influences their perception of reality and their future. This particular life issue is present in Plath's works as well, especially those dealing with young females who lost their father in childhood.

But the feeling of resentment towards Otto Plath may also be explained as the feeling his death was a "deliberate abandonment", as Osterweis, Solomon and Green (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>) point out. They observe that children may tend to imagine the death of a parent with a deceitful undertone, too. Resentment may seem a strong word to use, but as the

protagonist of *Among the Bumblebees* example illustrates, the child feels deceived because it has been left alone and becomes wary and mistrustful. Alice feels "betrayed" (JPBD 266) when her unconscious sick father does not respond to her calls. Perhaps it is useful to remember that, as Ryan puts it, it is a "never-to-be-erased psychic wound caused by abandonment" (8). The pain is too deep-rooted for children to deal with, to the point that the thought that the abandonment goes beyond their parents' willpower never crosses their mind. The trust issues will last much longer than during childhood. Esther and Alice are very likely to fear to be abandoned by other people as their parent has already done to them. In Alice's case it is impossible to know for sure, since there is no narration of her adult life. Although for the protagonist of *The Bell Jar* entertaining relationships with people is always challenging, Perloff claims that "like her ambivalence to the women she meets, Esther's response to men is equally divided" (515).

Accordingly future changes in life will result to be much more challenging because they may remind them of the great shock of their life represented by their parent's death, which changed life as they knew it. As a consequence, those negative feelings "awaken echoes of old traumas, to which I realize I have never been able to resign myself. I can thus discover antecedents to my current breakdown in a loss, death or grief over someone or something that I once loved" (Kristeva 4-5). In making this comment, Kristeva observes that distressing experiences bring back damaging memories from the past, which spiral into depression and, consequently, into the inner struggle represented in Plath's works.

Any negative feeling towards a parent, and especially if said parent is dead, is very likely to cause a backlash of guilt in the child. Children know they should behave properly towards their parents, so they feel guilty for considering a parent in an unpleasant or destructive way. If not properly dealt with, guilt remains bottled up, but sooner or later it is released. Guilt is a characteristic part of Plath's mental issues, which are noticeable in her characters as well; the DSM-V lists guilt as one of the indicators of depression (161, 820). Its effects on Esther's psyche are visible in the relationship with her dead father (as well as with the other men in her life). I endorse what Ramazani argues about guilt and internal conflict involving Plath in the significantly titled essay *Daddy, I Have Had to Kill You*, where he writes that Plath "chastises herself for her ambivalence toward the dead man" (Ramazani 1148). She ought to feel nothing but love for her dead father, it may seem the only sensible thing to do, but she cannot help feeling anger and hate towards him as well. The daughter "is condemned to a world defined by his catastrophic death" (1148). Basically what Ramazani is saying is that ambivalence and internal conflicts are ever present in Plath's mind. In addition, these feelings provoke guilt, which fuels her mental issues. Ideally Plath should have broken free from the cage represented by these thoughts on her father, metaphorically "killing" him to be able to let go and release herself, but in the end it is unlikely she was able to do so.

The relationship with the father is the first bond with a male figure in a daughter's life, which highly influences her future sentimental relationships (Krohn and Bogan 9, 12). When the connection with the father is problematic

or unexpectedly severed, this may influence other relationships with men in a negative way as well. In addition, the prose protagonists' relationship with their partner figures are also influenced by other issues, such as the society they live in.

1.2 Partner Figure

The female protagonists' relationships with the partner figures in their lives are influenced by internal conflicts. Many women are guilt-ridden because, as Chesler puts it, "women's inability to adjust to or to be contented by feminine roles has been considered as a deviation from 'natural' female psychology rather than as a criticism of such roles" (*Women as Psychiatric and Psychotherapeutic Patients* 746). The role the patriarchal society imposed on women could not suit all of them as was demanded. A male partner expected not only a companion but also a dedicated housewife and mother, a primary role for a good wife. Conflicts emerge when there is discord between personal desires and "the proper thing to do" to be a respectable citizen. The issues related to Plath's love life and her thoughts about it are again used as an inspiration for her characters' struggles in both prose works; *Cambridge Notes* (February 1956) from the *Johnny Panic* anthology is taken from Plath's *Journals*. The author herself had a tumultuous marriage to the poet Ted Hughes, but despite deeply suffering from his cheating she was not always the victim. Her works and journals, backed up by scholars' studies, show a complicated and moody woman (Gerisch 736, Axelrod *The Second Destruction* 17, McCullough ix, Holmes

<http://find.galegroup.com>). I am going to analyze the characters of Buddy Willard in *The Bell Jar* and Richard in *Cambridge Notes*, who is a very similar but slightly different version of Buddy. Indeed there are great similarities in the protagonists' attitude towards problematic partner figures and relationships.

Once again, internal conflicts and guilt dominate Plath's mindset. The protagonists of her two prose works cannot make a choice between a standard suburban family life and a career, writing and experiencing the world. The latter would see them the protagonists of their own life, and following their individuality makes it of course a very appealing choice. But the former would be the appropriate option in order to be accepted into the virtuous branch of society. A respectable girl should become a good wife and mother, seemingly a less challenging and more tranquil choice. But only superficially, because the yearning to follow her own hopes is strong, so the eternal ambivalence characterizing Plath's characters tears the character between two options. And throughout both *The Bell Jar* and *Cambridge Notes* the protagonists shuttle between worldly experiences and family life. This includes indecision about issues on their dependency and independency from the partner figure. These issues are ordinary for a person who has never had the chance to gradually become independent from a father figure because their bond has been prematurely and suddenly cut. Plath "understands her dependency on her husband and the need to create an independent life apart from him" (Ryan 9). She acknowledges she is dependent from Ted Hughes during therapy with Ruth Beuscher, as is

recorded in her journals from 1957 and 1958 (Ryan 9). The author's contemporary society sees the dependency from a man, a breadwinner husband, as a proper goal to aim for. On the contrary, a woman is regarded with suspicion if she does not have this aim in mind. So the claim "I'm never going to get married" (TBJ 89) that Esther makes to Buddy carries great weight. She seems in no doubt at the moment, but nevertheless she will also keep changing her mind to comply to the unwritten rules of her time throughout the entire novel. Indeed Esther admits to Buddy that she will "be flying back and forth between one mutually elusive thing and another for the rest of my days" (TBJ 90). Specifically Esther fantasizes about big families and housewifery along with her dreaming of writing and an independent career.

Esther is also capable of making an important decision that goes against the "common sense" at the time. When she realizes that Buddy Willard is a hypocrite, she decides there and then to leave him and not look back once (TBJ 68-69), even if he has always been her crush. Esther says "what I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb" (TBJ 212) and she "hated the idea of serving men in any way" (TBJ 72). Hence independence and self-realization are strongly valued. Esther wants to be the protagonist of her life and to do her own influential work, not merely assist men in doing it. Even if she knows this is problematic. Wagner claims that "Greenwood's persona is clearly marked by feelings of uncertainty, based on her all-too-sharp understanding of her 'absence of power'" (TBJ as *Bildungsroman* www.sylviaplath.de/plath/wagner2.html). Esther perfectly knows what she is

doing is odd and if people knew they would consider her foolish. She considers a whole new identity in Chicago because "then nobody would know I had thrown up a scholarship at a big eastern women's college and mucked up a month in New York and refused a perfectly solid medical student for a husband who would one day be a member of the A.M.A. and earn pots of money" (TBJ 127). Esther knows that following society's dictates would make her miserable, but anyway feels guilty for choosing to follow her heart. Plath's dependency on a partner figure is so strong that she even blames men when "they didn't stay around and love me like a father" (Journals 431). In *Cambridge Notes* the protagonist expects an exceptionally deep feeling from a man. A relationship similar to a father-daughter relationship, as if a partner figure should act as a father surrogate, to make up for what she missed. Speaking about Plath Rietz claims that "clearly Otto Plath was a tremendously powerful force in her psychic economy, one which had to be addressed" (417), but I think that this can be applied to her characters as well. In this case Plath writes about a fundamental issue in her life. Indeed Rietz adds that "Plath returned again and again to the story of a daughter, whoever she may be, whose mental life is dominated by her father" (Rietz, 418). The theme of the father is influential both in Plath's life and consequently in her works. The topic of a relationship with a man comparable to a father-daughter bond emerges in *Cambridge Notes* when the author, talking about a male acquaintance, claims that "even he could be a father. And I cry so to be held by a man; some man, who is a father" (JPBD 205). It does not even matter who this figure may be; she requires a father figure so desperately that

she looks for it in partner figures. What the protagonist wishes is not only dependency, but also a guide.

Plath's characters are also yearning to be free from the ties of a partner figure and a family life that would see them sacrificing their individuality and desires. Wagner observes that in the short stories in the *Johnny Panic* collection there is an opponent, or as she puts it an "antagonist" (*Specialness in Short Stories* 5), and "in several cases, a boyfriend or lover is the adversary" (*Specialness in Short Stories* 5). Wagner's point is that despite the need for partner figures, they are also an obstacle to a full realization of the character. In *Cambridge Notes* the protagonist admits that there is an "absurd faith which keeps me chaste" (*JPBD* 203) for Richard. Not a desire to do so, but an imposition from the outside, even though the next sentences deal with her intense passion for him. And most importantly she declares her power over a man; she is able of rendering him "invincible on this earth" or "go around castrating the arrogant ones" (*JPBD* 206).

Nevertheless ambivalence is constantly a feature of Plath's work, because in the next sentences Richard is the one who holds the power (*JPBD* 207). Plath reminds us that the internal battle goes on, and speaking about Richard she elevates him as a kind of divinity when she says she has "grown to the woman I am now, all because of this boy named Richard" (*JPBD* 203). According to Chesler women who did not make changes according to society's directions were deemed to be the problematic people at fault (*Patient and Patriarch* www.arsfemina.de/woman-sexist-society/patient-and-

patriarch-women-psychotherapeutic-relationship). So, as much as the protagonist values herself and her creativity, she goes back to considering herself not good enough to grow independently.

Plath deals with the partner figure in somewhat different ways in *The Bell Jar* and *Cambridge Notes*. Although it is true that ambivalence towards them is a common topic. The focus of the short story is almost entirely on the protagonist's feelings for Richard and her thoughts about the partner figure and her own role in the relationship. There is no plot to "distract" the reader from the flow of thoughts. On the contrary, in the novel Plath obviously deals with a greater variety of themes and characters in numerous scenes and episodes. But even if the partner figure is not always the focus, the reader has a clear idea of Esther's position.

In *Cambridge Notes* the protagonist openly declares her love (JPBD 203) and speaks more explicitly about her feelings and passion for Richard, whereas in *The Bell Jar* Esther is more cautious. She is thrilled about going to the Yale Junior Prom with Buddy (TBJ 56) and she is clearly in love with him (TBJ 53, 58) too, but her feelings are not as directly stated.

Both prose protagonists alike feel love and hate for their partners, to the point that at times the irresolution seems to drain them of their energies. Similarly, the author compares the partner figure to the paternal figure (and does more clearly so in *Cambridge Notes*); this love/hate dichotomy resembles that in the poem "Daddy", where the author mixes grief and hate

(Ramazani 1143-1149) using aggressive words such as "Fascist", "devil" and "bastard" (*The Collected Poems* 183). It is important to notice how both prose protagonists feel self-confident enough to stand on their own without a male partner at their side, distancing themselves from society's directions, but only with the usual vacillation between dependency and independency.

Plath's characters feel resentment towards the double standard that influences the everyday life of men and women. The inequality of treatment meted out to the two sexes, added to the characters' own internal conflicts, increases the burden already weighing them down. The double standard includes the diversity of choices available for men and women, which again are based on genders. For instance, men did not have to choose between a career and a family. This increases the characters' internal conflict; often they are not only hesitant when placed before choices, but they also feel guilty because some of the choices they find appealing are disapproved by society.

In *The Bell Jar* what strikes Esther the most is the hypocrisy of sexist discrimination. It is something that fuels Esther's conflicts. Perloff claims that the "focus in *The Bell Jar* is not on mental illness per se, but on the relationship of Esther's private psychosis to her larger social situation" (511). And occurrences about gender inequity are examples of what she finds unjust. Esther is especially angered at Buddy Willard, who she considers a fraud for not standing up to his choice of not preserving his virginity until marriage and "pretending all this time to be so innocent" (*TBJ* 66) and even less

experienced than Esther. In two sharp and sarcastic paragraphs Plath writes four times the words "fine and clean" (TBJ 64) referring to the opinion people had of Buddy and his family, and that she also should remain fine and clean to be worthy of a boy like him. Ironically when the scene unfolds he is just about to strip naked in front of her, but the idea is coming from such a high moral standard that Esther "didn't really see the harm in anything Buddy would think up to do" (TBJ 64).

And a greater kind of hypocrisy exasperates and confuses Esther, that is the difference in the consequences concerning freedom, especially sexual freedom, men and women are likely to experience. Here Tyson's claim that a patriarchal society elevates men in spite of women is fitting (84-86). Society's reaction to Buddy's affairs would be completely different than its reaction to Esther's discarding her virginity in favor of a complete stranger. Esther's suffering and conflicts are related to the double standard as well. Leonard observes that "'good' and 'bad' has been institutionalized by society (...) a girl is either 'nice or she is not'" (70). In other words there is no middle way, she can be either virtuous and included or troublesome and rejected. In *The Bell Jar* this is summed up in the episode of the movie starring "a nice blonde girl" and "a sexy black-haired girl" (39) and two boys. Even before the movie ends Esther figures out the happy ending is solely for the well-behaving deserving girl, the other who dared going with a man ends up alone. Esther already knows the conclusion far too well because she has seen similar situations again and again during her whole life.

Furthermore, freedom to Esther also means to be released from the restraint represented by having children. In fact, child rearing is a full time occupation for a woman, since she is burdened by the vast majority of responsibilities. Especially throughout *The Bell Jar* there is a clear feeling Esther does think children can impair her life. Her statement "children made me sick" (*TBJ* 113) is unambiguous, even if maybe too bold considering that Esther also mentions having children as a possibility from time to time. But Esther also adds "if I happened to feel like it" (127), claiming that she is not sure about what to do but hopefully intends to decide for herself. Not surprisingly, the societal expectation that women unquestionably desire a family is a source of internal struggle and guilt for not conforming that was a major problem at the time. Pinke observes that for a woman to "find her place in a society with expectation of 'femininity' with which she cannot identify" (Pinke 4, ctd. in Krafft 288) is a major problem. Esther cannot relate and wants to leave her options open, so in the beginning of the novel she briefly mentions a baby for the first and only time (*TBJ* 3). The ambiguity leaves the reader wondering what happened, if maybe Esther had a baby at some point in her life. Even if this contradicts Esther's opinion about an unplanned child representing a catastrophe. Starting to use birth control, even if a disapproved practice for an unmarried young woman, significantly makes her feel more secure. She feels as sexually free as men are.

The double standard is related to options as well. "What she realizes is that Buddy can construct his own sexual identity while she cannot" (Badia

134), she simply does not have the same alternatives that Buddy has, in other words he can have affairs without serious consequences. Primarily he can build his life as he sees fit and become both a doctor and a father. Buddy becomes a spokesperson of society when he tells Esther "in a sinister and knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore" (*TBJ* 81, *Badia* 133). The choice of words "sinister" and "conspiracy" is not casual, it feels almost like an ineluctable act perpetuated by society against Esther. Her range of choice is strictly controlled and limited, even if for both, man and woman, to have a job and a family would certainly be a possibility.

The double standard issue may appear less evident in *Cambridge Notes* because of the shorter nature of the work, but it still is a relevant subject that affects the characters. The gap between expectations and opportunities for men and women is present here, too. It is evident in minor occasions as well, when the protagonist asks herself "why is it that the man must so often take the lead?" (*JPBD* 208). But her real question seems to be why must she wait for Richard, silent and obedient, pretending she does not mind to do so, when really this causes her suffering? Krafft cleverly calls this "a catch-22" (289), where "the woman who appears to be 'all right' actually consigns herself to an unhealthy life" (289). She actually mentions *The Bell Jar* and *The Feminine Mystique* when referring to it (Krafft 289), but I think this applies to *Cambridge Notes* as well, because the tension and suffering due to double standards are evident. The protagonist does not feel that she can safely

complain of the difference between the male's roles and hers. It would not be accepted.

Again double standards are present concerning sexual freedom and freedom of choice. The protagonist remains chaste for Richard, but she does so unwillingly, it is not her real choice. In fact she calls an "absurd faith" (JPBD 203) the feeling that pushes her to do so. She feels obliged because she is taught to do so. She goes even so far as to call "rehearsal" for Richard (JPBD 203) whatever she does or say to other boys she dates. She does not allow herself to live, while he is in France, having affairs with others (JPBD 203). The double standard is so deeply rooted in her that it is normal not to live accordingly to her desires. The duality is ever-present. First the author mentions grand dreams of plans to "break through limit after limit" (JPBD 209), then a yearning for a "love to cook and make a house, and surge force into a man's dreams" (JPBD 216). "Yet the choice is so important, it frightens me little. A lot." (JPBD 216). Rosi Smith argues that "the culture of personal, as well as political, containment (supported by education) curtailed the sanctioned possibilities for women's development" (34). The consequences for such an important choice are relevant, it could mean being accepted or rejected by society.

Differently from *The Bell Jar*, the topic of maternity is not mentioned at length in *Cambridge Notes*. Although the reference to motherhood expresses a requirement for acceptance into the group that is society, more than a real desire for children (JPBD 207). The same requirement that is needed in order

to be part of the Mothers' Union in *Mothers* (1962). In addition to conforming to the majority and join the religious meetings with the other married mothers. Selden's claim that "oppressed women whose subordinate position is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth" (120) underlines how society elevates those who conform to their ideal and condemns those who do not. Esther in *Mothers* is joyfully allowed into the group because she, at least apparently, fits the requirements. The outsider Mrs. Nolan is gently but firmly refused entrance (JPBD 115, 116).

Both prose works present partner figures who are at the same time manipulative and appealing men. Despite the constant ambivalence of both protagonists towards the male figures, when the female characters start to feel better they also seem to understand their worth regardless of the presence of a partner at their side. When alone Plath seems to find her creative voice again and Esther decides to leave Buddy and get on with her life. As Wagner puts it analyzing Plath's short stories in the *Johnny Panic* collection, they are portrayed as "antagonists (...) operating against the protagonist and her instinctive wishes" (*Specialness in Short Stories* 5). They do not help the female characters. Again an inner contradiction rules Plath's works and mind, love and hate are equally and alternatively present. Guilt follows because of the lack of courage to finally be able to follow her own mind and get rid of an openly negative figure. Guilt would result even if the protagonists had such courage, because their choice would be against the responsible life directions they have heard about for their entire lives. The

difficulty in eliminating a problematic figure arises from the complexity of the father figure, who also has a negative connotation. And Esther cannot psychologically detach herself from the father figure, who influences her life and relationships with potential partners.

The Bell Jar and *Cambridge Notes* share the same aggressiveness towards double standards concerning the development of women. It is one of Plath's major topics and one that causes the most tension in her characters. Because it causes conflict in the author herself and on countless other women; Wagner maintains that "even the most conservative women authors create narratives manifesting an acute tension between what any normal human being might desire and what a woman must become" (*TBJ as Bildungsroman* www.sylvia.plath.de/plath/wagner2.html). The tension leads to internal conflict and guilt.

Society's norms, even those concerning motherhood, do not come naturally to the two female protagonists. The family, which Tyler-May names "the bastion of safety" (9), becomes the opposite for Plath's characters. The partner figures in these two prose works are very similar in their features, and the protagonists have rather similar feelings towards them, for the reason that the partner represents society and its dictates, whose inequality troubles the protagonists. But the common point is the ambivalence between dependence and independence because of fear of society's reaction and the pain the restrictions for females cause (Gentry 97).

The features of the partner figures in a patriarchic society often resemble the traits of authority figures, another important feature influencing the protagonists' life. Because similarly to authority figures, partners also aim to steer women towards a specific direction, one that women did not decide themselves.

1.3 Authority Figures

Male authority figures in Plath's prose have in common the fact of being unpleasant and annoying individuals who are somehow disliked by the protagonists. Generally, they are not involved in the protagonists' personal growth either, what they do is try to change and mold the female character more than helping them in a constructive way. This becomes another source of internal conflict. When a supposedly expert person claims something is wrong with an individual, it is very likely that said individual starts to question him or herself. Then guilt is what follows: I am not as I should be but I do not wish I was either. Therefore something must be wrong.

In the prose works I am analyzing, the protagonists are trying to fend for themselves in an authoritarian society. Several critics, feminist and not, such as Rosi Smith, Tyson and DeLaurentis, speak extensively about society's role in *The Bell Jar*, but their views can be applied to the *Johnny Panic* short stories as well. Their common point is that society set the norm and people had to adapt to it (Rosi Smith 36, Tyson 84-85, DeLaurentis 124). Through the authority figures Plath once again represents patriarchy, and the negativity and ludicrousness surrounding them is a critique of those who hold power.

A central issue concerning authority figures in Plath's works is that they do not consider the female characters' opinions to be worthy enough to be taken into consideration. They belittle the people they have in their care by treating them almost like children. The two representatives of medical authority in *The Bell Jar* and the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* short story are an example of someone demeaning women and discouraging them from speaking up. Showalter's observations related to the narrative theme of a woman's "awakening" (448), which is "typically followed by the appearance of a doctor to put the woman back to sleep" (448) is mentioned regarding *The Bell Jar* but it is relevant to *Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams*, too. Showalter explains the doctor figure as someone who "appeals to represent patriarchal authority because he has the tools to enforce it" (448). He has the authority to decide if a woman is healthy or not, and if what she says can be trusted or is the cause of poor health. As a consequence, he has authority over her opinions and over whether or not she can still be a part of society.

Esther Greenwood's psychiatrist, Doctor Gordon, is an example; he is the psychiatrist Esther instantly hates, in her own words, as she meets him. Both his physical appearance and his attitude are brought into questioning. Firstly, even his looks seem to challenge and upset Esther. She has never washed nor changed her clothes for three weeks and she has not washed her hair either. Whereas Dr. Gordon is flawless, his "features were so perfect he was almost pretty" (*TBJ* 123) and "his eyelashes were so long and thick they were

artificial" (TBJ 123). With his all-American family photo turned halfway towards Esther, he seems a pillar of wholesomeness, standing against Esther's eccentricity. Secondly, his attitude: after Esther discloses her crisis, the psychiatrist listens with his head bent and his only response is asking where she has been to college (TBJ 123). In doing so he demonstrates a complete lack of concern in Esther's dilemma, or alternatively a lack of trust of it being a serious dilemma. He does not comment nor does he offer any word of consolation or advice. Demonstrating carelessness and not listening to Esther he belittles both her opinions and the pain she is in. Asking what Esther *thinks* is wrong (TBJ 124) strengthens this claim, as if he has concluded from the beginning that her pain is imaginary. Leonard observes that Dr. Gordon uses the word "lot" (TBJ 126) when describing girls he was doctor to, "a commercial term that designates a large number of identical products" (76). What he thinks shows through his word choice. It is no mistake as he also uses the word "bunch" (TBJ 126), taking away their individuality and talking only about an impersonal group. The fact that he wants to speak to Esther's mother instead of explaining to her and finding the best suitable solution for exactly her case is one of the most remarkable features, which also makes a strong impression on Esther (TBJ 130).

Similarly in the other prose work, the Clinic Director in the short story *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* is an authoritarian figure that wants to mold the protagonist into someone else. When he finds the nameless Assistant Secretary alone at night in the Clinic building, he towers over her: "'tch, tch,'

chides an infinitely gentle voice from the cloud regions above my head" (*JPBD* 30). He picks her up from under her arms just like one would do with a child (*JPBD* 31), and just marches her sternly to the electroshock room. Plath highlights Esther's condition as an inanimate object that is picked up, or a small child at best. No explanations are asked for a situation that is surely bizarre, but hardly requires immediate electroshock therapy. Felman claims that "with respect to the woman's madness, man's reason reacts by trying to appropriate it: in the first place by claiming to 'understand' it" (7). The protagonist was neither violent nor irrational, she could have been reasoned with. Her opinion is not only belittled here, but also negated, like a small child with no authority over what is going to happen, similarly to a dependent relationship with a partner, or a father figure that occupies her mind with his absence and presence. Further on in her claim, Felman observes that the madwoman is degraded "to an object which can be known and possessed" (7). Indeed the electroshock scene sees Esther passed around from the Clinic Director to the Observation Ward secretary, who removes her clothes and proceeds to hand her to "the five false priests", probably nurses or helpers, who hold her down for electroshock (*JPBD* 32, 33). This scene takes on dreamlike surreal contours. The episode occurs in the Clinic at nighttime and from the word choice recalls a cult ceremony. Then the people who catch her seem to be waiting for her without a sign of surprise, they do not behave like hospital workers. The deity Johnny Panic becomes more real. The protagonist's fantastic world seems to infect the outside world. But this world is

forcefully subtracted from her through electroshock; she must change as the authority pleases like the other patients of the Clinic.

In both of Plath's prose works electroshock therapy is used as a form of power possessed by an authoritarian figure to alter and revolutionize the female character. Showalter claims that electroshock is one of the tools used by doctors in order to use their authority over patients (448). Indeed it is a powerful device which, aimed directly at women's brain, seeks to adjust their mind. I disagree with Silverman's view that Esther is prescribed a shock treatment by Dr. Gordon "upon not wanting to communicate her thoughts with him" (32), because in my interpretation of the text she tries to talk to the psychiatrist even if she dislikes him. But he does not attempt to understand why Esther considers it significant to show him the pieces of a torn letter she physically could not bring herself to write (*TBJ* 129, 130). Electroshock is administered to cure something that is not even attempted to be understood. Kellner mentions Valerie's lobotomy in *The Bell Jar* along with the other treatments attempted on Esther (224, 225). He focuses on Valerie's "perpetual marble calm" as opposed to her usual anger (*TBJ* 185). The image speaks about erased emotions. The reader does not have any additional information. Why was Valerie angry? Was it irrational or justified by something? Could she be displeased with something? In any case Valerie's resentment is corrected and "cured", controlled by doctor authority.

Moreover, electroshock carried out by Dr. Gordon without anesthesia, does not bring about a positive effect. On the contrary, it is a traumatic

experience for both Esther and the nameless protagonist of the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* short story. In the latter, the Clinic Director wants to suppress the dream world of his patients and have them to conform to the mass' normality, while the protagonist takes on the role of the defender of dreams and abnormality. Gerisch's thesis that "the psychiatry clinic appears as a metaphorical space through which the constrictions of patriarchal ordered middle-class life can be articulated" (754) fits both the clinic in the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* short story and Dr. Gordon's private hospital. What happens here is that the female figure is treated in order to be changed because she does not fit in the "healthy" female model. No real efforts are done in order to understand the real reasons behind the protagonists' breakdowns. Here Chesler's point that "female unhappiness is viewed and 'treated' as a problem of individual pathology, no matter how many other female patients (or non-patients) are similarly unhappy" (*Women as Psychiatric and Psychotherapeutic Patients* 746) is a useful lens to understand the topic. In both of Plath's prose works doctors are not there to really comprehend and heal the patients, but to readjust women to fit an ideal healthy model. Authority figures' use of their power over women also makes the protagonist insecure in the short story *Mothers*. The protagonist, also named Esther, doubts the value of her opinions. Wagner asserts that a "battle against submission to the authority of both older people and, more pertinently, men" is going on in *The Bell Jar*, and I think this is true for the short stories as well (*TBJ as Bildungsroman* 57, ctd. in Maple 5). In *Mothers* a rector of a Catholic church is the spiritual (and not only) guide of a group of

women, all part of the Mothers' Union. He is the only relevant male figure mentioned, Esther's husband makes only brief appearances and the other women's spouses are only cited. The rector goes door to door to call women who are new in town, like Esther, to church. But what should be a female affair, in reality is not. The rector retains the power to unite and divide the group. He subtly criticizes the only divorced woman, who then feels deeply uncomfortable and no longer welcome. She is not defended by anyone, Esther included, even if she thinks what happens is not right. Also the protagonist struggles throughout the story because of desperately wanting to please the rector and the newly found group, so she "swallowed the impulse to blurt out" (JPBD 110) what she thinks. She forces herself to keep her opinions concealed and play a role to suit the group, controlled by the authority figure. This situation evokes Plath's own condition; Esther is an American in an English town who feels estranged and alone, like Plath was in real life when she moved to London with Ted Hughes.

And indeed does Henry Minton have power over his sister Elizabeth in *Sunday at the Mintons* (1952). Brother and sister are depicted as complete opposites from the beginning; Henry constantly reprimands his sister about her distraction and being too carefree. The message from Henry is clear: she should be different, and this haunts Elizabeth throughout the short story; she is torn between answering back and complying without protesting. Because another message is also clear and implicit: between their two opposites, she is inappropriate, Henry is approved. According to De Beauvoir "humanity is

male and man defines woman, not in herself but in relation to himself" (26). Henry tries to make Elizabeth be rational and level-headed, for her own good. There is no effort to comprehend the other. Plath uses unambiguous words to give a clear picture of the two siblings. The story begins and ends with Elizabeth sighing (*JPBD* 148, 159), and the first thing we learn about Henry is that he is "fastidious", "supremely fastidious" (*JPBD* 148). Plath's portrayal of Elizabeth begins with words such as "dreamily" and "meek" (*JPBD* 148); next she is depicted by images suggesting lighthearted wandering. On the contrary, Henry is confirmed as a serious and extremely practical man. As Wagner puts it, "ages of stereotype of the fallacies of woman's 'intuition' against man's 'logic' are in operation here" (*Specialness in Short Stories* 8). Basically, Henry and Elizabeth respectively embody logic and intuition. Henry's fondness for following maps, numbers and rules is juxtaposed to Elizabeth's joy in not knowing the direction of her travels (*JPBD* 151,152). Henry as a personification of reason is represented by the ludicrous assertion "the wind is wrong" (*JPBD* 156); it must not storm if it has not been forecasted in advance. The internal conflict in the protagonist's mind is exemplified by the two contrasting opposites. Elizabeth, as Plath, cannot really solve this controversy or resolve to be straightforward, and feels guilt for not speaking her mind. A recurrent scene in Elizabeth's mind is reacting to her brother (*JPBD* 152); this aggression is reflected in her violent daydream about Henry drowning at sea attempting to retrieve her lost brooch (*JPBD* 158, 159). However, just as Elizabeth is never open with her brother, even her dream ends with her following her brother into the sea. There is a criticism of authority

and patriarchy but the protagonist is too conflicting and ambivalent to really be able to leave her current situation behind her completely. Once an independent librarian, she is again "meek" and "docile" (JPBD 148, 149) as she was in her youth. She is unwillingly led by her brother or her parents.

The inner and outer clash between opposites is a recurring issue in Plath's works. As Elizabeth is divided between refusing and adapting to her brother's ways, likewise Plath's characters strive between dependency and independency. Their decision is not as straightforward and obvious as it may seem, because the characters feel compelled to please authority figures, even if losing some of their individuality and freedom is the price to pay. The reason is the need to feel accepted more than a real desire to be guided by a reliable person they do not really believe in. As aforementioned, most of the times they dislike or hate the representative of authority. Esther thinks it is unjust to ban divorced women from the Mothers' Union but does not protest. After declaring herself an atheist she asks, "half in spite of herself" (JPBD 110) as she puts it, the rector to explain their church service of Evensong. She feels compelled to go: "there was no escape from the probing notes" (JPBD 109) of the bells, yet no one is really forcing her to go.

In *The Bell Jar* Esther seems to go against authority more straightforwardly; she decides not to see Dr. Gordon anymore (TBJ 140), likewise she demands to go home after her suicide attempt because she is sure the doctors in the psychiatric ward are "suspicious, fake" (TBJ 172, 173). Esther may seem less adaptive than the characters in the *Johnny Panic and*

the Bible of Dreams short stories, but the theme of keeping up a compliant external façade in order not to attract attention and be labeled as mad is equally relevant in both works. It is also clear that in both works internal conflicts develop from the pressure of having to maintain a simulated personality. The authority figures seek to control the female characters in order to shape them into conforming, adjusted individuals. They are the influences that try to direct the females' identities towards their preferred direction according to Rosi Smith (43), Althusser (119) and Butler (3). It is a recurrent theme in Plath's prose because this is substantial fuel to her characters' internal conflicts.

The father, partner and authority figures deeply influence the protagonists' lives and have a role in their persistent ambivalence and guilt. But even minority figures with an understandably less important part in the characters' existence can have a relevant impact on Plath's female personas.

1.4 Minor Figures

With minor figures I mean figures that take up less space in Plath's works and their role might be of a secondary importance in the life of her characters, but because of that it does not mean that they are less relevant figures. On the contrary, Plath uses those characters to deal with significant issues, even if they make only a brief appearance. Or perhaps because of that.

I have found secondary figures to be more relevant in *The Bell Jar*. In a novel Plath is able to deal with a wider range of characters, who have different roles and importance whereas in the short stories every character has almost equal significance. The short story form also allows for a lesser number of characters.

Irwin, the Cambridge professor Esther loses her virginity to, is an example of a minor figure with great substance in the story. He represents Esther seizing control, for once freer from her internal conflicts. Already feeling better from the asylum therapy, she chooses Irwin to get rid of the burden of her virginity on her own terms. Badia's assertion that "dismayed by this sexual double standard (*TBJ* 81), Esther attempts to seize control over her sexuality by losing her virginity to someone other than Buddy" (*TBJ* 134) does fit the idea that here Esther is making a choice against double standard. It is true that Irwin is seducing Esther but in spite of that she is not a passive character in the scene, she is already deliberately following her plan. When she is satisfied that the blood of the hemorrhage is the proof she needed that she is no longer a virgin, she chooses to leave immediately after (*TBJ* 219). She has obtained what she was looking for and does not need Irwin anymore. De Beauvoir speaks extensively about the implications of virginity and its loss, which represents a turning point in life and a way to rupture from the past (449). Indeed Esther feels a changed woman. Later on in the novel Esther also insists that Irwin pay the hospital bill when he fails to do so and firmly asserts that she is not interested in further contact (*TBJ* 231). This episode draws attention

to Esther's gained autonomy and freedom; here she is no longer so unresolved. This secondary figure allows Esther both to make an important choice and to undergo the "rite of passage" she feels she needs in order to move on with her life. Although this does not seem only a quest for independency. When Esther feels free after being fitted with contraception she claims she is now just waiting to find "the proper sort of man" (*TBJ* 153). She seems to be thinking again in society's terms, that is to look for a man and not her autonomy, but it is unclear if she is looking for a man to use for her purpose or a durable relationship.

Another relevant character who only appears briefly in *The Bell Jar* is Marco, the "woman-hater" (*TBJ* 102). Also in this circumstance Esther is capable of making a decision in a difficult situation. From the beginning of the episode of the country club dance (*TBJ* 99) Plath uses words that highlight an occurrence where female characters are treated as objects. Both Esther and her friend Doreen, who convinced her to go to the dance, are "being handed" (*TBJ* 100) from man to man, like packages exchanging hands. Esther is guided by Marco into a tango and is "dealt to him, like a playing card in a pack of identical cards" (*TBJ* 102). Esther's individuality goes completely lost. Leonard also writes about "the commodified female body, a passive symbol" (76), which is considered as such in the eyes of those men. The ability of women to decide for themselves is not taken into consideration. But Esther opposes to this view when Marco assaults and tries to rape her. She is already considering the idea of losing her virginity and briefly contemplates "if I just lie

here and do nothing it will happen" (*TBJ* 104), but then she chooses to react and fight him. Marco, as a spokesperson of society, divides women into pure and untouchable beings like the cousin he is in love with and the sluts for whom "yes or no, it is all the same" (*TBJ* 105), like Esther. But Esther defies her constant irresolution and rebels against this view. It is not a definitive change but even a small revolution is meaningful when every change is a bigger challenge than it appears.

Plath seems to choose passing scenes and lesser characters as ideal background to Esther's capability to make her own choices and to feebly rebel to follow her aspirations, as if she was not sure she could handle the consequences of a small revolt. Cixous' claim that "a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive" (888) fits to some extent with those passages. Esther is able to react and choose, which is an exceptionally important result for her, even if the choices she makes cannot really be called an uprising. Especially in *The Bell Jar* Plath uses episodes with minor figures to carry small revolutions, but this does not happen in a constant pattern. In fact, true to her indecision, in some cases Esther is unable to contrast even minor characters. Buddy Willard's father is convinced that "all sickness is sickness of the will" (*TBJ* 87), thus not only his own son's physical sickness but also Esther's mental struggle are included. In this case Esther does not reply to this openly absurd comment.

CHAPTER TWO

Fitting in and sticking out – The Ambivalent Desire Between Conforming to the Group and Being Unique

The ambivalence between belonging and rebelling to a group is a central issue in Plath's prose works. The characters do not really recognize themselves in the values and rules that have been established by a patriarchal society. Male-centeredness creates an unbalance. So the characters are torn between the desire of belonging to the larger group of people whose manners are approved by society's standards, and the desire of rebelling against an imposed canon and following a personal path. The former choice means apparent peace of mind because acceptance also represents approval; whereas the latter choice involves following a different direction from the rest, and the consequences are likely to be exclusion and disapproval. When Esther Greenwood is in the private psychiatric hospital she loathes the visits she receives because everyone is "measuring" (*TBJ* 195) and comparing her to her old apparently healthy self (*TBJ* 195). They judge and try to carelessly fix Esther attempting to infuse their views in her (*TBJ* 194, 195), as society does with individuals. No one reflects over what might be more

suitable for Esther as an individual, as no one reflects whether it is appropriate for them to try to help her in a situation they do not know anything about. Similarly in *Mothers* Esther witnesses the exclusion of divorced Mrs. Nolan, who does not know almost anyone in town after six years of living there (*JPBD* 108) because she does not follow their ways. Esther apparently has all the requisites for joining the group, and she keeps on pretending to share their values because she sees what happens to whoever holds a different position from the community.

I think an analysis of the interplay between internal conflict and guilt caused by this dichotomy helps observing from a different point of view fundamental issues in Plath's works such as difficulty in choosing, a twofold existence and the uncertainty towards society and its rules. In both Plath's works there are recurrent references to a stressful ambivalence between two choices, especially about whether the characters want to conform to the majority or choose a unique path. Plath's female protagonists have real issues concerning making decision because they feel the strong pressure the patriarchal society has over every part of life. As a result they feel blameworthy. Esther Greenwood, Elizabeth Minton (*Sunday at the Mintons*) and Esther (*Mothers*) all feel they cannot speak their doubts, because they would not be understood but criticized. Hence they keep silent.

2.1 Conforming and Rebelling

Younger and older Sylvia Plath's life has been characterized by separation into mutually exclusive positions. This is clearly delineated in the accounts from her biography, her *Journals* and scholars' studies about her and her works (Kukil 395, Silverman 33, Gill *Cambridge Companion* 46, 121). Silverman observes that "Plath's struggle often surfaced as a dichotomous existence" (33). Silverman bases her opinion on a passage from Plath's *Journals* where the author describes her life as "magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative – whichever is running at the moment dominates my life – floods it" (Kukil 395). In other words Plath is always divided between two options. From Plath's and Silverman's words we evince the deep impact inner conflicts, and the subsequent guilt, have on her mind. They structure and split up her whole life. This is not to portray Plath's prose works as autobiographical, but to give an idea of how ambivalence is relevant in the author's life, and becomes a part of her writing.

To take a case in point, in *The Bell Jar* Esther Greenwood alternates positive moments with plenty of ambitious plans for her future to negative and hopeless ones, submissive to quietly accepting whatever will be her destiny. First Esther seems to think she is capable of doing anything from being a botanist to "stud[ing] all over Europe" (*TBJ* 30) or being a poet or professor (*TBJ* 30, 31, 32). Shortly after her only desire becomes staying in bed or "spend[ing] the day lying in the grass, the longest grass I could find" (*TBJ* 27), suddenly incapable of constructive plans. She jumps from an idea to the

other, unable to complete any of her goals. There is a sudden stop in Esther's life, any plans stalled.

Mood swings are recurrent in *Cambridge Notes* as well, even if compared to Plath's novel they are mostly directed towards choosing between family life and career alternatives. Twice in the short story the protagonist mentions a yearning for having a family with her long distance on-and-off partner Richard (*JPBD* 206, 207- 216). From her words it is not sure she is really longing for this or if she just wants to be recognized as a well-adjusted and functioning part of society, along with all the people who seem content with what they have:

"I long to permeate the matter of this world: to become anchored to life by laundry and lilacs, daily bread and fried eggs, and a man, the dark-eyed stranger, who eats my food and my body and my love and goes around the world all day and comes back to find solace with me at night" (*JPBD* 207).

Plath underlines the presence of a man who lives a full life during the day, then comes back to his wife for the night. She provides him with all the nourishment he needs, but her world is inside the house, taking care of everything. It is uncertain if providing sustenance to someone else is really the protagonist's aim, or if her intent is really not to fall out of a group. Indeed she also says "Enough romance. Get to work" (*JPBD* 209), and makes plans about

traveling the world and having new experiences (*JPBD* 209). Both choices seem to be equally considered.

The characters' ambiguity comes from their reaction to society's approved code of conduct for women versus women's own ideals of happiness and fulfillment. Simply, the female protagonists did not think housewifery and family life could be their only goal in life. This social and psychological background is a crucial issue in Plath's prose. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is a tool that consistently helps understanding both women's situation in the 1950s and especially the problems related to their condition. The witnesses reported by Friedan are helpful to understand from women's own words the uneasiness and anxiety that they felt. Friedan delineates a picture where women are supposed to have "found true feminine fulfillment" (18) in their homely life, because every aspect of their life significantly improved when comparing with the past. Friedan evokes circumstances that should be problems free, even though they are far from easy. Deep down women feel anxiety and frustration because society's ideal of female realization is dissonant with their own aspirations, but they also feel that complaining is wrong because it would set them outside. Everywhere around them they find proves of an enhanced and easier life; their role at home is important and fulfilling. Therefore they sense that they must keep their feelings to themselves and feel nothing but contentment. Guilt follows, because as Friedan argues "if a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with

herself" (19). In other words they feel at fault and ungrateful, as a witness reported (19). But, as Baldwin argues, society "encourages ease for its women, so long as they stay within the domestic sphere" (28). Outside of the house the situation is completely different. For instance women saying out loud that they were struggling, and do not even know the reason why, would put them at risk of being seriously criticized, or worse considered mad and ostracized. Friedan individuates women's problem in the questions she hears from them "Is this all?" (15) "Who am I?" (21), and from the fact that "most adjusted to their role and suffered or ignored the problem that has no name" (26). Their role in the family can be fulfilling, but their frustration comes from the limited possibilities they may choose from. In short these are characteristics of the situation that affects Plath's contemporaries and her characters. Social surrounding is one of the most important inspirations in Plath's writing and the author constantly brings it into play. Plath's focus is mostly on the psyche of the protagonist, she does not merely show a victim of society but the whole thinking process that develops behind a young woman's constraints. Especially the conflicts following ambivalence over most life choices and its interplay with feeling guilt. The struggle the character faces everyday when confronted with both the important and the seemingly insignificant events. Because there are rules controlling every aspect of life, and this includes education, religion, work, even at home.

2.2 Ambivalence and Choices

Plath's characters are confronted with the same challenges concerning choices and opportunities for women that burdened Friedan's testimonies, which become common ground for both prose works. As Caroline Smith points out, Plath "writes her own ambivalence about the place of women in the 1950s" (4), and her characters are influenced by this struggle: "Esther is unsure of her 'proper' place in society" (4), and so do the characters of the *Johnny Panic* stories. The author usually chooses to write about women who are wives and mothers, or young women trying to find their place in the world. Their ambivalence towards society and struggling with its standards are at focus in Plath's prose. Besides the author cannot decide if being ostracized from society is the characters' aim or a catastrophe. Exclusion means the majority recognizes a different individual not fitting in their structures. This can save the character from anonymity and the agony of a life they did not choose. The character of Millicent in *Initiation* (1952) who autonomously chooses not to join a controlling sorority is one of the most balanced of Plath's prose.

The ambivalence between conforming and rebelling places the female characters in front of a dilemma when making choices. I will also analyze the interplay between having numerous alternatives and the inner conflict the characters experience. A choice becomes almost impossible, as Perloff also argues (515), or at best poses a real challenge. Starting from the most difficult choice of career versus family life, because it will decide the course of action. The struggle in decision making is that, as aforementioned,

rebellious or conforming could mean not being a part of the community group anymore. This indecision makes choosing among various alternatives even more complicated.

In *The Bell Jar* Esther's struggle takes shape in the protagonist jumping back and forth from one decision about her future to another, unable to pick one. I think it is useful to follow the line Plath forms throughout *The Bell Jar* to see how important ambivalence concerning choosing among alternatives is. Baldwin individuates "her whole problem in a nutshell: she wants it all but purportedly can't have it" (34). Probably not her only problem, but one of the most significant and influential. "Esther's character is grounded in her relationship to choice" (34), observes Baldwin. Having to make a choice is a disaster to undecided Esther. The protagonist realizes to her despair that she has no idea about what she is going to do after graduation, and responding to Jay Cee's question she states: "the minute I said it, I knew it was true" (*TBJ* 30). Jay Cee's answer sounds accusatory and makes her feel flawed and guilty for not knowing: "'you'll never get anywhere like that'" (*TBJ* 30). She doubts Esther's interest and effort because of her indecision. After all she is a young girl who yet has to graduate, on an internship away from home.

Then at home with her mother Esther's struggle continues and she goes from deciding to write a novel (*TBJ* 115) to starting her thesis (*TBJ* 118), after that she considers an apprenticeship in pottery making (*TBJ* 118) and a waitress job in Germany to become bilingual (*TBJ* 118), and in conclusion "to junk the whole honours programme and become an ordinary English major"

(*TBJ* 120). This is followed by briefly contemplating becoming a botanist (*TBJ* 31) and subsequently a nun (*TBJ* 158). Plath acknowledges the problem is an inner struggle in decision making, or in Esther's own words: "plan after plan started leaping through my head, like a family of scatty rabbits" (*TBJ* 118). The picture sees Esther frantically skipping from one decision to the other, clueless about her final decision. Accordingly, the passage where Esther has her picture taken to illustrate what she intends to be after college ends with a crisis, and Esther's long repressed feelings erupt when she bursts into tears (*TBJ* 98). Jay Cee's statement "'she wants,' (...) 'to be everything.'" (*TBJ* 97) explains the impossibility of the choice for a person who cannot deal with any of her desires, especially if the option stands outside the realm of what is deemed acceptable. Because the guilt is too strong and Esther becomes lost in an array of possibilities.

Esther's inner conflict continues to be a component of her life further on in the novel concerning the most important life choices. Between the safe option of the recommended family life and the choice of a career Esther cannot come to a conclusion. From the beginning to the end there will be no final resolution; the protagonist constantly changes her mind about her future. Esin Kumlu defines *The Bell Jar* as "one of the most significant literary texts of twentieth-century American literature, which crystallizes the political, social and psychological traumas and facts of Cold War America" (4). There is a mention of traumas because, as Kumlu underlines, the Cold War principles weigh heavier on women, who become extremely limited in the array of

opportunities (4). Women are encouraged, or better subtly directed, towards family life. Even colleges and workplaces become spaces where finding a spouse is as important as studying and working (Tyler-May 77). In both *The Bell Jar* and *Cambridge Notes* dating is a serious matter; throughout the works dates and blind dates with different potential partners are frequently mentioned as a normal part of life. On the contrary, there is little or no support towards pursuing an independent career. Several times Esther mentions becoming a mother first and immediately afterwards traveling and focusing on an independent career. She labels married life "dreary and wasted" (*TBJ* 30) and seems to be repulsed by the idea of having children. Family life is compared to brainwashing and becoming a slave, children are something that would rob her of her most intense passion and dream of writing poetry (*TBJ* 81). Regarding housewifery Baldwin finds that the passage she calls of the "kitchen mat" is explicative of the vision Plath has of the stay at home woman (26). No matter what a woman's competences and aspirations were, a marriage would mean "flatten out underneath his feet" (*TBJ* 80). In other words becoming as undistinguishable as Mrs. Willard's handmade good quality kitchen rug, which could not be told apart from all of the other ordinary kitchen rugs (Baldwin 26, *TBJ* 80). Even if initially the finer rugs' fabric and colors were showing, they soon are disappear (*TBJ* 80). Plath makes a comparison with women before and after marriage.

Esther's other goal is the desire to build a successful and autonomous career. The opposite of family life. According to numerous scholars like

Friedan and Tyler-May, this is a choice opposing to what society guided women to do. The protagonist's rebellious side runs parallel to her desire of conformity throughout the book. Esther would like to become a writer, and above all to experience the world and what it has to offer, because she is aware that her inexperience is a setback in the world of writing. "I needed experience. How could I write about life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or seen anybody die?" (TBJ 117), is Esther's realization when she is planning her future. A true writer must know how nuanced human feelings are. Esther knows that doing something in contrast to the rules can put her in trouble. Hence her rebellious side seems to be testing how far she can safely go before she is judged by the people around her. When she mentions to "the famous woman poet" (TBJ 211) at her college about maybe settling into family life, she hears a horrified reaction: "but what about your *career*?" (TBJ 211). Esther has not made up her mind about her future yet, her question seems more like a test to check a more experienced and authoritarian person's response. But in this case the encouragement to pursue a career does not come from a representative of society. On the contrary, Esther is speaking to a writer who notoriously lives with a woman (TBJ 210), so a person who is living a completely unconventional life, devoted to her career. Esther knows she is not the right person to take advice from.

However, Esther aims at a life with action and success coming from her own efforts. What scares Esther the most is not being the protagonist of her own life, and becoming the one waiting at home and only sensing the

excitement that takes place outside. "I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters" (TBJ 72) and "I wanted change and excitement" (TBJ 79) are her thoughts in the moments she desires freedom. Although I agree with Perloff that Esther's naïveté and inexperience hold her back from understanding whether she wants an active and independent life (517), I also think that the internal conflict she constantly experiences is the major setback. On the one side there is "infinite security" (TBJ 79) represented by making the accepted choice; on the other side there is "shoot off in all directions myself" (TBJ 79), which involves a series of risks. It is not only ingenuousness that holds her back, but also inner conflicts due to the consequences conforming or rebelling would have on her life. Esther knows the penalty can be negative judgment and exclusion from the group. Nevertheless exclusion may or may not be a negative outcome; the author does not reach a final conclusion. Indeed according to Fisiak "Plath's heroine feels trapped in the suffocating atmosphere of Ladies' Day" (190), so being accepted and integrated into a group of peers is not the ideal result for Esther, either.

Furthermore, Esther in *Mothers* feels similarly uncomfortable in the group of mothers at her local church, even if she rightly belongs to the group. She is a married mother expecting her second child, unlike Mrs. Nolan, a divorced woman who is the true outsider in the short story. This situation is a lucid picture of the ambivalence and contrast that are recurrent features in Plath's works. The work revolves around inclusion and exclusion, conforming and rebelling. Here Esther is an "undercover" outsider, in other words she only has rebellious

thoughts and feeble ambiguous reactions, but she never dares to act in the open. From the beginning it is unambiguous that Esther loathes the constant intrusion in her life of her small town neighbors. This annoyance takes form in her aversion and over thinking concerning the neighbors letting themselves in her house without ringing the doorbell first (*JPBD* 106, 107). The tight community has a habit of entering people's houses unannounced, this represents the bigger majority group that is society, which imposes its norm on individuals whether they like it or not. The mothers' group, which the author describes as "gnarled and old" women (*JPBD* 108), is a small society in itself complete with its unwritten rules; the outcast cannot be part of it. It is clear from a member of the community that "even if Mrs. Nolan wanted to join the Mothers' Union, she couldn't" (*JPBD* 116). She made the wrong choices and she pays the price with exclusion.

The reader also perceives, from the protagonist's anxious and tense thoughts, that she is against the religious and bigoted views of the rector and probably of the other mothers as well (*JPBD* 109-111), but she is never open about this. Although in the beginning she is treated as a potential outsider. Esther is paired up with Mrs. Nolan because she is new in town, and Mrs. Nolan "never came to the Mothers' Union meetings because she had no one to go with" (*JPBD* 107), which puts them in a similar situation. Besides, both women seem to understand each other and feel slightly misplaced, unused to the groups' manners. When "the rector said grace. Cheeks bulging, Esther and Mrs. Nolan peered at each other, making eyes and stifling their giggles, like

schoolgirls with a secret" (*JPBD* 114). They both start eating before the prayer, a symbol of doing things differently from the group, oblivious of the appropriate behavior. The mothers' association represents society, and its internal rules are a mirror of society's norms; Esther secretly loathes their values but does not reject them. The burden of ostracism weighs on the character who acts openly. But what is worse, ostracism or conforming? The last image of the work pictures "gravestones, greenly luminous in the thick dusk, looked as if their ancient lichens might possess some magical power of phosphorescence" (*JPBD* 116), the "chill of the evening" (*JPBD* 116) under the clothes, even a "crooked" (*JPBD* 116) arm. It is an ominous landscape of death and warped things, almost out of a ghost story. Esther and Rose, a member of the Mothers' Union, leave Mrs. Nolan and now there is no trace of Esther's disgust of the injustice towards divorced women, when "Rose crooked out one arm, and Esther, without hesitation, took it" (*JPBD* 116). Here conforming has a high cost, losing a part of oneself. The emphasis Esther puts on the word "*hates*" and the astonishment at "her own passion" when speaking seem directed to something else than the dogs they are talking about. Does she hate herself? Or her choice? In any case Esther is heavily influenced by controversy, whether conflicts are in the open or hidden.

The conflicts that Plath's characters experience regard important life decisions such as finding their place in society. Society's most prominent characteristic is conformity to a specific set of rules by a united group, so this necessarily happens at the cost of sacrificing some individuality. Speaking

about the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* anthology, Wagner identifies that "more often (than a lover) the antagonist is social pressure operating on the woman protagonist, trying to change the direction she intends to go" (*Specialness in Short Stories* 5). The essence of Wagner's argument is that society via its rules acts as a force influencing women through what is acceptable or not. For instance the ambivalence between the yearning to fit in the vast group that structures society, and at the same time a burning desire of rebelling. In *Sunday at the Mintons* Elizabeth Minton is an unmarried, childless woman, once an independent librarian who went back to living with her brother. The two siblings are one the opposite of the other; Elizabeth is a carefree daydreamer and Henry is a serious rational individual. Henry tries to lead his sister towards following his more logical ways, and never takes into consideration that her opinions could be as constructive as his. He is a representative of a society that Rosi Smith and Christina Britzolakis, among the others, identify as controlling and supervising (Smith R. 34, 36, Britzolakis 268). Elizabeth Minton barely tolerates her brother's manners, and she knows she is not in the wrong for being different from him. Anyway, her rebellion exists only inside her head; the reader knows of her misery through her thoughts. Because Elizabeth, as Esther in *Mothers*, never really reacts. Although it is true that her fantasy of seeing her brother drowning while feeling "a growing peace" (*JPBD* 158) is quite realistic, it still is a fantasy. What seems the reality turns out to be a dream, and with "a sigh of submission" (*JPBD* 159) she follows her brother back home. Elizabeth's initial choice is returning to live with her brother and dependency, but she also chooses to follow him into the sea in

her daydream (*JPBD* 159). Elizabeth cannot abandon the safety that is the acceptance from the community. Following a more personal set of rules may very likely turn into disapproval and exclusion. On the contrary, Elizabeth twice mentions her “merging into someone else, her mother perhaps. Someone who was capable and industrious about household tasks” (*JPBD* 151). She does not develop as an individual but as someone else. Becoming more like her mother and pretending to listen to Henry’s advice about how to read maps she is becoming a productive member of the community. Failing to be so may very likely generate guilt in the characters, because they also fail to conform to society’s expectations.

In the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* anthology ambivalence during the process of decision making is a component of the theme of choice. In the short stories Plath challenges the standard view of women’s role. Because of their limited range of choice women become the “captive nation” (28), as Baldwin puts it (also in Kumlu 4). They are called captives for the reason that they do not really have a say in their own decisions with life choices regarding for example their occupation. The rigid patriarchal society’s already set norms judge the appropriateness of a choice. Females were supported when the array of alternatives did not bring them away from home, especially for a longer period of time. In *The Wishing Box* (1956) Agnes Higgins is a housewife despairing that she is losing “her shaping imaginative powers” (*JPBD* 53). On the contrary her husband has grand creative dreams and daydreams. Agnes is desperate to find a solution, “anything to keep from

facing the gaping void in her own head of which Harold had made her so painfully conscious" (*JPBD* 53). She compares her fantasy world with her husband's and loses. Plath focuses also on the fact that the imaginative Harold has a full life outside his home; he has a job while Agnes is a housewife. There seems to be a connection between the two elements. The reader sees from Agnes' viewpoint a dull life of waiting at home, increasingly more miserable. Behrent's claim that "Esther Greenwood's growing awareness of the contradictions between what, as a woman, she is 'supposed' to want and her increasing dissatisfaction with the options available to her" (<http://isreview.org/issue/92/personal-and-political>) is also fitting regarding Agnes Higgins. According to society her role is at home but she is losing herself as an individual more and more. Harold trying to teach his wife how to revive her imagination (*JPBD* 52, 53) is also a mirror image of what society does to women. Its rules direct females in a specific direction that they have not chosen. Harold's attempt does not bring any significant results, teaching imagination is a paradox, and it does not stop Agnes from spiraling down.

The lack of opportunities is a real problem for women. Caroline Smith claims that in the 1950s, society seemed to be providing choices to women when really they were only offered the ones that were inscribed in the canon of the good housewife (*The Feeding of Young Women* 6). In other words, there is not much to choose from, the options provided seem mostly a sham to clear consciences. As a result, women are likely to feel guilty because who would not be happy with a vast range of offers and comforts? But in the short

stories Plath seem to describe situations when guilt is not that power-laden. In *In The Mountains* (1954) Isobel surprises Austin with her view on marriage. She defines it "signing your life away because you're lonely, because you're afraid of being lonely" (JPBD 169), and holds her position throughout the narrative. The protagonist, who is a version of Esther Greenwood as Austin is a version of Buddy Willard, is capable of defending her idea, and the reader understands she changed her mind from her past opinion on marriage (JPBD 170). Actually the whole situation between the couple changed. The female protagonist is now more detached from the male character than before; "that was half a year ago. I'd know better now" (JPBD 174), concerned about more than the simple occurrence they are talking about, when she was on edge witnessing a childbirth (also a variation of an episode from *The Bell Jar*). She seems to have changed her mind about their relationship entirely, together with her idea of marriage. Her views are now less traditional. In the bigger picture, Isobel seems to have changed her opinion on the role society assigns to females.

Also *Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Men* (May 1959) is between conventional and innovative views. The protagonist is a childless woman by choice. Needless to say, a very unusual and controversial choice in Plath's time. At least, it is her husband's preference, he "insisted that children tied one down too much" (JPBD 340). It is unclear if Myra fully agrees; she certainly shares her husband's point of view to a degree, but the reader also understands she "had started wondering about babies" (JPBD 350). As

Caroline Smith puts it, Esther Greenwood "is conscious of the ways in which she is different from the other women around her" (14), and so is Myra. She knows that she is different from her friend Cicely and she is not displeased to be atypical, but she is also ambivalent towards more conservative options. And because of that she has a "conflicted nature" (Smith C. 14) because she is aware of society's judgment upon her (Smith C. 14, Walker 2000, vii). Indeed she experiences Cicely's husband's obstetrician business card as a subtle negative judgment of her childless state, specifically that they "were not fulfilling their duty to the community, to the human race" (*JPBD* 340). Having children was considered a real duty, and Myra feels pangs of guilt. Myra's slightly inquisitive questions about anesthesia to Cicely are met with a certain "withdrawing" and "that blithe evasiveness of so many mothers when questioned point-blank about childbirth by childless women" (347), because Myra is not part of the group of mothers. Myra's criticism of anesthetic drugs reinforces her standing outside the mothers community. She is dubious and critical of a male created drug that "didn't stop her feeling the pain, but made her forget it right afterwards" (*JPBD* 348), and is startled that her friend is not equally critical. The greater critique is directed towards society that once again is steering women towards a direction they did not choose, even making them forget their pain with a drug.

Plath demonstrates what happens to outsiders in *Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit* (1955): the people who do not belong to the group are punished through exclusion. From the beginning the little girl who is the central

character and her two friends are "outlaws" (JPBD 161) because at school they play a private game of Superman avoiding the other children (JPBD 161). They are not taunted and everything seems to be fine, until the protagonist is accused of having pushed another little girl ruining her new snowsuit. The author's description shows it is blatantly untrue, yet every child confirms the protagonist did it (JPBD 164). The rumor arrives to her family, who is very dubious and does not believe the girl either (JPBD 165, 166). Ferretter individuates four cases of "injustice" (112) in the short story: "to the narrator by another child, and by the neighborhood to her family" (112), then another situation in a "film of Japanese guards torturing Allied prisoners-of-war – and of the injustices done to the German community in the United States" (112). In the examples identified by Ferretter every outsider is punished in some way. And Plath underlines how society perpetuates a complete exclusion too, ranging from children to adults. Every person excluded is changed by this occurrence; "ten years from now no one will know the difference" says the girl's uncle, commenting the occurrence. But the narrator thinks otherwise: "that was the year the war began, and the real world, and the difference" (JPBD 166). It makes a difference to her, as it does to every excluded person.

Plath deals with female struggles regarding decision making in both prose works. The theme is equally important in *The Bell Jar* and in the *Johnny Panic* collection, although the author deals with it in slightly different ways. In *The Bell Jar* the female protagonist is especially ambivalent about her choices and hides them for fear of judgment. The concern of exclusion from society is

too significant a risk, and Esther knows that a woman can be considered mad if she strays from the norm, examples of which she finds in her fellow patients hospitalized in the psychiatric wards. In the *Johnny Panic* anthology the characters seem to raise their voices regarding choices and rebelling. Even though ambivalence is a staple feature in the work and the characters are unresolved, they are more inclined to leave the group with less or no feelings of guilt. They own their choices too, and debate less about them. This is significant because ambivalence is the spine of both prose works. But in the *Johnny Panic* short stories the implication of making individual choices shows that the final result is of great consequence, even though it also displays that the journey to get there is challenging. Society is at all times associated with ambivalence and conflict, because it is such a manipulative force that takes away a considerable part of authority from the characters.

2.3 Self-Sabotage

The internal conflicts in Plath's narrative also show a mechanism of self-sabotage that arises from guilt. Seltzer explains self-sabotage as a system in which

"you 'act out' internal conflicts by first moving toward a goal- then retreating from it (...) the outcome is either immobilization (...) or you're impelled – or rather, unconsciously *compelled* – to do everything in your power to defeat yourself" (<https://psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the->

self/201102/self-sabotage-passive-aggression-toward-the-self-pt-

5).

Basically, it is a halt, an involuntary incapability of performing even the most ordinary of life expectations. Other studies, such as that of Skodol, Oldham, Gallaher and Bezirgianian find that "in all life situations in which the person might dare to assert himself or herself against other figures or symbols of authority, guilt is experienced and assuaged by self-sabotage" (560). It is almost impossible for the individual to experience making himself or herself heard as a positive occurrence with a constructive result, self-sabotage will come into play and ruin the experience.

When Esther Greenwood has too many choices to pick from, she experiences a halt and stops everything. Perhaps the most famous example is the fig tree image. Esther pictures her "life branching out" like a "fig tree", where each fruit is a possible choice (*TBJ* 73). But she is "starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose" (*TBJ* 73), and as a result she loses all of them (*TBJ* 73). The ambiguity towards the numerous choices troubles her and adds even more pressure on her. And the fig tree episode is not the only example: "I told Doreen I would not go to the show or the luncheon or the film premiere, but that I would not go to Coney Island either, I would stay in bed" (*TBJ* 27). Esther seems unable to handle what she has on her hands. She could just pick an offer as they are all enticing, but she appears unable to make herself happy.

Another key example of self-sabotage is Esther's deliberate choice of not going to other summer courses after she is not admitted to the writing course she applied to (TBJ 114, 115). She cancels arrangements both with friends and with the college, even though she loathes spending the summer at her childhood home (TBJ 114, 115). As if Esther wanted to punish herself after a failure, denying herself something that could do her good. Plath uses words and expressions to display a sort of external force influencing the protagonist to do something regretful. Indeed, immediately afterwards Esther repents having canceled her summer plans, but her hands reach twice for the receiver unable to pick it up (TBJ 114). Plath mentions a "zombie voice" (TBJ 115), as if it was not the real Esther, calling the Admissions Office. The "voice" was supposed to register for other courses, but says the complete opposite. Esther adds more and more weight on her shoulders by staying with her mother, with whom she has a strained relationship. Almost feeling guilty to be happy, Esther ruins it for herself. Guilt becomes a part of female identity. Society usually is active in promoting shame feelings in women for their choices and aspirations. Here Esther seems to punish herself, practicing what she has learnt from the people around her.

In the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* collection things are quite different. On the one hand in *Cambridge Notes* the protagonist deals with "relativity again, unsure" (JPBD 209), speaking also about an "inertia" (JPBD 209) that immobilizes her because she "get[s] positively sick with doubt" (JPBD 209). Uncertain of her capacities, she restricts herself, which makes her feel

even worse. Plath devotes an entire paragraph of repetitions that highlights a recurrent anxious uncertainty: "with men (...), with writing (...), with girls (...), with academic life (...)" (JPBD 209). Indeed the narrator claims that she "cannot read and think enough to meet my little academic obligations, and I have not written at all" (JPBD 207). Undecided and dubious she does not make any choice, hence she does not progress and restrains herself.

On the other hand though, in the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* anthology there are not as many accounts of self-sabotage as in *The Bell Jar*. Here Plath focuses more on disagreeing with the norm and not being as troubled by her decision. Even in *The Wishing Box*, where the protagonist chooses to commit suicide, I think this choice cannot be viewed as a real self-sabotage. Agnes Higgins is progressively feeling worse, from being unable to dream and imagine (JPBD 48-53) to not being able to read and sleep anymore (JPBD 54). Her life becomes unbearable and she prefers death to succumbing slowly. Still, it is a choice on her terms. Although in *Mothers* an account of self-sabotage could be considered choosing to join a group the protagonist does not like. But after all, being a part of a group is preferable to becoming an outsider shunned by her town, like Mrs. Nolan. So the examples of self-sabotage are not frequent, even the protagonist of the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* short story makes her choice. She risks and loses because she is caught and taken to electroshock therapy, but she still chose to follow her plan.

Esther is not a real insurgent who fights back against society, Plath mostly pictures her conflict towards society. Moreover, as Fisiak notices, the impact on Plath of the second wave of feminism is uncertain, even if the feminist features of her writing are unmistakable (190). But its influence is too remote (Fisiak 190), it would be too much to expect Plath waging war against patriarchal society. Perloff focuses on inner controversy claiming that Esther's "dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject" (511). So she is divided and once again the failure to choose is brought into consideration. Perloff's claim is relevant to the examined *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* short stories as well. Only Plath's short stories protagonists seem to be more self-assured, or at least they do not have such a strong feeling of guilt to punish themselves as much for their choices. They counteract the guilt, which is often followed by self-sabotage, that women are normally already used to feeling for not desiring the role society imposed on them.

2.4 Strong Pressure

Plath's female characters feel a strong inner and outer pressure to belong. Societal rules were disguised as the only sensible healthy choice to make and were consistently encouraged. As a result, the characters feel blameworthy when they stray from community standards. Acceptance from the patriarchal majority meant validation and proof to be a proper wholesome person. In her discourse Chesler maintains that "for a woman to be healthy she must 'adjust' to and accept the behavioral norms for her sex"

(*Women and Madness* 68, 69, Felman 2). And in Felman's review of Chesler's *Women and Madness*, she identifies and explores the positive-negative dualism associated with masculine and feminine (3), respectively, that is an accepted perspective in society. Therefore, desires straying from "the norm" were considered strange and unhealthy, and women insane for thinking this way; they were already feeling guilty about being women, as they represented the flawed gender. In both *The Bell Jar* (170) and in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (21) a female figure is sent to the psychiatric ward for sticking out her tongue to her mother in law. This image seems to have made a strong impression on Plath, who twice displays the absurdity of hospitalizing someone with a behavior outside the norm, even when it is such a trivial occurrence.

Inner contradiction is an essential feature into Plath's prose because it pervades women's life in all its nuances. This conflict can be explained thinking about the difference from what society demands from women and their real aspirations. In *Homeward Bound* Tyler-May deals widely with the principle of containment, which "aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behavior, and even political values were focused on the home" (16). So containment comprised every aspect of people's life, as a way to have power over their behavior and choices. Men's and especially women's conduct was controlled to check if it fitted with the concept of wholesome person. And as a result "self-supporting women were in some way un-American" (Tyler-May 22), if they disregarded the norms of containment,

which saw the “‘model’ home with a male breadwinner and a full-time female homemaker” (Tyler-May 20). The risk was being excluded or even suspected of a worse conduct than rebelliousness. So again the strong demands to conform caused not only a conflict between desires and obligations, but also obstructed the natural inclinations of people and their personal development, which in turn fueled conflicts and self-sabotage even more.

The outside world greatly influenced the already struggling characters’ minds. Friedan’s and Tyler-May’s studies displayed the extent of the influence that containment and society’s canons had in women’s life. Caroline Smith underlines the “pervasiveness” (18) of domestic ideologies and “Esther’s inability to escape them” (18), stressing how even in hospital she cannot elude them (18). Esther still needs the approval of a panel of society’s representatives, the doctors, to be dismissed from the psychiatric clinic. Likewise Leonard identifies that by the time Esther has rid herself by some of her demons and may leave the asylum, society still has a say in her liberation (65). She must be “approved for the road” (*TBJ* 233). Caroline Smith also adds her own view on Walker’s analysis of post World War II America, and identifies a country “itself filled with contradictions” (8, Walker 29). The character’s background is certainly a complex and in some way adverse one. Certainly it controls and manipulates the female protagonists; society expects something from women.

Esther gives the false identity of Elly Higginbottom from Chicago to a sailor who made contact with her. What she really means by doing this is trying to create a brand new identity in order to free herself from some of the pressure. She affirms: "in Chicago, people would take me for what I was" (*TBJ* 127). Esther feels that reinventing herself completely is the only way in which the real Esther would be able to reveal herself. She cannot do that in her hometown with the people she has known since her childhood, or in other words with the closed society of the suburbs judging her. She chose Chicago as "the sort of place where unconventional, mixed-up people would come from" (*TBJ* 127), so ideally a bigger and more open-minded society. But will Esther be able to reinvent herself, even if in a more flexible community?

The weight of society's demands is a subject in the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* stories as well. The nameless protagonist of the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* short story pays the price for being different, as Esther did. In the short story the narrator's difference from the majority is blatantly open and gradually increasing. She believes in Johnny Panic, the deity of panic, and works to put together the Johnny Panic's Bible of Dreams (*JPBD* 17, 18) copying the dreams of patients in a psychiatric clinic. Then she starts "recreating dreams that are not even written down at all" (*JPBD* 21), chooses to stay alone at night in the clinic (*JPBD* 28, 29) and plans to remain there all day long for periods of time in the future (*JPBD* 29). The whole story feels like a dream world that Ragaiðienė describes as "quasi-surreal" (108). Something only half real, at least compared to *The Bell Jar* or to the other

examined short stories. The unnamed narrator speaks about “counteract[ing] those doctors” (*JPBD* 28) and praises the “beauty” (*JPBD* 27) of a man with severe anxiety and panic attacks who increasingly removed himself from the world because of his fears. She sees each kind of diversity as something worthy to defend, even if panic induced. Everyone at the clinic works towards eliminating the mental problems of the patients, in other words what makes them unique in the eyes of the protagonist, and sending them back into society once they conform again. Ragaiðienė defines the love of panic as “an attempt to sink into the depths of the dream lake so that to avoid the social pressures and the strict gender roles of the mid-century United States” (111). Even if in the end the protagonist is caught by society’s agents and treated for her rebelling, it is unclear if she is going to change and fit in or if Johnny Panic, who “forgets not his own” (*JPBD* 33) is going to save her at some point. Difference becomes an instrument to oppose to the pressure of society, to the extreme. Because she would prefer that people live with mental disorders, an undeniably troublesome condition, than to become compliant members of society. The protagonist here is not ambivalent about her choices, because she has already decided her path and is convinced she is doing the right thing. Nevertheless the dichotomy society-individual, or in other words conventional-rebel, is present. Plath shows how damaging this duality can become through the severity of the protagonist’s reaction. She considers a harmful mental illness better than conforming to a toxic majority.

The pressure from society might also lead to a form of self sabotage, or at least to a halt in everyday occurrences. For example, the fear of being judged for disappointing might hinder the characters from acting. Dobson links panic and its personification in the deity Johnny Panic to Plath's "writer's block" (306, 307). And in the short story the god Johnny Panic is responsible for people being unable to function normally in society due to their fears (*JPBD* 22, 27). The theme of panic seen as a cause for a halt in life is also a topic in *Cambridge Notes*, where the protagonist mentions "the old beginning-of-the-week panic" (*JPBD* 207) that, as an old acquaintance, is an obstacle to her responsibilities. Dobson connects panic to Plath's "struggles to find the balance in her life" (308), in other words panic is linked to the conflicts in her mind. Along the same lines the protagonist of *Cambridge Notes* is a conflicted character. The pressure from the outside to act as an ideal person, which fuels the inner pressure the characters already feel, drives the people to act in a way that is unfamiliar to them. Inner conflicts may then lead to self-sabotage.

Society's continuous demands become a burden to the protagonists. Women feel the strain of coercion into an already set direction. This is a common point in both of Plath's prose works. Kumlu argues that "*The Bell Jar* and some stories in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* define the anxieties of Cold War America" (10). Their protagonists just react in different ways to their concerns. In the anthology the principal female characters seem to be less ambivalent and conflictive than in Plath's novel. They acknowledge that

their beliefs are in contrast with the ideal model proposed by society but their guilt is less manipulative than in *The Bell Jar*. Indeed in the novel pressure is met with more difficulty and often means an end of life as the protagonist knows it. A halt that feels like a punishment. Certainly the difference in length of the two works plays a part in this. A short story allows less space for mood changes and the transformations that naturally occur in an individual's life. Difference in length does not mean a less authoritative effect, indeed the anxiety that develops from the failure of meeting imposed expectations clearly has an impact on women's lives both in *The Bell Jar* and in the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* short stories.

CHAPTER THREE

Consequences of Ambivalence and Guilt

Ambivalence and internal conflicts, as I have analyzed in the previous chapter, are a characteristic of Plath's writing. The relationship with the male figures shows how division and dichotomy are a staple characteristic of the mind of the female characters. They are always ambivalent and uncertain between choosing to conform or rebel to the standard rules because this could have serious consequences on their whole lives. As the analysis continues I would like to explore some of the consequences that a conflicted character experiences. Being prone to division is bound to create a dissonance in the characters' identity; they do not feel they can safely be themselves. The consequences I would like to explore are the pursuit of perfection, a strained relationship to eccentricity, the need to play a role and the struggle to control one's life. Those are features directly related to the ambivalence the characters experience in their lives. The reason of the tense relationship with society's dogmas is the attitude towards women such as double standards between men and women, and a tendency to direct and control women's behavior towards an implicit norm. The stigma that follows

rebellion ensures dissenting is rarely an option. This creates a fracture between the real personality of a person and the role they are forced to play. At this point, internal conflicts become frequent. Indeed Plath's characters show the difficulty and fear of their effort and society's pressure to be part of the homogeneous group. Sometimes the female characters only dare to dissent in their minds, the only place where they cannot be judged. As a consequence, they feel they can only play a role in order to function. Society suffocates their eccentricity and individuality.

3.1 Pursuit of Perfection

The pursuit of perfection is closely related to the topic of ambivalence. Very often Plath's characters show a tendency to perform to unrealistic expectations, and guilt usually is a consequence of the inevitable disappointment. In *The Bell Jar* the failure to be admitted to the writing course devastates Esther, and so does Jay Cee's critique of her lack of knowledge about her future. In the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* collection the characters very often strive to perform to please the expectations of others. Beck argues that people with a tendency to depression go through the process of growing up "setting rigid, perfectionist goals for themselves" (7). So do Esther and several short story characters. Although Esther Greenwood is an excellent student, a winner of prizes and scholarships, and the protagonist of *Cambridge Notes* is a writer; failure is bound to happen at some point. Therefore the conflict between an ideal versus a real person is exhausting and bears traits of self-destructiveness. Constant perfection is an impossible goal,

consequently you never allow yourself to be happy. Plath's characters very frequently struggle to conform to a standard image they feel they should mirror. They want to please the people around them, a symbol for society, in order to be accepted into the group. Even if they feel they do not belong to it, they need the group's acceptance anyway. So the characters feel the need to always be at their best.

Plath's characters are never good enough, neither for society and especially nor for themselves. Ryan observes that never feeling adequate is a feature that appears in Plath's *Journals*, especially those from 1957 and 1958 (9). "Plath is forever adjuring, admonishing and recommending solutions to herself to be more productive, more successful, more gifted, neater, cleaner, more sociable" (Ryan 9); the key topic here is becoming more of something, anything, and not be sufficient as one is. Similarly Esther jumps from one prize to the other, rarely allowing herself another place but the first. *The Wishing Box* deals entirely with a woman who is desperate that her dreams are not satisfactory compared to her husband's dreams. Agnes Wiggins is frantic in her quest for more eccentric dreams, and her failure in accomplishing this means committing suicide. Esther in *Mothers* hides her real self from the judgment of others, certain that she will be rejected if she fails to do so. The feeling of being insufficient brings shame and guilt to Plath and her characters. Agnes Wiggins and the two Esthers in *The Bell Jar* and *Mothers* all feel distress and need to hide.

The actions of the characters carry features of self-sabotage; aiming at constant excellence means to have an unrealistic target that is impossible to

fulfill. Therefore happiness becomes almost unachievable. Leonard explores the subject of the "the pursuit of perfection, as outlined by the process that commodifies 'femininity'" (73, 74), and doing this she focuses on the aspect of women's magazines. The center of attention is especially on the articles that push women towards a pre-packaged and pre-approved ideal of realization such as the caption "'discover the new you'" (Leonard 73), and the belief that if women follow their advice they will transform into their ideal inner and outer self. Leonard identifies common aspects of the quest of flawlessness as "both self-deluding and self-destructive" (73, 74). In this specific case the need for transformation does not come directly from women but it is introduced from an outside source: society. But since the pressure for a makeover towards a pre-approved amelioration comes from various agents such as media, family, religious authority to name a few, it becomes an embedded characteristic in everyday life, hence barely detectable, but still very influential. The pressure comes then from both the outside and the inside.

A conflicted character obsesses over the perfect accomplishment and not to be a disappointment. To other people more than to herself. Leonard and Caroline Smith dive into the topic of fixation especially examining Esther in *The Bell Jar*, but I think it is an aspect to be found in the Johnny Panic anthology as well. According to Leonard Esther's "sole concern is to 'do it right'" (74) and Caroline Smith also observes that "throughout *The Bell Jar*, Esther preoccupies herself with performing 'appropriately'" (10). So both scholars agree that the pursuit of perfection is central in Esther's mind. In the same way Leonard and Caroline Smith choose the episode of the beach

picnic grilling hot dogs with Jody, Mark and Esther's date Cal to prove their point (Leonard 74, Smith C. 17). The episode they take into consideration is so effective because grilling hot dogs is a particularly trivial and unimportant occurrence with no relevant consequences. Regardless Esther obsesses over doing it flawlessly: "by watching Jody and Mark and Cal *very carefully* I managed to cook my hotdog *just the right* amount of time and didn't burn it or drop it into the fire the *way I was afraid of doing*" (TBJ 149 cursive mine). Even if she manages to cook her hot dog skillfully she decides to bury it in the sand in any case to avoid a possible negative judgment (TBJ 149). She must be as flawless as she thinks the other people around her are in order to be accepted. In this case it is the group of her peers, in other cases it is her family, family friends, her doctors or employer. In the picnic episode Esther strives to conform to the group to be recognized as a part of them and basically stresses that she is not at all different from them. In a way this group represents society and all that it portrays as good: young boys and girls dating and having fun in a wholesome way. Dating has the purpose of finding a mate to start family life, so this is a clean and approved occurrence. Actually, Caroline Smith points out, "for Esther, the only way to be accepted by others is to conform to what society thinks a woman in the 1950s should be" (10). But obeying the rules in order to be included provides only a temporary satisfaction. Indeed Esther is "unable to deal with the pressure" (Smith C. 17), or in other words the sacrifice of her desires are a compromise too significant to make. Esther goes against her beliefs when she conforms, so the result has negative consequences, such as her depression and suicidal thoughts.

Although Leonard and Caroline Smith worked with episodes from *The Bell Jar*, inner conflict and the quest for perfection are also present in the *Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams* collection. The entire short story *The Wishing Box* is about a wife's "strange jealousy (...) growing on her like some dark, malignant cancer" (JPBD 48) arising from her uninteresting and insipid dreams compared to her husband's astonishing vivid dreams. Otherwise she is insufficient, which is also Leonard's and Caroline Smith's discourse.

Likewise in *Sunday at the Mintons* Elizabeth Minton feels partly guilty that she is different from her brother. She prefers her way of being instead of her brother's, who is exceptionally rational and meticulous and exhausts his sister with his behavior. She mentions this many times throughout the story. But at the same time she makes false promises to him that she can change and become more like him, a better model. In the episode of the "telling direction" with maps, Elizabeth completely fakes an interest in examining maps (JPBD 154). In another episode she reassures Henry she is not daydreaming when she was, in fact, doing so (JPBD 149). So although Elizabeth judges Henry a difficult person and she knows he is not perfect, deep down she feels guilty and flawed, and hides her real self from him. In this case the quest for perfection is done in secret; Elizabeth fantasizes about dissenting but never acts. The only time she allows herself to do so is during a violent daydream about her suicide in order to follow her drowning brother. In other words a sacrifice to the stronger authority figure she cannot live without. Indeed Henry Minton acts as both an authority and a sort of partner figure. He is self-assured and takes for granted that his opinions are the truth. Moreover he

both belittles Elizabeth's ways and tries to direct her towards his conduct, in order to change her and make her conform. Although she could still decide for herself, since she used to be independent, she feels she cannot do that. The decision making process is seriously impaired because it would break with societal standards.

In the short stories there is no striking episode as I think the one of the picnic in *The Bell Jar* is. That is a case of an unimportant occurrence which is blown out of proportion and shows the extent of Esther's struggle. Nevertheless the search for excellence is a theme in both works, only treated in different ways. In *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* it is mostly exposed throughout the entire stories in the shape of the protagonists' guilt due to the fact that their different ways are also flawed.

As shown in the previous chapters, this is the usual attitude towards women's ambitions. As in Henry Minton's case, especially partners and authority figures influence women because society blames them for having "unhealthy" thoughts when they dissent. Therefore, as analyzed in chapter two, this strong pressure means they are constantly uncertain in what resolution to make.

3.2 Suffocate Eccentricity

The transformation of a person's identity into a pre-set model comes, as aforementioned, from both the inside and the outside. Whereas the inner pressure results from the societal norm that is fixed in the characters since childhood. A similar instrument related to forming individuals is the repression

of unconventional behavior and peculiar individual traits. The suffocation of eccentricity is an important topic in Plath's prose works, and it is related to the struggle between conforming and rebelling. Once again the issue is that the woman is insufficient as she is. The pressure to change is perceived everywhere, from schools to magazines, family and friends; society urges women to adjust to a model. This encouragement generates internal conflict because the real inner self and the rules for the ideal standard do not match. According to Wagner Elizabeth Minton is "fearful of her own identity" (*Specialness in Short Stories* 8), because her brother Henry openly expresses disapproval for her manners and tries to inculcate some "common sense" into his sister. Elizabeth seems to be compliant and even asks to be taught some of his skills but Plath depicts her uneasiness and instead she "withdraws into herself" (Wagner *Specialness in Short Stories* 8). The desire to be more like Henry is faked in order to not have to endure Henry's disapproving face pitying her. Elizabeth enjoyed and appreciated her life most as she lived it when she was an independent librarian. She would like to rebel to Henry but she only dissents in her thoughts. Choosing her brother's side of life, or in other words the patriarchal society's norm, may also be seen as self-sabotage because she undermines her opportunity to be happy. But again, the pressure from the outside world is too strong and she prefers not to be left behind on her own.

Especially in the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* anthology Plath focuses on eccentricity being one of the unique traits structuring a personality that is considered rebellious. Wagner focuses on Plath's short stories and

observes that "in each of Plath's early stories lies the potential for a course of action society might have found abnormal or destructive" (*Specialness of Short Stories* 5). This unusual and deviant behavior can be usually found in eccentric rebellious characters. Plath's short story *America! America!* (1963) is all about eccentricity being seen as something to be avoided at all costs. Plath writes about a state school and she lays emphasis on the fact that it is for everyone, from all social extractions. What they have in common are depressed parents (*JPBD* 34); Plath gives a picture of adults without the necessary strength to fight anymore, who carry on dumbly with their lives. On the contrary their children could become what they wish (*TBJ* 34). Only they need not to stray from what they are taught. The presence of an authoritative figure is a central feature in Plath's narrative. Usually it is represented by one person such as a doctor, an employer or generally an older adult in a position of power to represent society. But here it is represented in the form of society as a whole, as an abstract powerful figure that makes meaningful decisions about children, hence about the future of society.

It is soon clear that the children must conform to the societal model in order to become, ironically, whom they want to become. If not, there is something defective and unhealthy with them. Boyer analyses that "female disabilities are often associated with a 'system of shame'" (206, *Miner* 285). And rebellions and eccentricities were considered just that: something to change and cure, a defect to correct. As the protagonist puts it, "eccentricities, the perils of being too special, were reasoned and cooed from us like sucked thumbs" (*JPBD* 36). Uniqueness is undesirable, because it

cannot be controlled. And eccentricity mixed with knowledge can be dangerous, especially for females; it could signify a more independent thought and straying from the pattern: "the girls' guidance counsellor diagnosed my problem straight off. I was just too dangerously brainy" (*JPBD* 36). Quite sarcastically Plath uses words as "problem" and "dangerously" to explain how eccentricity becomes a substantial issue. The pursuit to create good citizens starts early, from children in school.

After all, even Esther Greenwood is scolded by the seniors on her floor for studying too hard, they make "nasty loud remarks (...) about people wasting their golden college days with their noses stuck in a book" (*TBJ* 57). Not only do they think studying too hard is negative, but they also consider it a real imperfection and for blind dates they usually introduce the "less desirable" and "flawed" boy to Esther, the "pale, mushroomy fellow with protruding ears or buck teeth or a bad leg" (*TBJ* 54). Esther's answer is guilty and shameful, as if she was somehow ashamed of her conduct and she tries to justify herself "I didn't think I deserved it. After all, I wasn't crippled in any way, I just studied too hard, I didn't know when to stop" (*TBJ* 54). She does not question the absurdity of judging a person negatively for studying too much during college days; she acknowledges her diversity. To reinforce her guilt for being flawed, no one asked her out a second time, as if even those less desirable boys saw an even worse blemish in Esther. A similar occurrence happens when Esther complains she is blind after her suicide attempt, and the nurse immediately pairs her with a similarly "imperfect" person: "you'll marry a nice blind man some day" (*TBJ* 165). Esther does not reply because it

is a normal thought in a case like that. Likewise Buddy Willard finds obvious it will be extremely hard for Esther to marry after having spent time in mental institutions. Esther just acknowledges his statement, as if it is no surprise in their contemporary society (*TBJ* 231). Such mild trivial eccentricities seen as imperfections show the extremeness of society's reasoning that rebelling also means exclusion. Plath wants to emphasize the strain people felt at the time.

Plath's contemporary society posed numerous more or less subtle obstacles against the more independent and eccentric minds. Badia argues that "Esther's frustration is not unreasonable given the societal constriction regarding women's roles in mid-century America" (133) and cites Plath's writings in her *Journals* when she individuates "the great fault of America, namely its expectancy of conformity" (411). After all society tries to erase any form of eccentricity in children from the very beginning. At the end of *America! America!* the protagonist goes by a primary school, and she notices the substantial difference between the past and the present. As time passed "all the anarchism (...) had been, in a quarter century, gentled away" (*TBJ* 37), it seems society has a plan to even out all differences and that it is working. Plath describes the children's condition sarcastically; they are more tranquil and protected than ever, and even reading "had become such a traumatic and stormy art" (*TBJ* 38). But the protection offered by society has a double side. "Did I glimpse, in the First Aid cabinet, a sparkle of bottles-soothers and smootheners for the embryo rebel, the artist, the odd?" (*TBJ* 38). Plath's stance is clear on the matter of perception of eccentricity. Disguised as a good deed, the aim in helping the children is to shape them to meet

acceptable societal standards. Having a uniform group is one of the bases of society.

The topic of conflicting ideas about belonging or rebelling is central when Plath deals with the topic of sororities. The author briefly mentions sororities in *America! America!* (JPBD 37) and she dedicates the short story *Initiation* entirely to the ambivalence she feels about them. In the former short story the character is very dubious about sororities, she labels the initiation “our smug admittance to the cherished Norm” (JPBD 37). The sorority represents society, which also is a restricted group where only the people who behave according to a standard are accepted. A sorority bears issues such as “censorship and surveillance” (Britzolakis 268) that are some of “the key problematic of Cold War cultural production” (Britzolakis 268). In order to enter a sorority an aspiring girl must obey her “big sister” (JPBD 141) without questioning her orders. And to keep her place a girl usually needs to behave appropriately to the sorority’s rules. Plath criticizes that a person has to withhold a part of her individuality and repress a part of herself in order to be admitted to the group, just as society and the male authoritative figures are used to expect from women. The author uses expressions such as “systematically destroy my ego” and “I was being tailored to an Okay image” (JPBD 37) to call attention to the change that a person felt compelled to undergo in order to belong. But at the cost of one’s individuality, belonging turns “into the nihil of belonging (...) the privilege of being anybody was turning its other face-to the pressure of being everybody; ergo, no one” (JPBD 37). Women’s personal aspirations and conduct are suppressed and bottled

up, and as the witnesses of women analyzed in *The Feminine Mystique* convey, this brings shame and fuels the inner conflict typical of depressed people.

Whereas in *Initiation* the protagonist is initially thrilled to be part of a sorority and to step into the group of especially chosen people. Actually, Millicent considers it a constructive transformation of her life more than a chance to be part of the top group. Change is seen as a positive occurrence, "how horrible it would be if one never changed" (*JPBD* 138), nevertheless Millicent would also like to include her former world as well, bringing her old friend Tracy with her. But throughout the story, as the initiation unfolds, Millicent goes through a process of transformation of her own. The initiation becomes an opportunity for reflecting about herself and what belonging to this group really means. Millicent discovers that belonging to a sorority is not what she thought and that conforming to them gives an "unpleasant anonymity" (*JPBD* 141) and a "denial of individuality" (*JPBD* 141). Basically, a person's uniqueness is damaged, and the initiation becomes a process of molding other new people to fit in. Krafft argues that the "power of the mystique" (291) "apparently blurs together rather than recognizing distinct personalities" (291) of women (also Bayley 203). The general tendency is for women to be considered as a group with similar dreams and beliefs, when "the feminine mystique encourages women to replace their personal desires with fantasies of motherhood and domesticity" (Krafft 292). Maple's view about individuals around Esther "encouraging her to inhabit an identity she is not comfortable with" (5) fits perfectly in Millicent's case. The result is creating

similar values in a homogeneous group and erasing individuality. Hence it is also easier to control them. But in the short story Plath creates a protagonist strong enough to “revolt” (JPBD 137), as she puts it. Millicent feels that “her own private initiation had just begun” (JPBD 147), because her own growing process has just begun during the experience. She decides to go through the initiation then refuses to join them when they would declare she had been accepted. So in a way Millicent has the change she felt was important but not at the cost of sacrificing herself. And most importantly, she does not feel conflicted or guilty as Esther painfully is, or the women’s testimonies in Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and Tyler-May’s *Homeward Bound* were. She is the most balanced of Plath’s protagonists I have analyzed. She does not have a partner figure and she is not influenced by authority figures. Society does not have the usual strong grip it has on women in Plath’s narrative nor does Millicent feel the pressure to conform at all costs. As a consequence, she does not sabotage her chances to be happy and chooses her own path. Plath shows that there is an opportunity to do this and to be oneself.

The topic the two short stories have in common is that female protagonists who are different or judged as weird have a problem. Silencing and manipulating them are key words to understand what society puts women through. Among the numerous themes De Beauvoir focuses on in *The Second Sex* there is self-control; she argues that “self-control imposed on the woman becomes second nature for the ‘well-bred girl’ and kills spontaneity; lively exuberance is crushed” (401). Society makes an attempt to contain women, and predictably as a result, a majority “do not dare aim too high”

(De Beauvoir 402). The feeling of guilt that springs from the idea of being defective is always in the back of their minds and is effective in blocking them. In both *America! America!* and *Initiation* there are characters who are considered peculiar, in a way that pictures them as broken and guilty. In the former short story the protagonist declares "maybe I was just too weird to begin with" (JPBD 37) as the reason she did not go in the sorority. Likewise in *Initiation*, the reason why Millicent's friend Tracy is rejected from initiation is that she "was just a bit too different" (JPBD 140). The words come from a member of the sorority, similarly to the significant statement: "I know it doesn't sound like much, but well, it's things like that which set someone apart" (JPBD 141). Louise is somewhat excusing herself because she knows the examples she gives are exceptionally trivial ones: she is speaking about "wearing knee socks" and "carry a bookbag" (JPBD 141). Closed groups such as sororities are another metaphor Plath uses for society, where even little things are meaningful because they are useful to individuate outsiders; they are a good controlling tool. Society and sororities are both units that select chosen members on the basis of their capacity for being obedient and conforming to a set of rules. There is no place for people who stick out or choose not to abide.

In conclusion, eccentricity is a theme in both prose works. In *The Bell Jar* the author represents oddity as an inappropriate issue, which it is best to keep hidden. Esther is punished several times for being different and eccentric, as other characters similarly are. In *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* unconventional behavior is portrayed less negatively; the protagonists are not

as ashamed as Esther to represent a difference in the group. Some of them hide, but for others it is a natural choice to be in the open. And, most importantly, they do not feel guilty for who they are and for being unlike the majority. A real revolution in Plath's narrative is represented by Millicent, the young girl who perceives separating from the group as an occasion for a constructive change. It is radical because the characters usually have learned since childhood from different authoritative figures that eccentricity is an imperfection and they learn to conform. This influences the ambivalence and guilt that the characters always feel in Plath's narrative and that runs throughout her works.

3.3 Play a Role

If suffocating an eccentric character means sending the message an unconventional female was somehow defective, a possible consequence is that said person feels compelled to suppress her own drives and aspirations. As a result she is forced to play a role that does not belong to her because of the guilt of feeling wrong. The problem of pretending is that a conflict between the real and the fake self starts to take form, the individual is under pressure and this is likely to cause an internal struggle. Both the direct and the more subtle demands to be part of a uniform community I have analyzed in the second chapter here drive women to play a role. They feel that they have to maintain a perfect façade and apparently play along with society's dictates.

In their works, both Perloff and Leonard have offered an analysis of *The Bell Jar's* protagonist Esther Greenwood in particular playing a part, but I believe the same issues can be applied to Plath's other prose characters too. Perloff observes that the two most important elements at play are Esther's "strange detachment" (509) from the outside world, and that she appears, from the beginning, "an elaborate contrivance, an empty shell" (509). Whereas Leonard focuses mostly on Plath and "the pressure to masquerade" (62) she experiences, in addition to the feeling of despair that the author suffers pretending to be someone she is not (62). As this is so important in Plath's life, it becomes a relevant element in her works as well. Again, in Plath's works there is pressure to change and follow societal values. The separation from the external world Perloff speaks about can be found throughout *The Bell Jar*, in expressions such as "I heard myself say" (*TBJ* 30, Perloff 509), or in the way Esther seems to hear and see herself from the outside in her phone conversation with her friend Jody (*TBJ* 113, 114). And especially when she "listened to the zombie voice" (*TBJ* 115) cancelling her arrangements for the summer writing course. The disconnection she feels springs from performing a part, Esther does not feel connected to the made-up self.

Esther expertly plays the role of Elly Higginbottom while talking to a sailor without a real reason (*TBJ* 127), but she also plays a part with almost every person she meets in the novel. Esther changes her personality according to/depending on the person she is speaking to, unable to let the real Esther reveal herself in the presence of others. She seems too scared to expose the

wrong side or inappropriate ideas and be judged for that. As a result Esther belittles herself, even without the habitual aid of authoritative figures. She copies the behavior of the people she encounters, doctors, love interests, professors and the women in her life. She always considers other people's actions and choices to be more valuable than hers. As an illustration of this, when Esther is with her outgoing friend Doreen she acts like a consummate party girl. The opposite of Doreen is Betsy, who is pictured as a nice and sweet kind of girl and for that named Pollyanna Cowgirl by Doreen (*TBJ* 6). Esther plays along with Doreen when they are together (*TBJ* 6), but when she is with Betsy she seems to recall her quieter side and acts more like her. Krafft identifies Betsy and Doreen as "hyperbolic representations of the 'bad girl' and the 'good girl'" (293), and Esther does not know which aspect best represents her. She acts like each of them when she is in their respective company. Although according to both Krafft and Smith Esther both relates and dissociates from Betsy and Doreen at different times (Krafft 294, Smith C. 13), I think the critics complete each other and the perspective on Esther with their further analysis. Krafft argues that Esther "wavers between mockery and identification suggests her inability to completely shatter the feminine stereotypes that they each represent" (294). Her vacillation is caused by her inability to contrast the rigid norm. Moreover Caroline Smith adds that with Esther's vacillation "ultimately she finds herself conflicted, wishing to conform to society's expectations of her" (13). Esther is always dithering between two choices, and she cannot choose in this case as well. She cannot counteract society's labels on women and cannot find what she as an individual really

wants. She tries to hide behind other people such as Doreen and Betsy because she would like to be someone who fits in a group, whatever group, but ultimately cannot. She is different and she cannot forcibly change this, which causes her conflict.

Moreover, the characters emulating the behavior of the people around them seem to be acting as a way to please the counterpart and attract the least possible attention on their different, flawed self. Dealing with the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* anthology Linda W. Wagner observes that

“what is more pervasive about these stories (...) is their emphasis on Plath’s pervasive theme-that of the different woman. In most of Plath’s fiction, her protagonist is a woman who feels herself different-from society’s expectations and perhaps from her own-and therefore, in some ways, excluded” (*Specialness in Short Stories 2*).

Indeed several characters from the short stories feel at fault and rejected because of their distinction from the majority; their solution is playing a part.

This happens in *Mothers*, when Esther desperately and unwillingly forces herself to accept the rules and values of the religious community in her new town because she wants to be accepted, and she knows revealing her true self would most likely mean to be rejected. Esther plays a part both with the religious group and also with the true outsider of the story, Mrs. Nolan, who resembles her more than the other women in the group. Esther not only fakes interest in going to church, but she also abandons Mrs. Nolan in favor of the

mothers' group because she understands conflicting people cannot fit in. Esther is recognized by Mrs. Nolan as a fellow outcast, "'what do you do here?' it was the question of a desperate woman" (TBJ 113), who understands she has something in common with the new woman in town. Esther only recognizes the injustice perpetrated on Mrs. Nolan by the rector (JPBD 115), but does close to nothing to defend her or their fellow different perspective on life and values. The protagonist has the opportunity to become a part of society and the group that decides who can belong or not. In this case Esther holds the power to potentially choose between the rebellious and the conformist side. She feels the same ambivalence as many other of Plath's characters do, but in the end the anxiety to be rejected plays a decisive role in her final decision.

One of the works where the character is acting more frantically to build a façade is perhaps *The Wishing Box*: Agnes anxiously pretends to be able to dream fantasy filled dreams like her husband does. In a dialogue between husband and wife Plath uses expressions like "forced", "lied", "hastily" "feeling like a fraud" and "dubiously" (JPBD 52). Agnes' life is a continuous rehearsal, terrified her act will be discovered. She goes as far as committing suicide so as not to face a visionless dull eternal waking time, different from anyone else and with a wrong point of view. What is valued as the most important feature here is the personal world of dreams and imagination because it represents the inner self, free of constraints. Imagination also represents the characters' personal choices, and a world where they can be free of judgment and think how they please. But in reality their choices are concealed and their thoughts

unheard, they do not dare to show themselves to the people in the real world. The example of Agnes demonstrates that she feels the pressure of performing in order to conform to "something else", exactly what it is unclear, but surely someone different from her inadequate self. Her life becomes ruled by internal conflicts and guilt and she spends her days trying to adjust to her role and to force her imagination back, in spite of the fact that forcing imagination is nonsense. Again, the double standard between males and females analyzed in the first chapter is a feature so rooted in Plath's contemporary society that it plays a role in people's subconscious world of dreams.

The aspect the prose characters in *The Bell Jar* and in the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* anthology have in common is that they change their personality according to the person they are speaking to; they are unable to let their real identity reveal itself in the presence of others. The characters' personalities are suffocated; they are pressured from many sides: authority, family, partners, peers and the outside world in general. Dealing with Esther Greenwood Baldwin points out that Plath's character "is, as she constantly reminds us, a master of deception, might it not be important to read her against her word?" (24). Esther does not reveal her opinions and views but copies the characters around her to please them in order to be accepted. Moreover the question about the characters' identity can be applied to the characters of the short stories as well. Behind the roles they play there is a part of their identity that cannot be shown to everyone or at every moment because of the consequences a disclosure might imply. In addition,

withholding sides of one's own personality and playing a part is heavily influenced by internal conflicts. The inner struggle is between satisfying the part that wants to be out in the open and the fear of judgment because they feel in the wrong.

However in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* the protagonists are more self-confident than the other prose characters and do not give the impression of caring about judgment from the community, represented by teachers and peers, as much as Esther Greenwood does. Millicent's personal journey in *The Initiation* is more important to her than the group's opinion and she is able to follow her heart. She is capable of choosing to explore a path that suits her personal needs despite everyone else's expectations; in this particular case internal conflict and guilt are not present. Millicent feels no shame regarding her decision, instead she plans to openly tell everyone on the last day of initiation displaying her decision as overtly as possible. The usual ambivalence that is typical of Plath's characters is lost here.

3.4 Need of Control

Plath's characters feel the need to play roles because they have a desperate need to control life occurrences. Their own feelings are too much to handle because the thought of exclusion from society is constantly present. Performing a part is a natural reaction that helps the characters regain control over problematic emotions that make them feel faulty and their actions inappropriate. The loss of control becomes a real problem for depressed Esther Greenwood (Fisiak 188) and the short story protagonists:

they strive both to achieve control over their lives and to be free of the control of others. In any case, control is central and failure to achieve it leads to mental struggle. Loss of control could potentially mean showing the wrong side, which means an odd, imperfect individual who desires different things.

Charteris-Black's analysis of interviews with depressed people sheds light on depression and the issue of control. He presents a series of common metaphors that several interviewees used to describe their situation such as "descent, containment and constraint, weight and pressure and darkness and light" (Charteris-Black 206). Most importantly, the scholar notices that the metaphors all have in common "expression of feelings about loss of control" (Charteris-Black 205), which appears to be of great consequence. "Loss of emotional control" is related to "a divided self" (Charteris-Black 214), and Charteris-Black uses Kövecses system to identify emotions: CAUSE→EMOTION→CONTROL→LOSS OF CONTROL→BEHAVIORAL RESPONSE (2000, 2005). In other words, loss of control can contribute to a divided self; it is frequent among depressed people, and Plath's characters, who often suffer from mental problems, are no strangers to this mechanism.

Control is a central feature in Plath's prose work. The characters frequently experience loss of control and attempt to regain power. Esther Greenwood is a perfect example, suffering from depression she loses control of her life and actions (Maple 2), and is subjected to the illness. When Esther's breakdown is getting worse she becomes increasingly unable to make decisions and take action on her life. Fisiak and Evans point out that Esther struggles to be in command of her own decisions (Fisiak 191, Evans 86). The

protagonist of *The Bell Jar* goes back and forth between the desire to control her own decisions and the fear of the consequences in doing just that; because control also means taking responsibility over her actions and exposing herself to others, as a consequence she would moreover be exposed to their critique and judgment.

Critics agree that society and historical period play a significant role over both “process of choice” (Badia 133) and a divided self (Smith C. 14, Badia 133). Plath’s characters show the effect the pressure to make “appropriate choices” has on individuals. The characters’ inner conflict comes from the difference between what the individual yearns for and what the individual should be yearning for according to the widespread norm. Badia claims that control is a central feature in *The Bell Jar*, and that “nearly all the plot episodes within the novel reveal Esther’s struggles to gain control over her own life, to determine her own choices, rather than merely accept those that society presents to her” (Badia 132). In other words, Esther struggles inwards to gain control over her existence because the roles for women were too limited and circumscribed and the complexities of women’s interests and personalities were not taken into consideration. I think this claim can also be valid for the short stories prose characters, who share with Esther feeling guilt-ridden for thinking differently from the majority.

In *The Bell Jar* Esther finds herself in a situation where control is central: this happens when she is with Marco, the “woman-hater” (TBJ 102). He tries to assault her and for a moment Esther considers not reacting “if I just lie here and do nothing it will happen” (TBJ 104). As Badia puts it, Esther “is potentially

subject to the control of men" (134). Marco takes control of Esther from the moment she is "dealt to him" (*TBJ* 102): he orders her drink, forces her to dance and moves her around during the dance as if she was a doll (*TBJ* 102, 103). But she chooses to resist to his assault and fight back, hence asserting her choice. Marco represents both the authority and the potential partner figure, hence the forceful patriarchal society, who tries to force women in roles that are too rigid. Nevertheless, after her experience with Marco Esther returns home, where the breakdown that was starting to happen in New York will develop to full-scale and she "begins to lose control of her own body and mind in multiple ways" (Maple 3). As Esther's mental illness worsens, she also loses more and more control of her actions and decisions, this is also a reaction to women's condition and their difficulty in expressing themselves.

More to the point, Esther's perhaps more determined and revolutionary choice regards contraception. First, Esther goes against what society dictates; contraception used by unmarried women was decidedly frowned upon. Second, she chooses to take complete responsibility over her sexuality, her choices do not involve anyone but herself. Third, one of Esther's most significant concerns is an unwanted pregnancy. She feels she has "got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line" (*TBJ* 212). In other words an unwanted pregnancy may potentially keep her from living her life because it would tie her to someone, possibly the wrong person, and to family life. Because in society's view a pregnancy out of wedlock automatically also means marriage. On the contrary, her dream is to be free to explore as much of the world as she can in order to become a real writer

and a fulfilled individual. In a way contraception becomes a symbol of Esther's freedom of choice; a successful electroshock therapy frees Esther from the bell jar choking her, but it is only when she is fitted with contraception that Esther finally feels that she has control over her own life (TBJ 212, 213). Her choice is revolutionary because, as Megan Behrent puts it, "Esther must break the law to gain control of her own body" (www.isreview.org/issue/92/personal-and-political) because contraception was still illegal in the 1950s (Behrent www.isreview.org/issue/92/personal-and-political). Hence it is even more important that Esther feels no internal conflicts and no shameful feelings over her choice. Initially she felt inadequate just cooking a hotdog (TBJ 149). The initial guilt she felt before arriving at the doctor's quickly disappears and Esther chooses not to play the role of the newly engaged fiancée she previously invented; it is just the beginning of the journey but she starts to free herself from masks and roles. In this particular episode Esther can be compared to Millicent in *Initiation*. Finally she is not lost in the constant dichotomy that is her life and chooses rebellion and not giving in to society.

Plath's other prose characters face not being in charge of their own life and being influenced from the outside. In the short stories collection this is an important theme, and here Plath shows the topic of control from different points of view. In *The Wishing Box* Agnes Higgins is a powerless witness of the increasing loss of control over her life because she cannot bring herself to dream as imaginatively as she did before; she is losing control over a part of herself while desperately fighting to keep authority. Plath focuses especially

on an increasingly gloomy state and her husband nonchalantly keeping up with his considerably more exciting life. While Agnes stays at home and has plenty of time to over-think her state, her husband takes his freedom for granted. Difference and double standards regarding freedom between the sexes interplay with the control theme. Her role is undesired; she would like more from her life.

In *America! America!* and the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* short story there is a common theme of the critique over control that is unfairly taken away. The protagonist of *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* "cannot feel" (JPBD 30) her legs and feet because they are "asleep" (JPBD 30), she has no control over her body, like Esther (Fisiak 188). Indeed apart from not feeling her body the Clinic Director pushes her as they walk (JPBD 30), then "propels her around" (JPBD 31) and another hospital worker "grabs and gets" her (32); she is then "undressed", "anointed", "robed" (JPBD 32), then other workers "take hold" (JPBD 33) of her: she has no authority over her body or her decisions, and this happens because of her diversity. Similarly in *America! America!* the children are overly sheltered and fed tranquilizers by adult authority. Here the children become a symbol of women in society, similarly females are the "inferior" half of society. Like children, women are apparently protected and sheltered from dangers outside of their realm, but in reality they are prisoners of a role. Like children, they have someone else deciding over them. For instance authority figures such as doctors who in both of Plath's works try to fix their problems of anxiety and discontent with pills (an image also given by Friedan's and Tyler-May's many testimonies).

On the contrary, in *Sunday at the Mintons* and *Mothers* control is only apparent, mostly enforced by the power of suggestion. The female protagonists have rather clear opinions about their likes and dislikes, but they do not communicate them to the people around them. Essentially they follow an authority's directions and not their own views; their "attempts to seize control" (Badia 134) do not succeed because they never begin in the first place. Even if the protagonists achieve being relatively confident over the way they are, at least interiorly, they do not hold control over their lives because they let others decide for them. The guilt they feel over their diversity makes them doubt the validity of their opinions. The double standards between the sexes and the imposed differences are so deeply rooted in women that usually it is too difficult for them to question society's schemes.

Control is one of the relevant features in Plath's prose; both works show the importance of loss of control and the fight to achieve it. In *The Bell Jar* Esther increasingly loses control as her illness develops, and there are few occurrences when she is not too uncertain about her decisions. For instance when she can feel free from her partners Irwin and Buddy and when she understands that she is not always the one to blame in every situation. But one of the biggest achievements of the novel is Esther autonomously deciding to have contraception fitted, thus gaining control over her body and her life. She does this uniquely for herself, without self-sabotaging the opportunities for happiness, but in most of *The Bell Jar* Esther Greenwood is without real authority over her life. She both fears the consequences of her choices and feels guilt for the diversity of her opinions: she changes her

opinions depending on the people or the situation she is in, this because Esther understands that she can benefit from hiding her real self, and so she does.

In the *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* collection Plath chooses to show the topic of control from different angles. She pictures complete loss of control, apparent control that happens only in the character's mind, critique over control being taken away and a balanced character who takes complete control over her decisions. So in both works what is described is how deciding as an individual, free from the judgment of others, can be empowering. But this is the exception and not the rule in Plath's works. Especially for conflicted characters such as Plath's; society's norm is too powerful and influential a challenge for them.

A split existence is a common feature in Plath's narrative. I have found this concept to be the cohesive element connecting all of the arguments I have analyzed in the two prose works. Specifically, internal conflicts and guilt are significant themes that raise several questions and from which the other topics develop.

The male figures have a central purpose; the situations involving them are the source of questions and dilemmas for the protagonists. The crises concerning male figures that the protagonists experience even make them question the validity of their opinions and desires. Society openly and subtly exposes a type of behavior dissociating with the approved standards as

wrong and clearly unhealthy. Moreover, this attitude generates guilt in the individuals when they do not find the perfectly reasonable and beneficial options offered by society appealing, even though the reason is only difference of opinions. This produces an intense strain on women because the (not so subtle) hints to conform to the community come from everywhere around them: in school, at work, from the medias, their family and their peers.

However the desire to have more in life than what is already planned for them is so strong that women are constantly ambivalent about choices. The risks when making a decision are important, because the outcome can be either dreadful or wonderful: being an outcast means freedom from unwanted choices but it is also a source of fear because it may also mean loneliness.

Therefore the mental struggle Plath's characters experience results in self-sabotaging, which becomes an automatic reaction. The female characters do not let themselves do something satisfying, because what makes them happy might end in punishment for daring to think outside the lines. Indeed the yearning for rebellion and an external pressure to do the opposite are likely factors of a feeling of guilt.

To sum up, the characters' lives are based on dichotomy, and certainly society and patriarchal figures have a role in this. Women in the works I have analyzed could rarely be wholly themselves, and in order to carry on in their environment they had to put on a show and play a role that did not belong to them. This contributes to intensifying their inner struggle and guilt. Central features of the characters' masks are the need of control and the pursuit of

perfection, which are directly linked; wearing the mask of the proper woman and respectable citizen is also an attempt to maintain an apparent control over their life, while in reality society heavily influenced them from the beginning of their lives. From the very beginning, in school as Plath describes, the aim was to repress individual peculiarities that stray from the norm.

Conclusion

In my analysis I have found internal conflicts and guilt to be a part of the female protagonists' identities and fundamental elements of Plath's writing. Throughout the author's works the interplay of those two elements develops other subject matters that become a significant part of Plath's narrative and widen its perspective. Through the multifaceted relationship of the female protagonists with the various male figures the reader understands that the complicated relationship with a patriarchal society is a significant issue in the mental struggle of the female characters. Society holds unrealistic expectations towards women. Moreover, the standards of behavior are usually set down by a predominantly male community, ill-equipped to be making decisions regarding the entirety of society. Hence women deal with an imbalance, or again, with a split. The focus of division follows women, and Plath's characters, throughout their lives. The occurrences in Plath's works exactly show that women are usually unresolved and ambivalent towards the validity of their opinions and goals, and part of the reason is that they are surrounded by an unbalanced norm.

Ambivalence also means that the characters are vague about their future. Typically they are aware that their individual wishes go beyond the standardized ideal they are supposed to be thrilled about, but finding an alternative to this proves to be a challenging issue. The societal pressure inhibits them to imagine a positive option, in other words it undermines their

self-confidence and ability to take autonomous decisions. In addition they develop feelings of guilt concerning their wrong desires. Goals such as an independent lifestyle, a career or simply desires that stray from what is considered ideal were particularly difficult to pursue in Plath's time; indeed they were so problematic that the author does not provide her characters with a final decisions or a clear-cut solution to this. In fact the author herself experienced mental strain and had problems with ambivalence and women's roles, because the labels created for women were too rigid for them.

In comparing and contrasting the two prose works I noticed there are several similarities, especially on the themes Plath deals with and on some occurrences that are reiterated, albeit not identically, in both of them. In both texts the central characters all experience different amounts of internal conflict and guilt, and feel that they have to hide rebellious behaviors: even Millicent (*Initiation*), the most self-confident and free character, is well aware that to be different very likely excludes a person from an homogeneous group. Eccentricity is the focus.

However the two works are far from being copies with minor differences; they differ in the general approach Plath has towards duality, conflicts and guilt. The author represents characters who are more straightforward and confident, or critical about society's ways in her posthumous prose collection, even though they certainly are not radical rebels. The posthumous nature of the anthology speaks volumes about how

the strain societal pressure and the double standards between the sexes inhibited women from making choices. Even the author felt freer writing about such delicate topics without thinking about publication. Consequently what I consider most revolutionary is finding an example where individuality and choosing a personal path are seen as opportunities of growth in *Initiation*. Generally in Plath's works being out of the ordinary is a risky matter, even if the need to hide one's personality is also critiqued and challenged by the author. Accepting one's own identity without thinking about labels as "flawed" or "unhealthy" that are recurrent in Plath's contemporary society is one of the most challenging processes; the social stigma is an ever present thought at the back of the characters' minds.

Although *Initiation* is the most direct example of choosing unconventionality, it is not the only instance in the prose anthology. In *America! America!* Plath criticizes the repression of eccentricity with sarcasm, and *Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit* is a critique of excluding people for being different. Especially in this latter work there are aggressive feelings of anger and deception, hence the protagonist is not accepting passively. Likewise, there are similar instances in *The Bell Jar* as well: when Doctor Nolan does not blame Esther for detesting her mother (TBJ 195), this represents an important step towards Esther's healing, because she "waited for the blow to fall" (TBJ 195) but there is no punishment for a thought she has always felt guilty about. Moreover when Esther starts improving after electroshock therapy, she understands that the other female patients'

unpleasant remarks are not directed at her but towards themselves, because they are struggling with their own problems (TBJ 209). Esther is not always the problem because she is guilty of wrong decisions. The realization that the outer world can be the cause of problems is a significant step for the character and in Plath's narrative.

In the two prose works I have analyzed, the social background is a crucial element to consider. The author presents the consequences of being exposed to that environment, such as persistent internal conflicts and feelings of guilt, in addition to the obstacles posed by the mental strain caused by a standard that rarely leaves room for personal adjustments; indeed "*The Bell Jar* and some stories in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* define the anxieties of Cold War America" (Kumlu 10). Plath portrays a landscape where men and especially women were confused and divided because of close social scrutiny and a constructed ideal (Kumlu 10).

While *The Bell Jar* is considered one of Plath's relevant works, critics such as Atwood (<https://www.nytimes.com/98/03/01/home/plath-johnny.html>) and Badia (137) claim that *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* is not the author's best narrative. Although I believe that in the prose anthology there are several works that add elements to the ideas represented in *The Bell Jar*, and generally are useful to illuminate Plath's narrative and understand the author from a different point of view. Most importantly, it is a place where Plath criticizes the standard ideal and represents eccentricity as a plus side,

there is frequent mention of less ambivalent characters who follow a personal path.

And why is that important? In *Laugh of the Medusa* Cixous deals with the importance of writing for women. Writing becomes an instrument for the representation of women, with which they can show the nuances of their identity (Cixous 876) to include the possibility that some may be content with family life, while others may prefer a career or an entirely different life, even though these last options were purposefully overlooked in favor of maintaining the traditional gender roles. Hence rigidly limiting women's opportunities and triggering unhappiness and mental problems. For instance, Friedan's and Tyler-May's texts elucidate the problem that women did not know the extent of the restlessness that many of them had in common and that fuels inner struggle, hence the function of writing becomes clarifying what women lived through.

The female characters struggle with their identity. Benigna Gerisch speaks about inner dichotomy generating a "true female self" and a "false self", which cannot coexist without the individual struggling (757). The individual is forced to wear a mask, and this division of real and deceitful is not something women choose. Those inner conflicts represented in the short stories and in *The Bell Jar* lead to distress and a stop in life: at a certain stage the characters cannot withstand the situation of persistent ambivalence anymore. Critics agree that Plath's female characters have a problem with the definition of their own identity (Perloff 521, Boyer 201, Wagner-Martin

Novel of the Fifties, 5-6), Perloff argues that “the hardest thing in the world to do-and it is especially hard when one is young, female, and highly gifted-is simply to be oneself” (521). This is the problem of Esther Greenwood and the majority of Plath’s shorter prose characters. In fact they, except from Millicent in *Initiation*, will not really be at peace with themselves; they remain conflicted and guilty. The situation might change at times throughout the texts and improve, but their lives are a constant rollercoaster driven by conflicts and guilt.

Looking at Plath’s prose works through the lens of mental conflict and guilt has been a way of changing perspective and analyzing some of Plath’s themes differently, that is keeping ambivalence and feelings of guilt as a focal point while exploring the characteristics of divided females and the consequences of ambivalence on them. Consequently, the center of attention is not only depression but being split between the yearning to fit in and to rebel at the same time. As a consequence, this split influences women’s identity and life; they disguise themselves as individuals who are well-adjusted to their environment while in reality they suffer. As a type of coping mechanism they feel the need to pursue perfection and over-control their life in order not to expose their real character; Doing this is also a self-sabotaging mechanism that further increases their frustration. Moreover the relationship of the female protagonists with the male characters through the lens of internal conflicts sheds some light on the difficulties women experienced because of their pre-determined and rigid roles, and how the

lives of the characters are often focused on exactly these conflicts and the ambivalence between fitting in and dissenting. This new focus has helped to expose a diverse angle to questions such as: what happens in a conflicted mind? What are some of the consequences of division and guilt?

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