JACLR
Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research

JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research is a bi-annual, peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access Graduate Student Journal of the Universidad Complutense Madrid that publishes interdisciplinary research on literary studies, critical theory, applied linguistics and semiotics, and educational issues. The journal also publishes original contributions in artistic creation in order to promote these works.

Volume 9 Issue 2 (December 2021)

Diana Ramos Milla

"Gender Coercion and Artificial Femininity in Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*"

Recommended Citation

Ramos Milla, Diana. "Gender Coercion and Artificial Femininity in Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 9.2.2 (2021): <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

Abstract:

Gender coercion and artificial femininity in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) are portrayed as significant subjects of controversy in America's 1950s and 1960s, for cultural conventions endorsed by male-centred modern psychiatry restrained the possibility of female identity beyond normativity. Modern psychiatry based on the foundations of nineteenth- century's ethics proposed a model of femininity grounded on the notions of wifehood and motherhood, so female rebellion against social standards was pathologised since resistance was considered insane and opposed to female nature. As a consequence, the conflict between femininity and modern psychiatry diagnosed disobedience as a mental state for which women needed to follow aggressive psychiatric treatments and hospitalization. The presence of McLean hospital in both literary works resembles the imprisonment that femininity must prevail to shape the feminine experience according to social demands. So trauma and body studies allow to comprehend how brutality against the body results in mental deterioration and dualism, as the violence presented in both novels seems to be directed to the body for the psyche is the immaterial dimension of the individual. Phenomenological theories are also used to revise the dualism between body and mind, given that violence prevents the characters from unity, and commitment in the psychiatric ward approves the creation of an artificial femininity to create a simulated identity. Hence, McLean is represented as a hierarchy where its three stages, Wymark, Caplan, and Belsize perform the function of creating manufactured entities.

Keywords: Madness, Psychiatry, Dualism, Gender, Femininity, Artificiality.

Diana Ramos Milla

Gender Coercion and Artificial Femininity in Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*

0. Introduction

The Bell Jar (1963) by Sylvia Plath and *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) by Susanna Kaysen portray the controversial relationship between womanhood and modern psychiatry as a male-centred institution during the 1950s and 1960s in America. Both novels deal with the notion of imposed models of femininity against young women's aspirations, so characters such as Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* and Susanna Kaysen in *Girl, Interrupted* stage the conflict between female identity and modern psychiatry to maintain order in the division of gender. Moreover, the authors' actual experiences as patients in McLean hospital relate to both novels, for Plath's work is semiautobiographical, and Kaysen uses it in her memoir. *The Bell Jar* and *Girl, Interrupted* present a panorama where the female subject embarks on a journey that destabilises the self, due to a social frame that prevents individual identity from achievement. This social environment becomes a scenario in which descending into madness becomes a common sensation that pushes femininity into the path of punishment as the result of collective judgment. Modern psychiatry also seems to label female resistance to feminine roles as mental unsteadiness, so these characters are subdued to the authority of a male-centred institution supported by a society that isolates what is considered beyond the conventional. Ergo, McLean hospital is presented as the core in both novels as the place where faulty femininity is to be penalised, and aggressive psychiatric treatments become common practices to erase selfhood and refusal from the characters' persona, so duality and phenomenology occur in the individual to explain the division between body and mind as a response to trauma and lack of unity. Both works also demonstrate how duality divides the parallel universe of the mental hospital and the world outside, for it seems that the hospital's achievement is to shape women into dolls to be offered as a product. Hence, the division in McLean's stages, Wymark, Caplan, and Belsize, appears to work as an inverted pyramid whose purpose is to fix these female characters symbolising a doll-making factory. Therefore, McLean artificially shapes their mindset to fulfil society's demands by erasing any individuality, and preventing them from unifying the female identity. This paper intends to investigate the gender conflict regarding female identity and modern psychiatry coupled with the figure of manufactured roles of femininity in Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*.

1. Gender Coercion and Artificial Femininity

America's male-centred culture in the 1950s and 1960s determined female purpose as the affectionate housewife who fulfilled the family's necessities and social demands. Connections between social standards and modern psychiatry became predominant during these decades, even determining whether women needed to endure violent therapies or mental hospitalization if reacting against the nature imposed on them. The affinity between cultural impositions and modern psychiatry resulted in a tumultuous

conflict around the matter of female identity, since these forces attempted to adjust gender roles from a social attitude that minimized women's opportunities. Furthermore, modern psychiatry designated women reacting against the conventions of tradition as mentally ill subjects in need of recovery and rehabilitation, however, as Jane M. Ussher affirms, the term 'mental illness' can be problematic since it may allude to any pathology that can be cured by biomedicine, separating the individual from culture and politics (4). With this in mind, it seems that both novels do not correlate with mentally ill subjects, for Esther in *The Bell Jar* and Susanna in *Girl, Interrupted* project their condition from a social and cultural schema, so they would not just be confined to a medical gaze.

By way of illustration, Esther in *The Bell Jar* is admitted in McLean[1] hospital, as her male therapist considers she suffers from a mental disorder for she does not seem content enough with her life, and indifferent to social conventions such as marriage. According to social standards, accepting a marriage proposal from Esther's partner Buddy Willard would be advisable from a conventional point of view. However, as Showalter suggests "Esther feels lost and displaced among the sexual sophisticates, prom queens, and future homemakers … she enters a depressive spiral in which none of the alternatives available to educated women seems satisfactory" (216). Esther commences to sustain a disconcerting engagement with society and femininity, and her unfavourable experience with the institution of marriage creates a negative association between sexuality and marriage linked to the experience of ECT sessions during her first sexual intercourse "a little electric shock flared through me and I sat quite still" (Plath 81), so intimacy is described as an electric shock that invades her body, foreshadowing Esther's future experience with psychiatric violence and the disruptive connection between her and affective-sexual encounters. Similarly, Susanna in *Girl, Interrupted*, confronts an unforeseen situation where and another patient in McLean hospital experience the troubling linkage between womanhood and conventionality while they decide to cook some caramel to entertain themselves "The nurses thought it was cute that we were cooking 'Practicing for when you and Wade get married?'" (Kaysen 32). It seems that nurses in McLean positively encourage these patients to persevere in cooking and staying in the kitchen, so they are prepared to attend feminine roles already endorsed by the hospital. According to Friedan, the American world pushed women into madness, forcing them to build their own identification while avoiding dependent identities (96), but neither Esther in *The Bell Jar* nor Susanna in *Girl, Interrupted* have the chance to develop their identities due to the dispute between female identity and a male-centred society that attempts to dissolve any possibility of oneness. Thereupon, rebellion against social and cultural functions pushed women into confinement and isolation, for they were considered ineffectual and quiescent, resulting in resentment towards female sanity.

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013), a

[1] McLean hospital in Massachusetts was a mental institution famous for holding popular residents such as Ray Charles, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Susanna Kaysen. In Girl, Interrupted Mclean appears explicitly mentioned since it is Kaysen's memoir. Despite the fact that The Bell Jar does not refer to its hospital as McLean, literary criticism considers Plath's work as semiautobiographical due to her experience in McLean in the 1950s.

mental disorder is a clinical pattern associated with distress or disability, leading to loss of freedom as a consequence of behavioural manifestation and culturally disapproved of (25). Presumed cultural assumptions seem to be involved in the determination of mental affliction, even penalising the individual's self-manifestation to maintain a social order that denies unconventional choices. Hence, it could be argued that Esther and Susanna are valued from a bigoted social viewpoint, since there is moral responsibility in indoctrinating young women to be fitted for the social context, expecting them to behave according to the stereotype of femininity.

As Elliott mentions, male psychiatry perceived and concluded that femininity is masochistic, as women tend to feel pain during childbirth, choose to feel pain with beauty standards, or even fantasise with the idea of being raped and sexually abused (7). In that regard, suicidal attempts assume the form of indications of internal sorrow, as the body becomes the target of pain so they need to separate the mind from the body to withstand grief, but the body as the target of violence involves being destroyed, implying that the mind would also be annihilated. In *Girl Interrupted* Susanna admits that her suicidal attempt is just a self-destructive part of herself she yearns to execute, so she reveals that the inside is wounded and that there is no possibility to externalise this discomfort and the body is to be hurt to release emotional pain. As Marshall mentions: "The bodily readings of Kaysen's text suggests that girls continue to ingest a cultural pedagogy that teaches girls to turn their anger inward rather than outward, that instructs them to self-destruct as the only viable option for resistance" (128). Thereby, Susanna's ability to handle her emotions seems to be manipulated and distorted by cultural conceptions that prevent her from developing equilibrium, as she opts for imploding to release discomfort since exploding is not culturally and socially approved of. Likewise, *The Bell Jar* describes how Esther is directly exposed to ECT sessions for her emotional distress, even though she admits that she has no aim to take her life: "I couldn't see the point of getting up … It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at" (113, 142), so Esther admits that the reason for her distress is deeper than the surface of her body; thus, she is able to identify that the violence inflicted on her body will not pacify her sorrow.

Modern psychiatry and femininity were distinguished as susceptible topics, predominantly due to the implementation of obsolete treatments and theories from the nineteenth century. In 1883 the French physician Auguste Fabre stated that women suffer from hysteria[2] and they carry it throughout generations constituting their temperament (qtd. in Ussher 9). Women pathologised with hysteria experienced depression and fatigue in response to restrictive social patterns and cultural context which endorsed sexual abuse and violence against women, and as Ussher suggests, these women could nowadays be diagnosed with BPD (Borderline Personality Disorder)

[2] Term coined in the nineteenth century that gave psychiatrists the motive to exploit the notion of the hysterical woman as the malfunctioning and unbalanced subject.

or PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), meaning that female insanity is based on a cultural myth constructed by social labels of sorrowness as a response to the discontent of women due to the characteristics of their lives (11, 13, 14). Hence, the idea of the hysteric woman proceeded during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s since the paradigm to diagnose female insanity emulated the same pattern that nineteenth century psychiatry established.

The term hysteria was eventually coined as schizophrenia for the respective periods of the 1950s and 1960s. According to Showalter, "During the post-war period, the female malady, no longer linked to hysteria, assumed a new clinical form: schizophrenia" (203). Thenceforth, *The Bell Jar* and *Girl, Interrupted* operate as an illustration of how the female subject endured the practices and ideologies of obsolete psychiatric techniques. In *Girl, Interrupted* Susanna attends an appointment with a psychiatrist, who after a brief and superficial conversation determines her admission in McLean. The recollection of events may demonstrate that the therapist's criterion relies on social traditions ""Have a boyfriend?" he asked. I nodded to this too. "Trouble with the boyfriend?" It wasn't a question, actually, he was already nodding for me … "You need a rest"" (Kaysen 7). Despite being close to committing suicide, it could be argued that Susanna's therapist is more concerned about her status in her sentimental relationship rather than the actual cause behind her suicidal attempt. Hence, the private becomes a subject of matter, so Susanna is judged as a failure for the prediction of her future as a defective wife, and her admission to McLean seems to be motivated by a social response to her incapacity to adjust the collective matter. In such a way, conventionality punishes and leads her to seclusion, not so different from nineteenth-century code that expected women to fulfil their roles in seclusion. Similarly, *The Bell Jar* employs traditional values to pathologize and punish Esther. For example, Esther's accident while skiing with her partner Buddy Willard may be anticipated as a misfortune due to the presence of a man in her life "You were doing fine, a familiar voice informed my ear, until that man stepped into your path" (Plath 93). After suffering an accident and breaking her leg someone suggests that her life has been disrupted by the presence of her partner, so Esther recognises the significance of marital conventions for women since her accident is linked to the presence of Buddy Willard in her life. Esther's rejection of the institution of marriage that is imposed on her, leads her to associate it with the beginning of her mental breakdown.

Esther's first appointment with Doctor Gordon[3] gives a picture of the therapy's orientation and hierarchy. It appears that Doctor Gordon assures his male domination in accordance to fulfil the male-centred dominion of modern psychiatry, in order to subjugate female creation "Doctor Gordon cradled his pencil like a slim, silver bullet" (Plath 129). The pencil seems to be described as a phallic symbol that denotes the superior status of Doctor Gordon, for he belongs to a profession that eventually decides the fate of femininity. Thus, describing the pen as a machine of creation and domination is detrimental for Esther, as she struggles with her creativity and

[3] Doctor Gordon is introduced in The Bell Jar as Esther's first male therapist before her stay in McLean.

inspiration forces "Lifting the pages of the book, I let them fan slowly by my eyes … leaving no impression on the glassy surface of my brain" (66). It appears that Doctor Gordon's possession of the pen may represent the patriarchal domination that interrupts Esther's creative process and determines her fate. Consequently, Esther seems to be at the mercy of her therapist, who is supported by male-centred modern psychiatry in order to regard her as the broken subject.

As Schmidt mentions, the 1960s' psychiatry was highly influential, for Michael Foucault published *The Birth of the Clinic* in 1963 (7). According to Foucault, "the patient's bed is to become a field of scientific investigation and discourse" (xvi). In other words, the patient becomes the object to be observed and loses its humanity to be part of a field of study. Thus, the suffering of the individual is not considered the main priority, but the recollection of pathologies and symptomatology. This violent intervention indicates that medical power comes before the patient (Schmidt 8). Seemingly, Esther feels stressed and objectified when she is admitted in McLean and several medical students are meant to observe her "I couldn't understand why there should be so many of them, or why they would want to introduce themselves, and I began to think they were testing me, to see if I noticed there were too many of them, and I grew wary" (Plath 196). This remark confirms that Esther and Susanna are not humanised or identified as subjects, which seems to resonate with Friedan's idea of female victimization, as psychiatry discriminated women with personal or professional expectations "They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for" (Friedan 44). Consequently, femininity becomes a question to be pathologies by modern psychiatry since it rejects the values of female self-growth by embracing disadvantageous values of objectification.

From the literary works under analysis, it could be argued that the clinical distress, pressure, and violence directed to these women set a boundary between the outside world and the inner dimension of the hospital ward. On this subject, the psychiatric dimension mirrors the consequences of the outside world, so young women such as Esther or Susanna are blamed and penalised for their decisions and incapacity to succeed in the collective context of society. As Showalter states, "The asylums are indeed confusing places, secretive prisons operated on Wonderland logic. Their female inmates are instructed to regard themselves as 'naughty girls' who have broken a set of mysterious rules that have to do with feminine conduct" (211). In that regard, *Girl, Interrupted* closes its first chapter with a sentence that already foreshadows their fate in the psychiatric dimension "Every window on Alcatraz has a view of San Francisco" (15).

Patients perceive how social pressure is also inflicted even on the place where they are meant to recover from their emotional distress. However, it seems that the rigid regime established in the psychiatric ward inhibits their capacity to restore their sanity and process of emotional healing, blaming inmates for their mischances. In *The*

Bell Jar Esther feels responsible for receiving ECT treatment with no previous diagnosis "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done" (Plath 138). In like manner, in *Girl, Interrupted* Susanna expresses on several occasions how imprisonment becomes the inmates' only perception "Five-minute checks. Fifteen-minute checks. Half an hour checks … it never stopped, even at night, it was our lullaby … it was our lives measured out in doses" (54), so the lives of Esther and Susanna seem to be confined to checks and schedules in which they cannot have privacy or motion. Thereby, their lives are interrupted by breaking the natural course of existence, making them unable to identify themselves suspended in the pain of emotional distress in a confinement in which as Herman suggests, prolonged trauma occurs to the victim as a prisoner (74). Time is measured by numbness and dehumanization comparable to the confinement in a prison: "A nurse would look through the chicken wire and decide if you were ready to come out. Somewhat like looking at a cake through the glass of the oven door" (Kaysen 46). As the previous passage suggests, it could be argued that the imprisonment of the inmates in the psychiatric dimension results in a suitable scenario for depression and mental disorders, as the isolation process that inmates must endure, coupled with their constant surveillance, and external influence, results in the incapacity to express their individuality through dehumanization.

According to Ian Gotlib and Constance Hammen "Vulnerability to depression, in part, is a function of the environment that has been created by the person" (246). This situation of imprisonment allows these women to be prone to suffer from actual mental illnesses as a response to the oppressive situation of confinement, so the parallel universe of psychiatry becomes highly dangerous and unbalanced for their psyche since it encourages their descent into madness. For instance, Lisa in *Girl, Interrupted* is presented as one of the few inmates who is still in contact with the outside world, as she constantly manages to escape the psychiatric ward "'Lisa always knew what she needed.' She'd say, "'I need a vacation from this place'" and then she'd run away. When she got back, we'd ask her how it was out there. '"It's a mean world'" she'd say. She was usually glad enough to be back. "'There's nobody to take care of you out there'" (27). The fact that she mentions that the outside world is detrimental for there is nobody to take care of them, suggests that Esther and Susanna begin to lose their sense of independence and individuality, which may seem coherent for they are forbidden to have any contact with the outside, and denied any kind of activity to maintain their minds engaged.

Inside the dimension of psychiatry, Esther in *The Bell Jar* and Susanna in *Girl, Interrupted* lose themselves, so as a consequence they embody their diagnosis since the mental hospital only gives priority to their pathology "I imagined my character as a plate or shirt that had been manufactured incorrectly and was therefore useless" (Kaysen 58). They appear to be forced to divide their perception of the world in two, since they are confined in the imprisonment of the psychiatric dimension while being denied any contact with the outside world, making their mental condition their sole reason for existence. *Girl, Interrupted* presents a situation in which Susanna

among other inmates demonstrate feelings of nostalgia and idealisation when they are visited by nurses their age "When we looked at the student nurses, we saw alternate versions of ourselves. They were living out lives we might have been living … we wanted to protect them so that they could go on living these lives … halfway between our miserable selves and the normality we saw embodied in them" (81). Thus, their only alternative is to imagine how their lives would be if they had not been confined in isolation, so they visualise themselves in the reflection of people coming from the outside in order to have a close experience of normalization. Esther in *The Bell Jar* also perceives the idea of imprisonment and detachment from reality "What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort" (Plath 227). The reason why Esther mentions that these girls also sit under bell jars resembles a metaphor for imprisonment and mental deterioration, since a bell jar is an inverted glass jar where things are put in order to be observed by scientists and physicians. Therefore, Esther's reference to the bell jar symbolises how women in the outside and in the psychiatric dimension are constantly examined and suffocated since there is no air to breath in the captive social expectations of the bell jar. According to Esther, women in the outer world are still oppressed even though they are not confined in isolation, so it seems that Esther realises that oppression is found in both the psychiatric dimension and the outside dimension, therefore, there is no contrast between women living in confinement and those living in a standardised normalization outside the hospital.

Bodily experiences of rebirth and death take place in both novels as the resemblance of false security and dishonest motherly protection. According to Judith Herman, "The sense of safety in the world, or basic trust, is acquired in earliest life in the relationship with the first caretaker. Originating with life itself, this sense of trust sustains a person throughout the lifecycle" (51). Herman's theory of basic trust in early stages of life related to the function of the caretaker, may present the idea that rebirth in both literary works under analysis, is oriented to reset the individual's mind and life cycle in order to create a new self, for in the case of Esther and Susanna their sense of safety in the world fails. Thus, they need to create a new relationship with the female caretaker to provide a new meaning for their lives, and regenerate their existential cycle. In *Girl, Interrupted* Susanna seems to interrelate the experience of rebirth to the maternal uterus, as she finds similarities between the tunnels of McLean and the experience of being in the maternal womb, for there are similar characteristics regarding space and structure:

> There are tunnels under this entire hospital. Everything is connected by tunnels. You could get in them and go anywhere. It's warm and cozy and quiet. I said. 'A womb doesn't go anywhere' … 'The hospital is the womb, see. You can't go anywhere, and it's noisy and you're stuck. The tunnels are like a hospital without the bother' (Kaysen 121, 122)

It seems that Susanna reacts against the idea of the womb as a possibility of going further and evolving. She appears to connect the womb to imprisonment by comparing it to the confinement of the hospital, so she attributes meanings of infertility, seclusion, loneliness, and impossibility as a symbol in which life cannot take place and opportunities fade. Vulnerability is also directly connected to the actions of the hospital accountable for women's weakness: "Naked, we needed protection, and the hospital protected us. Of course, the hospital had stripped us naked in the first place" (94). Nonetheless, returning to protection is not possible as they can only achieve an artificial and false sense of safety, so the notion of basic trust and reliance on the caretaker do not seem dependable alternatives, for the hospital misuses their confidence first. In *The Bell Jar* Esther perceives the maternal affection and the protection of the uterus as a positive experience "And when Mrs. Bannister held the cup to my lips, I fanned the hot milk out on my tongue as it went down, tasting it luxuriously, the way a baby tastes its mother" (Plath 106). Esther seems to perceive the nurse Mrs. Bannister as a foster mother since she relates the experience of being given milk as the relation between mother and offspring in the act of breastfeeding. Additionally, when Esther tries to commit suicide, she seems to compare the setting and situation as an opportunity to return to the maternal womb: "It was completely dark. I felt the darkness … Then the chisel struck again, and the light leapt into my head, and through the thick, warm, furry dark, a voice cried, "Mother!"" (90). In that regard, it appears that Esther achieves a momentary satisfaction by experiencing the action of breastfeeding revolving around a tender and secure atmosphere. Nevertheless, she experiences the side effects of false maternal protection, since Doctor Nolan, her female doctor in McLean, is in charge to ensure that Esther receives ECT sessions, so when Esther is not previously informed about her ECT session by her doctor, she feels betrayed by the possible motherly figure Doctor Nolan could symbolise for her:

> It wasn't the shock treatment that struck me, so much as the bare-faced treachery of Doctor Nolan. I liked Doctor Nolan, I loved her, I had given her my trust on a platter and told her everything, and she had promised, faithfully, to warn me ahead of time if ever I had to have another shock treatment. (111)

Female intervention in both novels as motherly representation seems to fail, not only for the false sense of security but also because this relationship seems not to fulfil the therapeutic relationship between therapist and patient. As Laing argues, the individual can only be itself in its world and the psychiatrist cannot go straight to patients, for the language of the self does not seem to be parallel to make a successful therapeutic contract (19, 25), which suggests that both novels do not succeed in such purpose, as characters are culturally forced to live in a different reality from theirs and forced to enter the therapist's reality. Therefore, the lack of communication between the mind of the patient and the reality of the therapist provokes the patient's detachment, and allows psychosis and depersonalization to generate a split in the individual as a way of coping with emotional distress (Laing 69). In *The Bell Jar* Esther struggles to find words

to express her sorrow and concerns regarding her feelings of distress to Doctor Nolan. Thus, the following passage portrays silence and numbness as her only options, for her psyche depersonalises in order to handle her emotions and detaches herself from reality:

> I wanted to tell her that if only something were wrong with my body it would be fine, I would rather have anything wrong with my body than something wrong with my head, but the idea seemed so involved and wearisome that I didn't say anything. I only burrowed down further in the bed. (Plath 96)

Esther confronts dualism between body and mind during her stay in McLean, as Esther's phenomenological sense seems to be ruptured. Accordingly, phenomenology[4] explores the connection between body and mind in order to exist, in contrast to Cartesian dualism. As Merleau-Ponty and John F. Bannan mention to define phenomenology: "I am the absolute source. My existence does not come from my antecedents or my physical and social entourage, but rather goes toward them and sustains them. For it is I that make exist for myself" (60). It appears that Esther does not follow the principle of phenomenology to become the subject of existence, so her experience of the world cannot be attached to reality or truth as she cannot unify her existence through the connection to the body. Furthermore, language seems to fail due to her incapacity to express through the mind, as she needs to articulate through projections "I opened my fingers a crack, like a child with a secret, and smiled at the silver globe cupped in my palm. If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself, and if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again. I smiled and smiled at the small silver ball" (Plath 97). In that manner, the silver globe breaks in several identical pieces which represents the multiplicity of the self when the subject is broken, so the division of the silver globe represents how she cannot be considered the subject anymore but minor reproductions of one entity preventing her from unity. According to Chamarette, "Phenomenology's conceptual location might be described as the place where the sensing subject and the thinking subject meet … sensation and thought, body and mind, world and self, being and nothingness" (290). Esther in Plath's novel violates the union of the sensing and thinking subject by splitting her mind in several portions that do not allow her to complete her integration. Similarly, *Girl, Interrupted* presents how Susanna violates the union between mind and body, as she seems to objectify her body in order to understand her presence, for she does not seem to perceive her physical dimension as real and solid:

> I turned my hand over quickly. The back of it wasn't much better. My veins bulged— maybe because it was such a hot day—and the skin around my knuckles was wrinkly and loose. If I moved my hand I could see the three long bones that stretched out from the wrist to the first joints of my fingers. Or

[4] Phenomenology, opposite to Cartesian dualism body vs mind, is a philosophical study that consolidates the union of the whole individual in order to have an insightful perception of existence within all the dimensions of being.

> perhaps those weren't bones but tendons? I poked one; it was resilient, so probably it was a tendon. Underneath, though, were bones. At least I hoped so … I put my hand in my mouth and chomped. Success! A bubble of blood came out near my last knuckle, where my incisor had pierced the skin. (Kaysen 90)

However, the fact that she needs to hurt herself suggests that she needs to wound the body so her presence can be proven real. According to Laing "existential phenomenology attempts to characterize the nature of a person's experience of this world and himself" (17). This statement represents a close reading of what Susanna in Kaysen's novel endures in order to find her phenomenological sense, since biting her hand to bleed demonstrates that she tries to experience herself from a physical perspective in order to find her nature in the world. In consequence, parallel to Esther, she violates the phenomenological essence as she depersonalises her psyche so as to sense her body, and even though she tries to prove her bodily existence by provoking the physical experience of pain, she still perceives her body as an inert and unknown self that cannot be unified.

It seems that the parallel universe of psychiatry threatens the inmates' perception of emotions and expression, since they need to find a private place to release what is considered insane not to disturb the normalization of the public. For that reason, in *Girl, Interrupted* Susanna describes the function of the seclusion room as a symbol of sanity in disguise, as inmates are allowed to make use of it to free themselves "You could pop into the room, shut the door and yell for a while. When you were done you could open the door and leave. Yelling in the TV room or the hall was "acting out" and was not a good idea. But yelling in the seclusion room was fine" (Kaysen 46). The seclusion room seems to have a dual meaning that reflects the contrast between the psychiatric dimension and the outside world, for it projects at a micro level how isolation is used to give inmates a false sense of freedom. In other words, as in the outside world, it appears that distress and misgivings cannot be expressed publicly, so the individual must find a private place to release frustration and anger. Otherwise, these emotions can lead to isolation in the seclusion room in order to numb the patient if these emotions are expressed in the public space "Anyone who sustained a higher level for more than a few hours was put in seclusion" (46). As Susanna admits "Freedom was the price of privacy" (46) as inmates decide to lock themselves to have a false sense of freedom without being punished, so the seclusion room becomes a microcosm within the parallel existence of the psychiatric ward, meaning that it holds two powerful forces: punishment and freedom. Likewise, it could be said that the seclusion room not only is a micro universe within the macro dimension of the psychiatric ward, but also a physical representation of how insanity is portrayed in the hospital.

The separation between the outside world and the psychiatric dimension creates a gap in which meaning is suspended. As previously mentioned, the mental hospital is mostly addressed as a prison, for it shares similar characteristics regarding isolation and punishment. However, studying the characters' thoughts about the

outside compared to their stay in the psychiatric ward may clarify some concepts of what can be found in the gap between both dimensions. Esther from *The Bell Jar* perceives the interaction with the outside as a privilege while staying at McLean, so any contact with life outside seems untouchable and foreign "Joan had walk privileges, Joan had shopping privileges, Joan had town privileges … Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me" (Plath 108). It seems that she understands the outside world in terms of privilege and freedom, since she compares her situation of imprisonment with the vision of the outside as free of oppression. Nonetheless, it appears that Esther's vision of the outside may be idealised, as she did not have good experiences before her admission in McLean, which suggests that due to her condition of confinement her idealisation of the world outside the psychiatric ward is blurred by images of unreal privileges. For instance, one of Esther's experiences in the outside foreshadows that she cannot enjoy any privileges for being in the outside. In that regard, she describes how going to the cinema appears to be an oppressive experience, as at certain point the film she watches predicts the indoctrination of gender roles in the outer dimension:

> Finally I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody … I began to feel peculiar. I looked round me at all the rows of rapt little heads with the same silver glow on them at the front and the same black shadow on them at the back, and they looked like nothing more or less than a lot of stupid moonbrains. (Plath 23)

It seems that Esther's experience at the cinema gives an insightful analysis of how she perceives the outside world. She describes how people begin to blur and lose any definition, which resembles a representation of how the film projected feeds the audience's mind with social conventions. It appears that the film presents two opposite kinds of female roles and their corresponding fate. Firstly, there is a woman echoing the role model represented by the angel in the house, for she is described as a nice girl, so she is rewarded with a husband. In contrast, the called sexy girl suggests patterns of the prototype of the fallen woman as a femme fatal, so she remains alone and is not rewarded with a husband. These female principles and conventions are fed to the audience, and as a result they start to be dehumanised as they accept the product the film feeds them with. For that reason, Esther's event at the cinema suggests that her understanding of the experience in the outside is unreliable, as the event of watching the film indicates that the outside world's main goal is to apply gender coercion in the same manner as the psychiatric ward. So, it seems to confirm that her vision of the outside as privileged is conditioned by the state of imprisonment provoked by the hospital, whose purpose of gender coercion is the purpose in the outside.

As mentioned, *The Bell Jar* describes three wards in McLean hospital as stages to give special attention to patients in different phases. According to Judith Herman, recovery of trauma can be divided in three stages: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life since the main goal is to impose

simplicity and order in a process of turbulent complexity (155). However, the process of recovery described by Plath in McLean does not seem to be parallel to the several stages of recovery, for the stages of safety and reconnection are not respected. It could be said that the stages within the hospital function for a common purpose, which is to offer a final product to society instead of attending the female patients' mental necessities. In that regard, the hospital's distribution seems to be presented as an inverted pyramid hierarchy whose objective is a working process of doll-making as a factory. This pyramid hierarchy is represented in Plath's *The Bell Jar* since the three stages of McLean are described in the novel. However, even though they are not mentioned in Kaysen's novel, the basis of such model allows the development of the same hypothesis, for Mclean is introduced in *Girl, Interrupted,* and also the process of doll-making to achieve artificial femininity.

According to the description of the stages in McLean presented in *The Bell Jar*, the inverted pyramid in McLean suggests that Wymark holds the worst cases on top of the hierarchy, symbolising stereotypes of broken dolls that enter the system of the hospital to be fixed and offered to society as perfect dolls. Women who are less threatening and broken after being exposed to aggressive psychiatric treatments in Plath's novel proceed to stay in Caplan. In that regard, it seems that Caplan functions as an in-between state in which inmates are constantly supervised in case they need to undergo violent treatments again, so in that stage the hospital supervises if the initial fitting functions and whether these women are prepared to be sent to the last stage. Considering Belsize as the end of the pyramid, patients are constantly under their bell jars, observed and analysed to enter the new phase. If they can enter Belsize, it means that they are sufficiently sculpted to be offered as a new product to society, so in this last phase they are indoctrinated and repaired to be on the social markets as models of femininity offered as dolls. To illustrate, Mrs Norris serves as an example of broken doll who is wrongly placed in Caplan "I don't know how long I sat there, watching the woman in purple and wondering if her pursed pink lips would open, and if they did open, what they would say … she's going to Wymark, my nurse told me in a low voice. I'm afraid Miss Norris isn't moving up like you" (Plath 183, 186). For that reason, as Mrs Norris seems to still remain numb and catatonic, she needs to be sent to Wymark again. For her numbness does not correspond to Caplan since in that level women are meant to be less unemotional and need less fitting, so they are closer to enter the path of normalization through Belsize.

Esther's observation of Belsize emphasises that patients are fairly different from those in other stages, since they are described as conventional people allowed to get married or enjoy the privilege of going outside for mundane activities such as shopping. Nonetheless, Esther's description of DeeDee[5] during her stay in Belsize supports the metaphor of the female subject transformed into a doll, as she acknowledges DeeDee's physical appearance close to the features of this inert object "She widened her starey blue eyes like a little doll" (Plath 198). In that regard, women

[5] DeeDee is presented in The Bell Jar as an inmate in McLean who belongs to the stage of Belsize.

in Belsize not only have already undergone treacherous treatments that erase any presence of identity, but also project their existence and perception in a dehumanising manner that allows their further objectification into dolls, as the previous the passage suggests. During this stage female rivalry is rewarded, as women are finally fixed and taught how to behave according to the role model of femininity. Hence, they are indoctrinated to reject the unfit women who do not move according to the hierarchy of the pyramid. Esther's realisation in *The Bell Jar* of how inmates in Belsize disregard her presence in that stage "I had gone to bed right after supper, but then I heard the piano music and pictured Joan and DeeDee and Loubelle, the blonde woman, and the rest of them, laughing and gossiping about me in the living room behind my back. They would be saying how awful it was to have people like me in Belsize and that I should be in Wymark instead" (Plath 198). They are inculcated with the dynamic of social role models that reward women who reject the notion of unity and are willing to contribute to normalization. Likewise, Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* also implicates the idea of falseness and artificiality "As long as we were willing to be upset, we didn't have to get jobs or go to school" (Kaysen 94). It appears that Susanna experiences the notion of dehumanization in the same manner as Esther, for as she mentions there is no need for them to worry about activities related to the outside world. Ergo, the agreement to remain numbed and quiet as dolls is the price to pay in order to enter the frame of normalization. *Girl, Interrupted* presents a metaphor of objectification that demonstrates how artificiality is indoctrinated as a symbol of synthetic reality "We ate with plastic … Food tastes different eaten with plastic utensils. One month the plastic-utensil delivery was late and we ate with cardboard knives and forks and spoons … melting clotted cardboard in and out of your mouth, rubbing on your tongue" (55). Susanna's perception of the alteration in food taste due to the use of plastic and clotted cardboard may represent a metaphor for the digestion of artificiality. Thus, the use and ingestion of plastic and cardboard contributes to the hospital's indoctrination of objectification that portrays the process of dehumanization and construction of synthetic personalities, as a reference for the doll-making process for loss of authenticity.

The final product achieved by the process of doll-making through the hierarchy of the inverted pyramid in McLean, suggests that women who are succumbed to the procedure of objectification may be considered suitable and acceptable in order to be offered as dolls, designed to fulfil the role of models of femininity that were defective previous to the intervention of the hospital and its conditioning. However, Esther in *The Bell Jar* and Susanna in *Girl, Interrupted* seem to defeat the organization of the inverted pyramid, for they seem not to move according to the hierarchy established. By way of illustration, *The Bell Jar* closes Esther's experience within the pyramid with an open ending, for it is not clear whether Esther is eventually able to leave McLean permanently or if doctors decide she is not sculpted enough, so she needs to spend more time in McLean undergoing ECT sessions: "The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room" (Plath 280). Esther's fate seems unclear, however, her discomfort

during the Belsize stage and her perception of other inmates as artificial dolls, may foreshadow that Esther's destination may not be in the outside world, for she is not truly integrated in the dynamic of McLean. It could be argued that the hospital decides that Esther does not move in the same dynamic as other female inmates who are prepared to embrace conventionality on the outside. So, Esther's standstill in the pyramid determines her fate as she cannot be freed from the process of dehumanization determining her impossibility to reintegrate normalization. Similarly, Susanna fails to follow the pyramidal hierarchy, for she astutely chooses the institution of marriage to escape the hospital: "Luckily, I got a marriage proposal and they let me out. In 1968, everybody could understand a marriage proposal" (Kaysen 114). Hence, Susanna's final decision to get married seems to be a tactic to leave McLean, for marriage is one of the final goals throughout the process of doll-making in the pyramid, so the hospital celebrates its achievement as Susanna is considered fixed and prepared to be offered. Consequently, Susanna succeeds in breaking the imprisonment even though she urges the institution of marriage against her will, so conventionality and normalization cannot leave her.

2. Conclusion

It could be stated that Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* represent female oppression in America during the 1950s and 1960s, as both novels display the impossibility to fully realise the protagonists' self for social expectations consisted in ruling women's life so as to maintain an order in gender roles. For that reason, Esther from *The Bell Jar* and Susanna from *Girl, Interrupted* picture a panorama in which the female identity revolved around domestic notions of motherhood and wifehood. The disruption caused by these ideals led to the influence of modern psychiatry, which was in charge of pathologizing women who did not conform to traditional gender roles. Modern psychiatry influenced by nineteenth century's dogmas followed the notion of the hysteric woman, whose term evolved to schizophrenic during the 1950s demonstrating that psychiatry pursued an archaic female model that encouraged punishment and isolation to offer a remedy for female distress, and it also alluded to diagnose the conflict of femininity through medication and violence, since the female body was meant to suffer brutality through psychiatric violence, and the psyche represented the unreachable dimension of the individual. Yet, as demonstrated, the dogma of masochism related to female suffering aimed to regard the physical dimension as the target of violence.

In both novels cultural context supported by psychiatric confirmation appears to also diagnose female insanity since Esther and Susanna are pathologized due to their rejection of social conventions. Ergo, the female body meant to suffer is not allowed to release the pain, so Esther and Susanna's suicidal attempts indicate the implosion of internal sorrow which eventually arouses a split between mind and body in the characters. Phenomenology also suggests that the characters need to prove their existence, even though their connection with the body fails as they cannot perceive

their mind as whole, so their phenomenological sense is fragmented leading to the division between mind and body preventing Esther and Susanna from unity. Therefore, harshness seems to be perpetuated in McLean to create an artificial model of femininity, as characters are forced to divide their perception of the outer and psychiatric dimension due to the confinement in the hospital and lack of contact with the outside. Experiences of rebirth in McLean also suggest that motherly protection is impossible within the hospital, as female caretakers fail their nurturing purpose representing futility in the renewal of the lifecycle.

The notion of the inverted pyramid suggests that the ultimate purpose of the hospital is to shape these characters as dolls to offer a manufactured role of femininity. For that reason inmates are established in three stages: Wymark, Caplan, and Belsize. This hierarchy describes the process of disrupting the characters' sense of unity to achieve a model of femininity based on passivity in which the procedure determines whether the characters develop according to the doll-making process. In that regard,

Esther's final scene shows her impossibility to move according to the pyramid's hierarchy, resulting in her re-imprisonment to repair the part that rebels against the procedures so cannot escape gender roles and artificiality. Likewise, Despite Susanna's physical escape from McLean, she embraces the institution of marriage which symbolises that in the same regard as Esther, Susanna does not entirely free herself from gender coercion and artificiality. So, she intentionally decides to endorse imposed roles of femininity in order to finalise her imprisonment. It could be said that Esther and Susanna cannot evade gender division and the creation of artificial roles of femininity, for both characters do not progress in accordance with the hierarchy that McLean establishes to offer them as perfect conventional models of femininity, thus portraying the objectification of dolls to enter the venue of society.

Works Cited

Chamarette, Jenny. "Embodied Worlds and Situated Bodies: Feminism, Phenomenology, Film Theory." *Signs*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2015, pp. 289–295.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5. American Psychiatric Association, 2013.

Elliott. "'Self-Inflicted' Violence." *Off Our Backs*, vol. 31, no. 5, 2001, pp. 6–14.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 2001.

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975.

Gotlib, Ian H. and Constance L. Hammen. *Psychological Aspects of Depression*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1992.

Herman, Judith L. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: BasicBooks, 1997.

Kaysen, Susanna. *Girl, Interrupted*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999.

Laing, R D. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. London, England: Tavistock Publications, 1969.

Marshall, Elizabeth. "Borderline Girlhoods: Mental Illness, Adolescence, and Femininity in Girl, Interrupted." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 30 no. 1, 2006, pp. 117–133.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and John F. Bannan. "What is Phenomenology?" *CrossCurrents*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1956, pp. 59–70.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber and Faber, 1966.

Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830- 1980.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

Schmidt, Ramona. "The Medical Gaze in Psychiatric Treatment: Women Doctors and Nurses in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar and Susanna Kaysen's Girl, Interrupted" *Women and Medicine in American Literature and Culture*, vol. 17, no.2, 2016, pp. 1–19.

Ussher, Jane M. *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience*. London: Routledge, 2011.

Bioprofile of the author: Diana Ramos Milla is a postgraduate student who completed a degree in English Studies in 2021 at Complutense University of Madrid, and continues her academic career as part of the Master in North American Studies. Her academic interests include the field of Gender Studies (in which she obtained honours due to her research in theories of trauma in women's literature), American and British Contemporary Fiction, and particularly Modernism, Postmodernism, and Fantasy genre.

Contact: <diaramos@ucm.es>