

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES

**“Girls Like that Make Me Sick”: Female Homosocial
Bonds and Spatial Theory
in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar***

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Abstract

This thesis examines the correlation between spatial organization and the deterioration of homosocial bonds in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). It argues how the decay of homosocial bonds in the novel constitutes a central yet unexplored dimension of Plath's work. Drawing on feminist literary criticism, spatial theory and the historical sociology of female friendship, this study asserts how the main two spaces of the novel function as ideologically charged environments which consequently shape homosocial relationships and how Esther's mental decay is inseparable from both these spatial and relational contexts. The thesis resolves that *The Bell Jar* presents a structural critique of the spatial and social dynamics of postwar America, portraying Esther's breakdown not as an individual issue but as a historically and politically conditioned inevitability.

Key words: *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath, homosociality, postwar America, spatial theory, Cold War femininity.

Résumé: “Girls Like that Make Me Sick”: Liens homosociaux féminins et théorie spatiale dans *The Bell Jar* de Sylvia Plath:

Cette étude présente une analyse de la relation entre l'espace urbain et suburbain et la détérioration des liens homosociaux féminins décrits dans le roman *The Bell Jar* de Sylvia Plath (1963). Suivant l'expérience d'Esther Greenwood, la protagoniste du roman, dans deux espaces complètement différents, New York et la périphérie de Boston, ce mémoire met à l'avance le lien entre la dégradation de la santé mentale d'Esther et les relations homosociales qu'elle décrit dans l'histoire.

Ces liens homosociaux, inséparables du contexte sociopolitique et culturel de l'Amérique d'après-guerre, servent de point structurel central dans l'histoire et permettent de bien comprendre l'effondrement d'Esther. En effet, les relations homosociales ne sont pas un simple arrière-plan narratif, mais plutôt l'axe central de la dépression d'Esther, qui sert aussi de critique à la dégradation progressive des amitiés féminines comme résultat d'une idéologie propre au contexte de l'après-guerre et de la Guerre Froide.

La méthodologie de cette thèse explore *The Bell Jar* à travers d'une perspective de genre au même temps qu'elle examine la relation du texte avec son contexte social et politique contemporain. L'analyse de l'œuvre distingue les deux espaces principaux dans lesquels se déroule l'histoire et présente un aperçu du changement social et historique de chacun. En outre, chaque sous-partie de l'analyse du roman suit l'interaction et la relation d'Esther avec d'autres protagonistes féminines. Ces analyses offrent une description individuelle des personnages en les liant au contexte social, mais aussi à leur rapport avec Esther quelle que soit leur influence sur elle, négative comme il arrive dans la plupart des cas, ou positive.

L'état de l'art révèle que la conception de l'œuvre a beaucoup évolué depuis sa publication. D'abord considéré comme un simple récit autobiographique qui touchait des thèmes comme la dépression et la tentative de suicide de son autrice, le roman est aujourd'hui analysé comme un grand texte critique de la société de l'époque.

Parmi les travaux qui ont orienté cette évolution, plusieurs œuvres présentent un intérêt particulier. En premier lieu, *La Femme mystifiée* de Betty Friedan, publié en 1963 et souvent considéré comme son équivalent littéraire, forge le concept connu comme « le problème sans nom », terme qui sert à décrire le malaise des femmes américaines confinées à la sphère domestique. La relation entre les deux œuvres est significative car elle a permis d'éloigner *The Bell Jar* d'une simple autobiographie et de le rapprocher d'un texte qui dépeint d'une façon critique la société de l'époque.

En deuxième lieu, *The Racial Imaginary of the Cold War Kitchen* publiée en 2016 par Kate A. Baldwin, approfondit cette perspective critique et affirme que le roman démystifie la vie suburbaine en faisant un lien avec ce qui est populairement connu comme « The Kitchen Debate ». Ce texte permet de lier indéniablement *The Bell Jar* à la politique de l'époque et sert à apporter une dimension politique explicite au roman.

Finalement, *The Female Malady* d'Elaine Showalter (1985) fait une analyse historique et féministe de la description de la folie féminine aux XIXe et XXe siècles. Son œuvre établit un lien entre la condition d'Esther et la destruction des liens avec d'autres femmes. Cette dernière idée permet d'introduire le concept d'homosocialité, qui est développé dans le cadre théorique et approfondi à travers le texte « The Female World of Love and Ritual » de Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975), qui retrace l'histoire des liens homosociaux féminins aux États-Unis du XVIIIe au XXe siècle et décrit comment les

tabous culturels de l'époque ont affecté les relations des femmes en les incitant à prioriser les relations hétérosexuelles normatives.

Le cadre théorique aborde les deux éléments structurants principaux de cette étude: l'homosocialité et la théorie spatiale. Le concept d'homosocialité a été popularisé dans l'œuvre *Between Men : English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* d'Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) où il se présente comme un continuum entre les relations d'amitié et le désir homosexuel. Ce continuum, dans le cas des relations masculines, est souvent fragmenté par l'homophobie, mais dans les cas des relations féminines, le continuum est beaucoup plus fluide et moins stigmatisé, car elles ne sont presque jamais liées au désir sexuel.

Quant à la théorie spatiale, elle est présentée depuis une perspective féministe inspirée de l'œuvre *Mujeres, Casas y Ciudades* (2018) écrite par Zaida Muxí Martínez. Muxí Martínez propose une lecture féministe de l'histoire de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme et met en évidence une division entre « espace public » et « espace privé ». Ces termes, qui apparaîtront souvent dans l'analyse du texte et qui permettent d'associer chaque espace à la normativité attendue de l'époque, désignent une matérialisation de la division de l'espace. Cette matérialisation, dans le cas des femmes, les reconduit dans la sphère domestique tout en leur présentant cet enfermement et toutes les contraintes sociales comme une aspiration naturelle et un signe de réussite. Dans le roman, ces deux espaces seront représentés par la cité de New York et par la banlieue de Boston.

La première partie du travail porte sur le séjour d'Esther à New York et son analyse en tant qu'espace paradoxal. Dès l'incipit du roman, la ville est associée à une atmosphère apathique et, contrairement à un lieu de promesses et de libération, New York se révèle

pour Esther comme un lieu aliénant où elle comprendra son inadéquation et sa non-conformité avec les attentes patriarcales imposées aux femmes.

Dans cette partie apparaissent trois figures féminines centrales : Doreen, Betsy et Jay Cee. Toutes incarnent, à leur manière, la dichotomie patriarcale de l'époque. D'un côté, Doreen représente la féminité sexualisée et, de l'autre, Betsy est l'incarnation de la féminité domestique attendue. Ces deux personnages sont interprétés selon un article de Yesica Rebollar (2022) qui analyse la dichotomie entre les figures d'« ange » et de « démon ». Les deux sont subordonnées aux désirs patriarcaux et incapables de se réconcilier. Les interactions avec et la perception qu'Esther a des deux protagonistes seront aussi influencées par un regard masculin et patriarcal. Jay Cee, quant à elle, représente la réussite professionnelle et est analysée comme une possible figure de mentor, ou même comme une figure maternelle, mais qui, à la fin, a adopté des mécanismes d'autorité masculins. Cela la rend incapable d'offrir à Esther un modèle alternatif au binarisme présenté précédemment. Jay Cee a réussi dans l'espace public et dans le monde professionnel au prix d'une masculinisation de sa figure.

La célèbre métaphore du figuier qui apparaît dans cette première partie cristallise la paralysie qu'Esther ressent dans la cité. Les branches, analogies des futurs possibles, constituent une représentation graphique de son angoisse, car en choisir une exige d'abandonner toutes les autres.

La deuxième partie analyse l'espace privé et domestique. À partir du chapitre dix, le roman se centre sur le retour d'Esther dans la banlieue. Le contraste avec New York est rapidement identifiable : là où la ville offrait une stimulation excessive et aliénante, la banlieue impose une monotonie oppressante. Cela se voit dans les descriptions du roman qui décrivent un paysage uniforme, représentation d'une domesticité automatisée qui

transforme les individus en marionnettes conformistes. L'espace privé, que ce soit la maison ou l'asile psychiatrique, est décrit comme un lieu de surveillance et d'exclusion. Dans cette deuxième partie, il y a plusieurs figures féminines qui contribuent au déterrement psychologique d'Esther, mais aussi des personnages qui semblent la conduire à son rétablissement. Parmi les figures « nocives », on trouve, en premier lieu, sa mère. Elle incarne la domesticité que sa fille rejette profondément. Elle projette sur Esther des attentes de conformité que celle-ci ne veut pas assumer.

En deuxième lieu, on trouve Dodo Conway, sa voisine et mère de sept enfants qui représente une domesticité suburbaine extrême. Une autre figure, celle de Teresa, la médecin de la famille, est un personnage paradoxal : elle est la seule femme en qui Esther semble avoir confiance, et pourtant, c'est précisément Teresa qui l'oriente vers le docteur Gordon, le personnage masculin dont les traitements conduiront Esther à son effondrement total.

Finalement, il y a le personnage de Jody, une amie de Cambridge qui propose à Esther de partager un appartement, proposition qu'elle rejette. Par la suite, elle regrette sa décision, mais elle ne rappelle jamais Jody acte qui illustre son isolement.

Quant aux figures féminines qui jouent un rôle positif dans la guérison d'Esther, il y a, à partir du chapitre quinze, trois personnages importants. Philomena Guinea, une écrivaine qui finance le traitement d'Esther dans une clinique privée, représente une possible matérialisation de l'un des futurs des branches du figuier : celui de la femme indépendante. La contribution de Philomena n'est pas seulement financière, car elle permet aussi de libérer Esther de sa peur de la maternité. Esther paie avec une petite partie de l'argent que lui donne Philomena la mise en place d'un dispositif contraceptif.

Apparaît ensuite la figure de la docteure Nolan. C'est la psychiatre en charge d'Esther et la première avec qui Esther communique sincèrement et à qui elle confie ouvertement ce qu'elle pense. La docteure valide ses émotions et devient la figure la plus positive de cette partie, voire du roman. Leur relation montre ce que les liens homosociaux auraient pu être pour Esther. La docteure est décrite comme une alternative aux traitements patriarcaux du docteur Gordon et son rôle presque maternel guide Esther jusqu'à la fin du roman.

Finalement, Joan est la figure la plus complexe de cette deuxième partie. Joan est une ancienne connaissance d'Esther qui tente de se suicider après avoir lu l'histoire de la protagoniste dans les journaux. Joan est interprétée par de nombreux critiques comme un double d'Esther. Quand Joan avoue son affection à Esther, celle-ci la rejette violemment. Pourtant, malgré le rejet, Esther s'appuie sur Joan et son personnage devient indispensable dans un moment critique. La mort de Joan, qui arrive après qu'Esther ait perdu sa virginité, peut être lue comme la disparition symbolique de l'« ancienne Esther ».

La conclusion de ce travail est que *The Bell Jar* constitue une critique structurelle des dynamiques spatiales et sociales de l'Amérique des années 50 et 60. L'espace urbain de New York et l'espace suburbain de Boston influencent, chacun d'une façon différente, les relations homosociales et rendent impossible la création de liens véritablement solidaires. L'effondrement psychologique d'Esther est une conséquence historiquement et politiquement conditionnée qui mène les femmes à intérioriser des valeurs patriarcales en leur proposant une dichotomie inéluctable.

Des recherches futures pourraient porter sur l'existence de communautés féminines pendant les années cinquante et soixante qui auraient pu se développer loin de cette dichotomie patriarcale et de sa nécessité obsessionnelle de productivité. Il pourrait y avoir, sans doute, des documents informels (comme des journaux intimes ou des lettres) qui témoigneraient de la présence desdites communautés où la solidarité féminine était vraiment possible. De futures recherches sur ce sujet permettraient d'enrichir l'analyse de cette lecture et de démontrer que, même si *The Bell Jar* propose une description de la société plutôt sombre et critique, l'existence de liens homosociaux féminins solidaires et une vie éloignée du biais patriarcal étaient possibles dans l'Amérique d'Après-guerre et continuent de l'être aujourd'hui.

1. Introduction

The publication of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath in 1963 finds itself in a politically and socially conflicted period of time for American history. The story, set in 1953 describes a complex postwar landscape, and the story, written during the Cold War, the rise of the feminist movement, and the consolidation of consumer culture, has attracted large critical attention since its publication. The novel has been deeply analyzed from many different perspectives, those including autobiographical writing, clinical psychology, psychoanalysis, and feminism amongst many others. Yet, little critical work has focused on the intersectionality of two other dimensions, which, of course, do not exclude the previous ones but rather enrich them. Those are, as this thesis will argue, essential to the structure of the novel and, hence, its meaning. These two structuring subjects concern, on the one hand, the configuration of urban and suburban space (also referred to as public or private sphere), and, on the other, the importance of homosocial bonds.

This thesis argues how these two dimensions are related. The main spaces Esther, the main protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, inhabits are not neutral settings but rather ideologically charged environments whose material organization directly conditions the possible female homosocial relationships in them. Hence, female relationships cannot be fully grasped without reference to the spatial context that produces them. The main focus of this study is to explain Esther's psychological downfall in connection to a deterioration of her homosocial bonds.

My critical approach for this TFG is to explore *The Bell Jar* from a gender perspective while examining its relations to the social context of the period. The main corpus of this thesis is organized into two main parts, each corresponding to the novel's different spatial

settings: New York and the suburbs of Boston. They both offer a deeper understanding of the changing spatial landscape linked to contemporary social, cultural and political changes, and a breakdown of the different homosocial relationships described in them. The first part discusses how New York, far from offering liberation, functions as a place of alienation that transforms homosocial bonds into competition and how said bonds are mainly structured around a patriarchal dichotomy and which Esther judges as possible figures of identification. The second part, centers upon the suburban space and traces how private space and domesticity aggravates the conditions of female isolation already observed in the city. It also analyzes the impact of female characters in their contribution both to Esther's downfall and/or her recovery.

2. State of The Art

Sylvia Plath still stands as one of the most significant American writers of the twentieth century. Her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963, has since then been much studied and analyzed as an illustration of mental illness, depression and self-identity. These themes have led to a range of different interpretations, notably from a feminist perspective and as a critique of gender roles. The reception and research carried out on Plath's work has evolved from the simple consideration of *The Bell Jar* as an autobiographical portrait of madness, to a complex understanding of feminist theory and, most importantly, as a critique of post-war and Cold War American social structures.

One of the first works that comes to mind when discussing the feminist interpretation of *The Bell Jar* is Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan's work was published just a month after Plath's novel. Considering *The Bell Jar* as a literary counterpart of *The Feminine Mystique* has defined many feminist interpretations of the work making the novel a demystification of what Kate A. Baldwin refers to as "the good

life” in her work *The Racial Imaginary of the Cold War Kitchen: From Sokol'niki Park to Chicago's South Side* (2016). Baldwin uses this concept to describe a vision of suburban American life characterized by alienation, individualistic material consumption and defined gendered roles within the traditional nuclear family. In her analysis, Baldwin highlights how “In this classic text, a denunciation of suburban, white, middle-class female constraint might seem an appropriate frame” (Baldwin 58). Implying an inseparable relation between the political context of the time and the different feminist interpretations made of *The Bell Jar*: “In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture” (Friedan 18). It is the expected femininity that produces a collective and pervasive sense of unfulfillment: “The feminine role, in brief, prescribes for women crippling attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors which in and of themselves tend to generate depression.” (Bernard 1976). Not reading *The Bell Jar* from a feminist perspective is failing to detach the narrative from Sylvia Plath’s own life. Even though *The Bell Jar* could be considered an autofiction, it is certainly not an autobiographical novel, hence, falling into reductionist interpretations of the text basing it on the author’s life does not contribute to understanding the deep critique that is being carried out in the text.

Taking, for example, another thoroughly investigated topic, such as the treatment of mental illness, proves how the novel has many layers of analysis. Plath did indeed suffer from mental health issues, but Esther’s downfall and her long rehabilitation are not to be read as a description based on personal experience, but rather as critique of the unescapable gender roles and dominant patriarchal narratives that defined the social context and enjailed women. As Maria Rovito exposes, “Plath has been cast as the monstrous “madwoman” in the American literary canon, and the image of the

“madwoman” has been ingrained alongside her memory and work.” (Rovito 320). The subject of the “madwoman” is another productive one when reading Plath. Elaine Showalter in her 1985 work *The Female Malady* carries out a very interesting historical analysis of the conception and perspective of madness in the English culture. She focuses on the Victorian madwoman and the true reality behind psychological treatments, showcasing a strong patriarchal structure in patient care and even in the conception of mental instability in women. As it is observed in her work:

Some feminist critics¹ have maintained that schizophrenia is the perfect literary metaphor for the female condition, expressive of women’s lack of confidence, dependency on external, often masculine, definitions of the self, split between the body as a sexual object and the mind as subject, and vulnerability to conflicting social messages about femininity and maturity. (Showalter 213)

In the chapter “Women and Psychiatric Modernism”, Showalter analyzes Esther’s mental condition in *The Bell Jar* and states how:

In order to become creative, active, and free in a social milieu that denies these options to women, Esther must symbolically destroy the female side of her psyche, the side controlled by sexual need, maternal pities, and social conventions. The paradox of the novel, then, is that a woman can free herself from the constraints of schizophrenic womanhood only by denying her solidarity and emotional bonds with other women. (Showalter 218)

Claiming how her well-being depends on the eradication of female bonds, Showalter bridges feminist readings of *The Bell Jar* with a much psychological interpretation of the text. In addition, the explicit reference to the protagonist and her emotional bonds with other women introduces homosociality and allows to view it as a crucial concept for this study.

¹ The critics Showalter makes reference to are the following: Elizabeth Abel, “Women and Schizophrenia: The Fiction of Jean Rhys,” *Contemporary Literature* 20 (1979): 155-77; Judith Kegan Gardiner, “Good Morning, Midnight, Good Night, Modernism,” *Boundary 2* (1983): 233-51; Barbara Hill Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

Female bonding, or what will be referred as female homosociality is the key perspective this study will read *The Bell Jar* from. This topic has been explored in other contemporary works which will be the reference point from which this study will analyze these relationships in the novel. For example, what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg develops in “The World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America” (1975), a work that presents the valuable homosocial interactions amongst women in America throughout the 18th and 19th century:

It is possible to speculate that in the twentieth century a number of cultural taboos evolved to cut short the homosocial ties of girlhood and to impel the emerging women of thirteen or fourteen toward heterosexual relationships. In contrast, nineteenth-century American society did not taboo close female relationships but rather recognized them a socially viable form of human contact —and, as such, acceptable throughout a woman's life. (Smith-Rosenberg 27).

Her work highlights how fundamental an environment of compassion, understanding and empathy, that arose in childhood and continued all throughout one's life, was a key aspect in a woman's identity (making apparent in literature, especially in correspondence, how these positive female homosocial bonds were favorably received). “Emotionally and cognitively, their heterosocial and their homosocial worlds were complementary.” (Smith-Rosenberg 8). In the 1960s, however, the social transformation America was undergoing had a direct impact in all types of relationships. The post-war economic prosperity that propelled consumer culture and, consequently, individualist lifestyles, mixed with the fear and paranoia towards “the other” that characterized the American society of the Cold War period, had a direct impact on interpersonal relationships, notably between women. This study will focus on the social and political influence in the narrative of *The Bell Jar*, specifically, in the narrative that is adopted to describe and portray female homosocial relationships in the novel arguing how internalized individualism and patriarchal values modify a woman's perception of her support network.

Female homosocial relationships in works contemporary to *The Bell Jar* are scarce but not inexistant. One collection of books edited by Kristi Branham and Kelly L. Reames titled *Navigating Women's Friendships in American Literature and Culture* (2023) offers an interesting insight into different female friendships in modern literature, there is, in fact, one chapter that studies some female bonds in *The Bell Jar* in comparison to *Hangsamen*, a gothic novel published in 1951 by Shirley Jackson. However, this chapter brings the focus to college friendships and mainly focuses on the negative homosocial bonds and, while it is true that those are the main female bonds described in the novel, there are positive homosocial relationships that are not considered and also have an important role in the story.

Another interesting study on Female homosociality is the one carried out by Motahhareh Zanganeh in *Hostility and Solidarity: Female Homosociality in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* (2015). The work makes interesting analyses of different works written by Toni Morrison. Focusing on the first chapter of the work where the author studies Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973), she observes how the relationship between the two protagonists of the novel changes once they enter adulthood, one of the main reasons being the heterosexual relationship of one of the protagonists noting how: "The relationship during their childhood was a refuge from the families and community in which they lived. When they were together nothing would or could interrupt them. Yet, as soon as Nel submits to normative standards as a 'good woman' they cannot be alone anymore." (Zanganeh 78). Conformity to patriarchal expectations and the pursuit of productive homosocial bonds are, therefore, incompatible. This thesis will argue how this former idea is reflected in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as a key aspect of the narrative. Social changes, mainly in what regards the politics behind the occupation of public and private space and the Cold War ideology, significantly impacted the role of women in

postwar America. These social shifts caused frequent isolation and the neglect of homosocial relationships leading into steadier mental health problems. As this thesis will argue, stronger female friendships could have served to counteract these circumstances.

3. Theoretical Framework

In 1950s and 1960s American literature, female homosociality can be interpreted as both a refuge and a pitfall. What should carry comfort and solidarity can easily turn into a trap that reproduces the patriarchal structures that women seek to escape from.

The concept of homosociality was popularized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 1985 with her work *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Although her study focuses on male homosocial relationships, the theory it introduces is relevant to this study as a starting point to establish what homosociality is. She argues how there is a continuum, a spectrum between sexual desire and social bonds between people of the same sex. These intimate connections do not need to be entirely related to sexuality, but they are not totally separate from it either. For said reason, she makes a division between male-bonding and female-bonding arguing how the continuum is much less fragmented for women than for men. Because society's perception of close male relationships sometimes tends to be homophobic, male homosociality has been often considered more negatively. In women, however, close bonds have been more historically common and socially accepted making the distinction between female bonding and lesbianism less rigid.

Eve Kosofsky mainly develops a model to analyze the male homosocial bonds in literature and, even though she does mention female homosociality, that is not the focus of her work. She does argue, however, how male-bonding influences female-bonding in

the sense that “homosocial desire could be viewed as the ultimate source and truth of male motivations, identities and emotions, the impulse of male society” (Xu, 2018). Male ruled societies that perpetuate patriarchal power structures create strongly marked gender roles, hence, “historically differential shapes of male and female homosociality—much as they themselves may vary over time—will always be articulations and mechanisms of the enduring inequality of power between men and women” (Kosofsky 5).

One clear expression of the clear patriarchal structures that characterize American society are cities. After World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, what is known as the “reproductive sphere” and the “productive sphere” were divided once anew. These concepts, theorized by Marxist-feminists, are very useful to comprehend the role of women in the 1950s and the 1960s in America. Zaida Muxí Martínez in her work *Mujeres, Casas y Ciudades* (2019) observes how in terms of spatial formalization this division was materially seen and built with the emergence of suburbs and the outskirts of towns. She argues how the former would turn into the ideal American home bringing with it a new conception of life: a private one. A private life meant the return of the private woman which defined the expected femininity. Women were then socially reduced to the domestic activities they performed and urbanistically limited and alienated by spaces created by men only for men.

Cities, in this sense, reinforced this privatization of life, encouraging what Engels described in *The Condition of The Working Class in England in 1844* (1887) “the brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest.” (Engels 18). What is it, then, if cities are so alienating, that makes people, especially women longing for a change, resort to them? This thesis will argue how it is this paradoxical view of the city as both a liberating and alienating space what defines the homosocial bonds in New York City in *The Bell Jar*. It will also focus on the domestic and suburban spaces that gained

relevance after World War II as places of surveillance that enforced domesticity and shaped the conditions under which female bonding developed.

4. Female Homosocial Relations: A history of broken bonds?

Female homosocial bonding has always been an overlooked subject. Women had always, at least before the rise of suburbs and the individual private house, been very close to each other and support networks were normal. In fact, close relation to other women was established since birth, as women usually grew up surrounded by other women, and were always close to this positive gendered community. In Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's study "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" (1975) the approach to same-sex relationships is inscribed in a socio-cultural context and not interpreted from an individual psychosexual perspective defending a continuum in same-sex relationships. This study allows a chronological overview of the history of homosocial bonds in America and serves as the starting point for a clear analysis of the decay of social bonds.

From the late 18th century up to the end of the 19th century, there were very rigid gender role differentiations that emphasized a deep separation between men and women:

I would argue, that a specifically female world did indeed develop, a world built around a generic and unself-conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks. These supportive networks were institutionalized in social conventions or rituals which accompanied virtually every important event in a woman's life, from birth to death. Such female relationships were frequently supported and paralleled by severe social restrictions on intimacy between young men and women. (Smith-Rosenberg 9)

Established social interactions and rituals, the importance of kindred in these communities, the emotional function of female relationships, and the centrality of mother-

daughter relationships shaped and anchored these positive homosocial bonds. It is clear, then how:

(...) in the twentieth century a number of cultural taboos evolved to cut short the homosocial ties of girlhood and to impel the emerging women of thirteen or fourteen toward heterosexual relationships. In contrast, nineteenth-century American society did not taboo close female relationships but rather recognized them as a socially viable form of human contact—and, as such, acceptable throughout a woman's life. Indeed it was not these homosocial ties that were inhibited but rather heterosexual leanings. (Smith-Rosenberg 27).

The concept presented by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in her study about this encouragement to substitute homosocial relationships for heterosexual ones is what Jessie Bernard then develops in her work “Homosociality and Female Depression” (1976). She traces the decay of female bonds throughout the 20th century and how they came to mentally affect women. She observes how in the 20th century “the world of women became denigrated. Women as well as men came to despise it” (Bernard 230). Bernard points out different consequences to this decay including mobility, increased labor-force participation and the replacing of homosocial aid networks for other impersonalized bureaucratized services. The denigration of these homosocial bonds lead to what Bernard refers to as the “relational deficit”: the negative mental impact the substitution of homosociality for heterosociality inflicted on women who searched for emotional support in a bond that turned out to be a poor substitute for female friendship. The void that this relational deficit left is presented in Bernard’s work as one of the major responsible factors for the increase in female depression. Thus, in this context of hatred and downfall of female homosociality, “the cliché arose that women could not be friends because they were competing with one another, either for men before they were married or for social position afterward.” (Bernard 230).

5. New York: Urban Space and the Decay of Female Homosocial Bonds

This section analyzes the role of New York City in *The Bell Jar*. Considering the city as a starting point of Esther's despair, this TFG proposes said desperation as a direct consequence of Esther's experience in the city. A close link between the changing urban landscape and the decay of homosocial bonds is also made allowing a deeper comprehension of the role of feminine homosociality in the novel.

5.1. New York as a Changing Landscape: Postwar Individualism

The New York of 1953, the year in which the novel is set, reflects a systemic transformation of American society characterized by the rise of individualism and consumer abundance. After World War II, America was "determined to prolong and enhance the economic recovery brought on by the war" (Cohen 236). This postwar landscape, also home to the onset of the Cold War was the starting point of a societal shift. From the culture of collective effort to one where, as Kate Baldwin points out, "diversity" was redefined as consumer choice.

In this sense, space becomes an incredibly useful tool to keep on establishing a stratified society. Regarding gender, for example, what is known as the "private sphere" and the "public sphere" became divided anew. There was a need for women to abandon the working force to leave space for men coming back to work. That is where the emergence of suburbs and the effacing of slums in cities appear. The spatial division of spaces in America is the material consequence of a capitalist mindset adopted in the postwar period which praised private life. As Zaida Muxí Martínez claims in her work *Mujeres, Casas y Ciudades* (2019) the return of the private life meant the return of the private woman. As cities grew under this patriarchal view, women were reduced again to

the “domestic sphere” and the return of men to control the “public sphere” was reestablished. Growing cities of the period were built by men and for men. Said spatial distribution reinforced the “expected femininity” which praised and glorified suburban domesticity.

The rise of increasingly isolating communities is also due, in part, to the onset of the Cold War and McCarthyism. A study carried out by María Laura Arce Álvarez follows how the politics of the McCarthyism period had a direct impact on the surveillance of the population: “Essentially, communism became an excuse to control and manipulate most strata of society and mainly American’s private lives. By controlling the private lives of the Americans, McCarthy saw the way to control public life and, in that sense, preserve the most conservative values of American society intact” (Arce Álvarez 47).

One clear example of this surveillance is interpreted by Kate Baldwin in *The Racial Imaginary of the Cold War Kitchen: From Sokol'niki Park to Chicago's South Side*. The “kitchen debate” was only one of the topics that opposed US capitalism and Soviet communism and it is important to note how “[t]his vision of hostile rivalry is based in a binary framework that squares American against Soviet, a framework that during the period enabled some U.S. citizens to determine a sense of self based in opposition to this Soviet other” (Baldwin 59).

Hence, when referencing “the other” it is clear how there is a distinction between the expected American “good life”, that is, “the house in the suburbs, the new car, the husband with a white-collar job, the cleanly scrubbed children raised by a full-time wife and mother—a life that required not only leisure time and consumer plenty, but also whiteness” (Baldwin 63) and everything else that went against it. In this sense, *The Bell Jar* is a poignant critique of the social American expectations on women. Not only

because it dismantles the perspective of a promising urban future and the glorified suburban space but also because it exposes the role of women in said construction of “the other”. “*The Bell Jar* instructs us that Cold War fictions depend upon race, and that a woman—defined by and privy to the universal compulsion of consumer choice—was always a racialized subject” (Baldwin 65).

The following section of the thesis will argue how “otherness” is seen in New York during Esther’s stay in the city and how it can be linked to the decay of female homosocial bonds.

5.2. New York Described: Esther’s Experience in the City

The incipit of *The Bell Jar* establishes New York as a space filled with paradox. Set during the summer of 1953, the novel’s context is rapidly identifiable by the reference to the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg: “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York” (Plath 1). The Rosenbergs were a Jewish couple convicted of espionage becoming the first American civilians to be executed for these charges during peacetime. Their electrocution is echoed throughout the novel and has become central to many different critical interpretations of the book. This thesis will not focus on the impact their death has on possible readings of the text and neither on the impact this event had in Plath’s own private life, however, as María Laura Arce Álvarez points out, the event was very significant as it depicts “the fear and paranoia installed in American society” (Arce Álvarez 45). The atmosphere of collective apathy and fear defines the portrayal of New York City from the beginning: “It was a queer, sultry summer” (Plath 1). Said descriptions condition the interpretation of the city as not simply a spatial setting but rather as an ideological landscape that both shapes and suffocates Esther’s perception of herself. As

stated before, even though this thesis is not concerned with Plath's own life, her diary entry on the day of the execution depicts the particular social atmosphere of the period:

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

This indifference mirrors Esther's experience and perception of the city and from the first pages, New York is connected to a sensation of unfulfillment. Esther's stay in New York is the prize she receives, along with eleven other girls, for an internship at *Ladies' Day* magazine with all expenses paid. Objectively, this should be seen as a great opportunity:

Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car (Plath 2).

Yet, Esther immediately transforms this triumphant narrative into one of defeat: "Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself" (Plath 2). The tension between the city's promises and Esther's incapacity to fully grasp them and abide by them defines the central dynamic of her experience in New York: "It was my first big chance, but here I was, sitting back and letting it run through my fingers like so much water" (Plath 4). The city is presented as an access to opportunities that Esther can simply not seize. This is not because they are nonexistent, but because the version of freedom they offer is one she is fundamentally unable to inhabit. These opportunities seem to limit her to only one of the binaries possible for women.

This feeling of displacement is reinforced by the early chapters of the novel where Esther interacts with the city spaces and its social rituals. The first described interaction with the city offers an insight into its nightlife. During this night, Esther accompanies Doreen to a bar. There, she adopts a false name: Elly Higginbottom. This pseudonym is

a significant gesture of willing self-distancing, as if she is reluctant to experience the city under her own identity. The evening ends in discomfort at Lenny's apartment, where Esther watches with unease Doreen and Lenny get intimate before leaving alone, stumbling out into the summer heat, which hits her "like a last insult" (Plath 16). Esther ruminates on whether to take a cab or walk back to the hotel. She takes a map out of her pocket, quite a symbolical image literally having the whole city in her hands, and decides on the latter. When she gets to her room and looks out the window feeling exhausted and disgusting, she distinguishes the UN building balancing itself in the dark "like a weird, green, Martian honeycomb" (Plath 17). As Myka Tucker-Abramson observes in her work *Novel Shocks: Urban Renewal and the Origins of Neoliberalism* (2019), *The Bell Jar* offers one of the first comprehensive literary representations of New York during the age of urban renewal. In this sense, the choice for specific descriptions of new-built buildings carries a more political reading. It is the case, for example, with the mention of the UN building which, in words of Samuel Zipp, is "the most apt crystallization of the ideals behind New York's ambitious ethic of city rebuilding". (Zipp 37). Against this scenery of gleaming ambition, Esther's reflection is strikingly hopeless: "The city hung in my window, flat as a poster, glittering and blinking, but it might just as well not have been there at all, for all the good it did me" (Plath 17), as if the vision of the city stayed behind with the alter ego she created for the night. Ostensibly suggesting that Esther herself had no choice of interacting with the city. The city, with all its promises of modernity and possibility, remains entirely inaccessible to her. New York appears as a spectacle rather than a lived reality.

Chapter 3 is an especially symbolic episode. As observed by Tucker-Abramson, Esther's characteristic trait is hunger. Hunger for experience, notably sexual experience. New York is metonymic of all these desires. It is the place that promises liberation,

prosperity and freedom. However, it is this hunger for all these new experiences that leads her to disappointment and desperation. In this chapter, that hunger is rendered literal when the girls are treated to a lavish lunch during a visit to the magazine's kitchens, and Esther consumes the crabmeat voraciously, only to be later poisoned violently by it. Kate Baldwin has analyzed the role of the kitchen in the novel within the context of the so-called "kitchen debate" of 1959, in which US vice-president Richard Nixon and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev discussed American domestic suburban life. The individualistic lifestyle centered around ownership and consumerism became the measure to establish American capitalism as superior to Soviet communism. In this sense, New York is a perfect example of the growing "commodification" of the cities. Effacing slums and promising endless opportunities to embody this superior capitalist society. Esther's poisoning can thus be read as a critique of this consumer culture: the capitalist dream, greedily consumed, proves not nourishing but toxic. In this sense, the American femininity produced by the Cold War era defined by domesticity, consumption and conformation is proved to be not a gift but an aggression.

It is after chapter 3 that New York becomes increasingly alienating. In chapter 7, after visiting the UN with Constantin, a simultaneous interpreter, Esther reflects for the first time on her sense of inadequacy: "For the first time in my life (...) I felt dreadfully inadequate. The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn't thought about it" (Plath 73). The city, far from offering liberation, triggers a confrontation with the limits of her own selfhood. As Tucker-Abramson puts it: "(...) her anxiety about the foreignness of the city is not, as we might expect, about the decaying of the city—the loss of its quality, character, or value—but rather a confrontation with her own quality and character, with the loss of her own value" (Tucker-Abramson 130). New York, in this reading, aside from being the graphic representation of the postwar changing American

landscape, also functions as a mirror that reflects back Esther's inadequacy with profuse clarity.

It is in this same chapter that the novel's most known metaphor appears: the fig tree whose branches represent the different possible futures available for Esther. This metaphor can be interpreted as an expression of paralysis in the face of unlimited possibility, but also as the representation of the impossibility of choice within a social context that limits women's options from the beginning. Esther does not lack desire; rather, her desires are incompatible with the femininity that the city and the suburbs demand.

Esther confesses hating "the idea of serving men in any way" (Plath 72) but then succumbs to the thought of "being seduced by a simultaneous interpreter in New York City" (Plath 76). Her position regarding men is quite uncertain which consequently affects her perspective about her future:

(...) after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state. (Plath 81)

As Kate Baldwin points out:

The Bell Jar's ostensible emphasis on the cohesion of identity alongside the text's performance of this as an impossibility offer us an opportunity to query the ways in which isolated attention to selfhood and its inadequate fulfillment are a distraction from the embeddedness of that self in different matrices of power and interconnected networks of knowledge production. (Baldwin 59)

Esther's indecision is not a personal failing, but a structural condition produced by a society that offers women a promise of freedom that results in a confining future.

Her final night in New York encapsulates her journey. Having escaped an attempted sexual aggression at the hands of a man she describes as a "woman-hater"

(Plath 102), Esther returns to her hotel room and, in an action both hopeless and defiant, throws her clothes from the parapet into the night: “like a loved one’s ashes, the grey scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York” (Plath 107). The glaringly funeral image offers an interesting interpretation: Esther is not simply leaving the city; she is performing a kind of burial. She buries the illusions of the self that arrived in New York believing, although vaguely, in its promises. Stripping herself off her clothes functions as a metaphor for discarding the experience of the city in itself, in other words, an attempt to leave behind the version of herself that New York has built. Yet, this liberation is, in any case, conflicted. New York has not freed Esther, it has made her more acutely conscious of her own paralysis. The anxieties and contradictions that the city has revealed will not be solved by her departure. Quite the opposite, they will intensify in the suburban environment to which she returns and will eventually culminate in her breakdown.

In the end, Plath’s portrayal of New York in *The Bell Jar* is an evident critique of the postwar urban landscape and the ideological structures it sustains. The city is presented as a space of limitless opportunity and personal liberation, yet for Esther it works as precisely the opposite: a space of alienation, self-consciousness, and frustrated desire. This failure cannot be reduced to Esther’s individual psychology alone because it is inseparable from the patriarchal and capitalist structures that shape what the city offers and to whom it offers it. Ultimately, *The Bell Jar* seems to suggest that this urban promise of renewal and liberation is only available to those who can compete in its terms. And, for women, those terms are ones that demand conformity and domesticity rather than liberation and personal success. New York is, then, glittering but indifferent and profoundly unkind, and “flat as a poster” behind her window, it remains a spectacle that she can observe but one that she will never truly inhabit. For Esther, the only plausible

option not to feel this dread and the weight of her uncertainty and indecisiveness would be to share the experience, to counteract the individualistic part of the city with her interpersonal relationships with people in the same position as her, hence, with homosocial bonds. But, in the novel, Esther does not conceive her relationships to other women as anything other than a reflection and inspiration of what she might or should be. Homosociality turns here from what should be a support network to a judgmental and competitive environment. Alienation, thus, is inevitable.

5.2.1. The Cold War Dichotomy in Women: Doreen and Betsy

When presenting Doreen and Betsy, their description is filtered through the patriarchal lens Esther has internalized, hence, their portrayal reveals less about their individual character than about the female identity in postwar America. Drawing from Yesica Rebollar's article "The Angel vs The Monster: Dichotomization of Identity in *The Bell Jar*", Doreen and Betsy function as the binary opposition of the angel and the demon "dictating their fixed roles and restricting their ability to fully develop, unable to break free from patriarchal impositions and serving as role models, Angels and Monster, to Esther Greenwood" (Rebollar 1). Female figures are determined and portrayed following patriarchal expectations and always in relation to Esther and their importance in her self-definition. Thus, because Esther's self-assertion is ambivalent and indecisive, the feminine figures that surround her will translate and embody the different—all patriarchal based—paths that she can choose from. However, her inability to fully align with either position or her feelings of incapability will result in a negative description of the figures that embody these roles she cannot seize.

Doreen is the first female character she describes, and she is introduced through an immediately distancing formulation: "I guess one of my problems was Doreen" (Plath

4). Despite moments of apparent affinity, there are lexical cues that question this positive bond between them. Doreen suggests a life of “marvelous, elaborate decadence” (Plath 5). Even though Esther and Doreen get along during the stay in New York, Esther does not feel comfortable when she is around her. The pivotal evening where they meet Lenny crystallizes this dynamic. During this night, many of the descriptions Esther makes of Doreen carry quite a negative tone and the narrative makes it clear that Esther is reduced to a second plan. “I knew perfectly well he’d come for Doreen” (Plath 8). Esther feels left out, she is “melting into the shadows like the negative of a person [she] had never seen before” (Plath 9) and this feeling of insignificance culminates when Doreen and Lenny grow sexually intimate in Lenny’s apartment: “There is something so demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other, especially when you are the only extra person in the room” (Plath 15). Esther and Doreen’s relationship seems to arrive at a final point after this night out: Doreen comes back very drunk and seeks help in Esther’s room. Esther blames Doreen: “I felt angry with Doreen for waking me up. All I stood a chance of getting out of that sad night was a good sleep, and she had to wake me up and spoil it” (Plath 19). It is after this encounter that Esther makes a decision about Doreen: “I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her” (Plath 21). Doreen works, then, as a representation of a female role whose appeal operates only in a masculine economy of desire.

Betsy, who also appears in the first pages of the novel, embodies the counterpoint of Doreen. Esther explains how “Betsy was always asking me to do thing with her and the other girls as if she were trying to save me in some way. She never asked Doreen. In private, Doreen called her Pollyanna Cowgirl” (Plath 6). Betsy is the embodiment of the expected femininity. In the words of Yesica Rebollar: “She is the perfect future American housewife (...) She embodies the patriarchal female stereotype, what the male-dominated

society wants every woman in the nation to look like” (Rebollar 4). In the previous passage, Betsy is portrayed as a “savior”. She tries to deviate Esther from the sinful path that Doreen represents. She fits the figure of “the Angel”, a pure innocent woman who tries to save a “lost soul” from the wrong path. Even though Esther does not really describe Betsy in a negative way, she doesn’t really perceive her in a positive light either. Because Esther recognizes that she cannot fit the domestic ideal Betsy represents, she maintains her distance.

The key homosocial link here lies on the way Doreen and Betsy view each other: through an internalized male-gaze which causes them to see one another negatively, directly shaping Esther’s relationship with them. Both Doreen and Betsy are products of patriarchal wishes, Doreen in the sexual aspect and Betsy in the domestic one. They are both products of the same misogynistic society and because they both have internalized their roles as their persona, the only way they can view each other is negatively. Because their relationship is based on this opposite dichotomy, and because Esther also perceives it as such, she assumes these personalities cannot find reconciliation and that identifying as one directly discards the other. As Yesica Rebollar argues:

Her displacement in society, as well as her identity crises, are rooted in a binarism engendered by society’s fixation in determining women as one or the other. From the early religious influence of Eve as the Monster and her female counterpart Mary as the Angel to Victorian categorization of woman as whether ‘The Angel in the House’ or ‘The Fallen Woman,’ women have always been entrapped in this binary opposition. In the end, her otherness—as she fails to fit either categories—forces Esther to choose between the Angel or the Monster, with no other possibility in between, and leads her into madness. (Rebollar 2)

5.2.2. Powerful Women and the Distance from the “Expected Femininity”

Jay Cee presents a more complex figure. She is the embodiment of a successful woman. However, in postwar America, success for women was not work-related but rather privately and domestically considered. The figure of Jay Cee is quite paradoxical in

Esther's perception: she is the embodiment of a free woman but is largely described and perceived through a patriarchal viewpoint and, at the same time, she perpetuates said patriarchal structures. Jay Cee, from a homosocial perspective, could have been or should have been Esther's mentor but her authority becomes undermined by her reliance on masculine modes of existence.

Jay Cee's success within a male-dominated sphere permits a shallow interpretation of female emancipation. Yet, the novel undermines this reading. Doreen dismisses Jay Cee and describes her as "ugly as a sin" (Plath 5), framing her in terms of failure to conform to normative femininity and, although Esther tries to counter this opinion, even her admiration is judging as well: "Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter" (Plath 5). The intellectual superiority seems compensatory of a lack of feminine aesthetics.

Drawing on Emily Miller Budick *The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar* (1987) it can be interpreted how, because Jay Cee has adopted a "masculine" position, that of power, and she objectively does not fit into the expected feminine categories, her professional identity has demanded an abnegation of her private and gendered self. "Jay Cee is only another version of female submission. She is the masculine in female disguise." (Budick 876). And because she will never be a man, nor will she ever be considered feminine again, to win and preserve her powerful position, she has had to copy the behavior of men in these positions. Jay Cee treats Esther the same way some other male characters in the novel do. She is condescending and patronizing, but Esther seems to ignore that and wishes Jay Cee was her mother. Jay Cee ought to have granted support and mentoring, but she fails to offer Esther a future that distances itself from the dichotomy of female possibility. What her character ends up doing is pushing Esther deeper into her desperation and indecision as she reinforces the idea that she has nothing

that distinguishes her from the rest: “Hundreds of girls flood into New York every June thinking they’ll be editors. You need to offer something more than run-of-the-mill person. You better learn some languages” (Plath 31).

Thus, even though Esther seems to admire Jay Cee, not even she is free from a male-gazed description nor is she the kind mentor that Esther had hoped for. Jay Cee remains solely as another fig in the tree, distinct from the domestic one and incompatible with any other because, just as it happens with Doreen and Betsy, choosing one path requires the death of all others.

6. The Suburbs: Private Space and the Threat to Homosocial Bonds

This second part of the study will focus on suburban spaces and how the deficient homosocial bonds seen in the city do not disappear but rather prompt a depressive episode and the eventual downfall of Esther.

6.1. Alienated spaces: The Description of Suburbs in *The Bell Jar*

Chapter 10 dictates the return of Esther to her hometown. The descriptions she makes in this chapter already convey a negative perception of that space and they place the reader in a biased perspective subliminally preparing him/her for the events that await: “Like a colossal junkyard, the swamps and back lots of Connecticut flashed past, one broken-down fragment bearing no relation to another. What a hotch-potch the world was!” (Plath 108). This first image Esther gives of the suburbs can be interpreted, especially the last sentence of the fragment and the compound word “hotch-potch”, as an ironic reference to one of the most studied America’s identity-defining metaphors: the melting pot. This concept is America’s foundational metaphor of cultural assimilation and promised

freedom.² In this context, it can be argued that, with the rise of suburban culture, this heterogeneity was brought to a maximum, causing an indistinct landscape of houses that materialized the expected femininity and “the good life” of the 1950s: “(...) the withe, shining, identical clapboard houses with their interstices of well-groomed green proceeded past, one after another in a large but escape-proof cage” (Plath 110).

This dull environment, very opposite to the city of New York, stands out for its automated domesticity, which is mimicked in the narrative description, notably in the first pages of chapter 10 with very short, simple and neutral sentences to describe routines and state opinion. Esther explicitly says she has “nothing to look forward to” (Plath 113) a desperate statement that echoes what is theorized in *The Feminine Mystique* from the start: “It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States” (Friedan 15).

From now on, the urban space of the city will shift to the suburbs of Boston and will place the private sphere at the center of the narrative. Still, the problem will be the same that Esther confronted in the city: her sense of incompleteness, inexperience and ineptitude.

In this part, domestic space is highly linked to the figure of Dodo Conway, analyzed in section 6.2.1. of this study but also, and most importantly, it is connected and described as an enclosed space, one with no exit. This domestic space and the private one, encompass both Esther’s house and the different asylums she is sent to.

One of the first key spatial descriptions of said places occurs during Esther’s first visit to the office of Doctor Gordon in chapter 11. “Doctor Gordon’s waiting-room was

² Definition reinterpreted from Kirmizielmaoăzlu, Hakan. “Impact of ‘Melting Pot’ on Defining American Identity”. *The Journal of International Social Research*, Vol. 16, No. 97, 2023, pp. 1-18, DOI: 10.17719/jisr.2023.89335. Accessed 20th May 2026.

hushed and beige. The walls were beige, and the carpets were beige, and the upholstered chairs and sofas were beige. (...) At first I wondered why the room felt so safe. Then I realized it was because there were no windows” (Plath 122). The adjective “beige” is repeated four times in the first two sentences of the chapter, painting a sad, neutral, boring even deplorable image of the private space Doctor Gordon’s office represents. Paradoxically, this private space represents a safe place for Esther because it has no exit. The absence of any outward scenery can be read as the spatial correlative of ideological exclusion: private and domestic space offer a sense of security if they eliminate the possibility of other alternatives. However, this position rapidly bounces back as associations of private space as clear evidence of surveillance and alienation are introduced, especially in chapter 12 during Esther’s description of Doctor Gordon’s hospital:

Doctor Gordon’s private hospital crowned a grassy rise at the end of a long, secluded drive that had been whitened with broken quahog shells. The yellow clapboard walls of the large house, with its encircling veranda, gleamed in the sun, but no people strolled on the lawn.

As my mother and I approached the summer heat bore down on us, (...). The sound of the cicada only served to underline the enormous silence. (...) What bothered me was that everything about the house seemed normal, (...) Then I realized that none of the people were moving. (Plath 135-136)

The description stands out due to its neutral tone. The hospital is referred to as a “house” and what bothers Esther the most is the ordinariness of it. It is alluded to as a house, thus, a relation is established between the private space, the hospital, and the domesticity of the house. When Esther realizes none of the people were moving, her description does not turn into one of surprise but it rather stays pretty neutral, it could even be argued as automated and, it is this image of automatization and uniformity that marks its critique: “The figures around me weren’t people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life” (Plath 136). Private spaces and this oppression brought about by its domestic allure turn people into literally lifeless,

automated, “dummies”. Private space and domestic space are physical monotonal limitations that transform those who live in them into conformists and soulless individuals.³

After Esther’s suicide attempt, the reference to space changes drastically and the reader will, from then on, only hear the name of different asylum institutions. Space and society seem to get reduced, then, to performance. The Cold War period was a time of surveillance and submission to the American ideals imposed by the politics of that era, hence, in adopting them and subordinating to them, people lost their individual freedom and participated in this performative reality. As Kate Baldwin already pointed out: “The book is clear about Esther’s choice in the Cold War asylum: either you chose a million selves or one whole self. But the book also articulates the ways in which this dichotomy between the fractured and the whole is a false one” (Baldwin 72).

6.2. Esther’s Downfall and the Role of Female Friendship

In this context, Esther’s experience in the suburbs is highly conditioned by the way she interacts with other women. After chapter 10, the women characters described are not the same as in the previous ones. From these chapters, the most significant are the following: Esther’s mother, Dodo Conway, Jody, Teresa, Philomena Guinea, Doctor Nolan and Joan. Two different sections will follow analyzing Esther’s perception of them and their role in Esther’s downfall into depression as well as in her recovery journey.

³ As observed in: Eldrige, Pippa. *The Poetics of Sprawl: Literary and Filmic Engagements with American Suburbia, 1990-2017*. 2019, Thesis for the degree of PhD in English. <https://surl.lu/wmlqsx>

6.2.1. Figures of Failure: Esther's downfall

Esther's mother, Dodo Conway—one of Esther's neighbors in the suburb mother of seven children—, Jody—one of Esther's old friends from Cambridge— and Teresa—her aunt's sister-in-law—, they all appear before Esther's suicide attempt and before her stay in the asylum. All of them have different levels of implication in Esther's mental decay and are worth of a homosocial analysis.

Esther's mother is perhaps the most consistent and damaging female presence. The first descriptions Esther makes of her when she returns home are ones of a failed guiding figure and role model. Mrs. Greenwood is the one to inform Esther that she did not make it into a summer writing course she had applied for and was looking forward to: "I think I should tell you right away, you didn't make that writing course" (Plath 110). That is the second thing her mother tells her after her stay in New York and what was a "safe bridge over the dull gulf of summer" was now crumbling away and leaving no hope for Esther.

Although Esther's mother always reasons with her kindly and sweetly, "like one intelligent, mature person with another" (Plath 116), she is deeply loathed by Esther. It can be argued how this happens as a consequence of Esther's despise for domesticity, which is the future and expectations her mother projects onto her. Lauren Ashley Benard argues how Esther's mother did not have a very appealing influence on her because she associates her with domesticity, and that is one of the main normative labels she resists. Besides that, she also states how "[b]oth the cultural atmosphere of New York and her mother constantly try to mold Esther to fit a specific image that she resents and continually resists fitting into. This image consists of fancy clothes, eloquent vocabulary, and normative sexuality" (Benard 294). Hence, the importance both New York as a public space and her mother as a representation of the domestic and private space have on Esther is undeniable. Esther despises culturally inflicted whims about her persona and, often,

blames women in her surroundings about it. A fault that is often a result of Esther's own comparisons and self-hatred but that represent a mental structure that has integrated a sense of misogyny. From a more psychological perspective, Esther's mother can be indeed considered as an incendiary role. As Stephanie Tsank defends in *The Bell Jar: A Psychological Case Study* (2010): "Mrs. Greenwood, harmful to Esther's psyche through her unyielding passivity, is often pinpointed as having a causal effect to Esther's attempted suicide. Esther's mother is often grouped with a stream of domesticated women that symbolize Esther's conflict with the surrounding world" (Tsank 171). Essentially, what Esther hates about her mother is that she expects something from her that cannot be offered: a clear sense of purpose.

In chapter 16, that vision is made explicit. After Doctor Nolan tells Esther she will not be receiving any more visits, Esther affirms:

I hated these visits, because I kept feeling the visitors measuring my fat and stringy hair against what I had been and what they wanted me to be (...). My mother was the worst. She never scolded me, but kept begging me, with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong (Plath 195).

In the last chapter of the novel, Esther's mother makes an apparition again: "We'll act as if all this were a bad dream" (Plath 227), to what Esther's thoughts reply with a contradictory message: "I remembered everything. (...) Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover them. But they were part of me. They were my landscape" (Plath 227). While Esther's mother conformity to normativity proposes an image of her daughter that also aligns with said prescriptivity, she defends her own "landscape" which is quite relevant for this study as the importance of space is mentioned directly. It can be argued how Esther's reference to her landscape is a sign of purpose. She has defined her landscape and, in doing so, she has finally chosen one path from the many that branched out from the fig tree. However, this chosen path might not be as revolutionary and

opposed to domesticity as expected. In the first pages of the novel, she mentions her baby, this reference to motherhood can be interpreted as her eventual subordination to the domesticity she had largely despised.

Dodo Conway is another relevant figure. She is the embodiment of domesticity and although she represents “the whole sprawling paraphernalia of suburban childhood”, she interests Esther “in spite of [her]self” (Plath 112). Dodo can be closely related to another female figure, that of Teresa, Esther’s aunt sister-in-law, as they seem to lead Esther into her first traumatic experience in the clinic of Doctor Gordon.

The figure of Teresa might not seem so relevant but, from a homosocial perspective, it is quite interesting. Esther says she likes Teresa and affirms that she had a “gentle, intuitive touch” (Plath 121). Teresa is the family doctor, and she is the one that recommends Doctor Gordon to Esther after she explained all her symptoms. So, quite paradoxically, the only woman she seems to trust until this point of the novel is the same one that sends her inevitably to her downfall. In this same perspective, Dodo Conway is the one that drives Esther and her mother to their visit of Doctor Gordon’s private hospital.

In the same context of figures of possible guidance and salvation, we find the character of Jody, one of Esther’s old friends from Cambridge. Her figure is found between one of possible comfort but also of comparison. She is mentioned for the first time after Esther has come back home. Jody calls Esther to ask if she will be moving in with her and two other girls in a rented apartment. But Esther coldly replies with an “I’m not coming. I didn’t make the course” (Plath 114). Jody seems to comfort Esther and suggests her to come anyway and take another course, but Esther says to count her out and Jody quickly lets her know that there is another girl that is interested in the apartment.

When Esther hangs up, she realizes she has made a mistake, but she does not call back and represents an explicitly missed opportunity for homosocial refuge.

Esther's tendency to externalize blame onto other female figures is perfectly illustrated on page 129. When Esther is talking to a marine and daydreams of a future in Chicago where nobody would know her, she fears there is a woman, whom she confounds with Mrs. Willard, observing her and possibly judging her and ready to let Esther's mother know what she does. Except the woman is not Mrs. Willard. Esther blames her anyway and expresses her rage towards her in a unmeasured way: "I thought what an awful woman that lady in the brown suit had been, and how she, whether she knew it or not, was responsible for taking the wrong turn here and the wrong path there and for everything bad that happened after that" (Plath 129).

In all cases, before and after Esther's first shock treatments, women seem to have an important weight on her future and what seems to cause her to down spiral. It is both the miscomprehension from her role figures and her constant comparison to other women what leads her to a constant overthinking of herself:

Now I saw that the stupidest person at my mother's college knew more than I did. (...) I thought I'd better go to work for a year and think things over. Maybe I could study the eighteenth century in secret. But I didn't know shorthand, so what could I do? I could be a waitress or a typist. But I couldn't stand the idea of being either one. (Plath 121)

When trying to find her path and her way, expectations from other female characters, or the ones that arise from comparison to other women, make Esther feel unworthy, inept and dumb, and the feeling of being unable to choose between them does not only come from the myriad of options possible, but from the dichotomy these options encounter: either they follow the expected domesticity or they do not. Trying to escape the inevitable reductionism to domesticity women experienced in the 1950s, what Betty Friedan calls "the problem that has no name", was very much impossible and is what actually drives

Esther crazy: “I couldn’t stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not” (Plath 77).

6.2.2. The Healing of Esther and the Help of Other Women

It is not until chapter 15 that the role of women seems to carry a bit more positive of an impact. As it has been done in the previous section, this part will focus on different female characters from chapter 15 to the last chapter of the novel and will analyze the influence these different homosocial interactions have on the main character. Philomena Guinea, Doctor Nolan and Joan are the three main relevant figures in these chapters, and they all have a positive effect in Esther’s recovery journey.

Firstly, Philomena Guinea is a famous novelist who had also been in an asylum and who, after reading about Esther’s case in a Boston paper, offered to pay for Esther’s treatment. The figure of Philomena Guinea is quite interesting as it could be interpreted as the materialization of one of Esther’s futures, the one where she becomes a novelist. It is worth noting how Philomena Guinea’s help seems to come after one of the questions she poses Esther’s mother in one telegram: “Is there a boy in the case?” (Plath 177) to which a negative reply from Mrs. Greenwood’s side allows this help to materialize. It is thanks to her economic contribution that Esther is treated in a private hospital where her treatments will not be nothing as what she suffered in Doctor Gordon’s hospital. Philomena Guinea finances her recovery as well as a placement of an IUD device that Esther gets installed in secret. “Whether she knew it or not, Philomena Guinea was buying my freedom” (Plath 212). It seems that, along with overcoming her mental health problems, what liked her to a motherly future and the thought of having kids was what obstructed her “freedom”. The need for sexual experience she underwent during her stay

in New York did not diminish during this second part, it just transformed itself into something Esther wanted to experience without the fear of an imminent domestic and motherly future:

I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: 'I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me because what they did, they would do anyway, regardless...' (Plath 213)

However, Esther makes the following claim just after she has been fitted: "I was my own woman. The next step was to find the proper sort of man" (Plath 213). Although this claim is referring to her first sexual intercourse, it is written in a way that feels quite general and universal, as if women were never really property of themselves but rather something that belonged to "the proper sort of man". If this second reading is accepted, the actual detachment from gender roles seems impossible in the 1950s because, even women who felt like they were free, longed for a masculine figure to come their lives.

Secondly, Doctor Nolan is a key figure for Esther's recovery. She is the Doctor in charge of Esther's case and Esther admires her and regards her as a mother figure. "I was surprised to have a woman. I didn't think they had woman psychiatrists. This woman was a cross between Myrna Loy and my mother" (Plath 179). Doctor Nolan is the first female figure Esther openly and sincerely talks to and she is also the first to validate her feelings. An interesting image about this positive homosocial bonding occurs after Doctor Nolan asks Esther if she liked Doctor Gordon, to what Esther replies with a negative and explains how much she suffered with the shock treatments she received under Doctor Gordon's supervision. Doctor Nolan promises that she will not experience anything similar again and that she will personally notify Esther beforehand if she is ever to have shock treatments. Doctor Nolan appears then as an alternative to the hurting figure of the man. She is a nurturing, tender and caring figure that concerns herself with Esther's

wellbeing, aligning with the characteristics of a mother figure. Only on one occasion Esther loses her trust in Doctor Nolan. It is during a morning when Esther deduces she will be having shock treatments because the nurses do not bring her breakfast. She feels betrayed because Doctor Nolan had promised her she would notify her and she does not. Doctor Nolan does eventually appear and helps Esther calm down, “hook[s] her arm in [Esther’s] arm, like an old friend, and helps [her] up” (Plath 204). Doctor Nolan will follow Esther’s progress until the very end of the novel and will be the female role model that offers her company and guides her to the next chapter in her life.

Lastly, the third relevant female figure is Joan. She is a girl Esther knew, vaguely, from college. Joan also tries to kill herself after reading about Esther in the newspaper and her character has been interpreted by many studies as Esther’s double. This interpretation makes sense because this is how Esther describes her in the novel: “Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me” (Plath 197). However complex the character of Joan might be, the homosocial bond Esther has with her is quite changing. When Joan confesses to Esther that she likes her, the continuum of the homosocial bond is much closer to that of homosexual desire, however, Esther rapidly rejects this possibility and disgustedly replies: “That’s tough, Joan. Because I don’t like you. You make me puke if you want to know” (Plath 221). Ever after this deep rejection, when Esther knows Joan is leaving the hospital and going to live out, even if she envies her, she still finds a positive thought about Joan: “In spite of my profound reservations, I thought I would always treasure Joan” (Plath 215). The last time Joan appears is when, after losing her virginity to a boy named Irwin, Esther has a hemorrhage and seeks for help in Joan’s apartment. Joan helps her mercifully and without asking any questions. After that passage, Joan kills herself. The interpretation of the double self makes particular sense because this “old best self” disappears after Esther

loses her virginity. Hence, if we accept this interpretation, it is also interesting to observe how the relationship between these two female figures develops. Instead of being sympathetic towards an image of herself that resembles her younger version, Esther is judgmental and cannot help comparing her current persona with that image.

In short, homosocial bonds take a much more important role during Esther's return to the suburb. This aligns with the broader argument, because private and domestic space was where most women lived, embodying the domesticity society praised. Because there is a bigger presence of feminine characters, the interactions Esther has with all of them might seem quite repetitive. This sense of repetition is also reaffirming of the main point of this TFG: women could not choose many paths, hence, the ones that are described feel repetitive and follow a certain dichotomy, whether that might be domesticity, linked to a negative perception or "independence", linked to a positive impact.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed how space is closely linked to the way women interact with each other. The growth of cities celebrated a consumer culture and disregarded disadvantaged communities and what is commonly referred to as "otherness". The need for a stable country after the war brought about the rise of the suburbs that served the purpose of a passive but inevitable surveillance, especially for women. Public and private spaces were, thus, completely separate, and only men had the possibility to move between both. Women, on the other side, were expected to remain in the private sphere, reduced to domesticity and motherhood. Because society was based on productivity, women had to fit either into the "reproductive sphere" or the "productive sphere". As Pippa Eldridge observes in *The Poetics of Sprawl: Literary and Filmic Engagements with American Suburbia, 1990-2017*, "in a commodified environment that celebrates individuals as the

sum of their possessions has fostered a culture of competition based on material accumulation” (Eldridge 50). In the case of women, this material accumulation translates to their capacity to fit into one of the two productive spheres mentioned before. Not belonging to them, not fitting in them, or not choosing one, meant feeling displaced and unhappy. The paradox of it all, however, is that, even when choosing one, dissatisfaction appeared, too. What sustained this paradoxical system was that women themselves had come to internalize it. By replacing homosocial bonds with heterosexuality and making the desire for productivity a central element in society and interpersonal relationships, it was only inevitable that alienation, competition, and unhappiness appeared. In *The Bell Jar* this alienation is materialized in both the growing urban city that is New York as well as in the monotonous suburbs of Boston. Because Esther had structured her perception of life around the two productive binaries possible for women, her perception of other female figures gets reduced to a simple comparison that reflects her unfitting in society. After her downfall, female homosocial relationships become more important and signs of solidarity start to appear. It is thanks to the strengthening of these female homosocial bonds that Esther recovers. This confirms the main argument of this thesis, which argues that the deterioration of homosocial bonds is a result of various social factors, among which spatiality is determinant.

Further research could be carried out on female homosociality in the 1950s and 1960s America with a focus on different communities that possibly existed beyond this patriarchal dichotomy. It could be interesting to analyze different contemporary documents, notably personal and private written documents, such as journals, correspondence or other intimate texts. These documents might describe alternative ways to connect with one another, observations about how central the reproductive and productive spheres are in forming their relationships, or different indicators of a

replacement of heterosexuality for homosociality. Considering space, these documents might also carry valuable information too. Narrative descriptions or spatial references might give an insight into whether these female societies were alienated and clandestine or if they existed freely despite the society of the time. The existence of communities that interacted and sustained themselves far from the productivity-driven binary that structures female homosociality in *The Bell Jar* would be a great counterpoint to this TFG. Studying these documents could shine a light on different forms of female solidarity that may have remained unstudied, and which might confirm how centrality of homosocial bonds might prevent alienation, competition, and dissatisfaction.

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