Universität zu Köln

Philosophische Fakultät

Englisches Seminar I

'I am, I am, I am' – The Reconciliation of Discipline and Deviance in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades/To obtain the academic degree:
Bachelor of Arts

Vorgelegt von/Presented by:
Eva Zirker

Matrikelnummer/Matriculation number:
Fachsemester/Academic Semester: 6
Studiengang/Study Subject: English Studies, Deutsche Sprache und Literatur
(2-Fach-Bachelor)

Abgabetermin/Submission Date: 06.09.2022
Erstgutachterin/First Reviewer: Jun.-Prof. Dr. Judith Rauscher

Table of Contents

1. Introduction 1
2. (De)Constructing the Norm, (De)Constructing 'Madness' 3
    2.1. The Cultural and Socio-Political Context of 1950s US-America........ 3
        2.1.1. The Gendered Norms of 1950s Heteropatriarchy........ 3
        2.1.2. Capitalism and Consumerism in Light of the Cold War 6
        2.1.3. The Institution of Psychiatry in the 1950s........ 9
    2.2. The Relation between Social Norms and Mental Illness........ 11
        2.2.1. Producing the 'Mad': Cultural Circumstances and Social Stressors........ 11
        2.2.2. Constructing the 'Mad': Defining Deviance 13
        2.2.3. Disciplining the 'Mad': Preventing and Processing Deviance........ 16
3. Navigating Deviance and Discipline within Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*........ 19
    3.1. "I was my own woman" – Men, Marriage, and Motherhood........ 19
        3.1.2. Buddy Willard and The Prospect of Motherhood 22
        3.1.3. Reclaiming Her Body through Contraception........ 25
    3.2. "A wonderful future beckoned and winked" – Promises of Consumerism and Meritocracy........ 28
        3.2.1. New York as a Site of Failed Fulfilment........ 28
        3.2.2. Esther as the Model Student without Prospect........ 31
    3.3. "I didn't think they had women psychiatrists" – Pathology and Psychiatric Institutions 34
        3.3.1. Dr Gordon and the Trauma of ECT........ 34
        3.3.2. Dr Nolan, the Fellow Patients, and the Lifting of the Jar........ 37
4. Conclusion........ 42
5. Works cited........ 44
    5.1. Primary Sources........ 44
    5.2. Secondary Literature........ 44
6. Statutory Declaration........ 48

1. Introduction

> By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display. (Cixous 880)

> Depersonalization (DP) and derealizations (DR) are symptoms of a disruption of perceptual integration leading to an altered quality of subjective experiences such as feelings of unreality and detachment from the self (DP) or the surroundings (DR). (Büetiger et al. 1)

Set in 1953, Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) tells the story of Esther Greenwood, a young woman feeling increasingly disassociated from her environment and herself due to her inability to conform to prevalent socio-cultural expectations. Functioning under the dichotomies of conformity vs. nonconformity and illness vs. health, the strict socio-cultural norms of the 1950s produce a tension between deviance and discipline. In the narrative following the "mythical descent-ascent pattern" (de Lauretis 133), Esther's struggles with the reconciliation of these two ambivalent forces can be read as symptomatic of a culture systemically built on intersectional repression.

The first section of this paper shall focus on the production of deviance as a foil to the strict normative ideals of 1950s America. In order to understand Esther's unwillingness to conform to specific gendered norms at the time, I will first focus on the repressive nature of 1950s heteropatriarchy, especially in light of the nuclear family. Even though the oppressive mechanisms of heteropatriarchy do not limit themselves on the submission of straight, cis-gender women, this paper will largely exclude the experience of queer people for the sake of concentrating the analysis on the character of Esther Greenwood. Nonetheless, the examination of heterosexual relationships, motherhood, and the character of Joan require the description of 'heteropatriarchy' as opposed to 'patriarchy' alone. Furthermore, I will largely focus on white middle class women, as the protagonist herself belongs to this demographic and lowerclass women of colour were largely erased from idealising narratives due to prevalent meritocratic ideas. Using the example of the distribution of gender roles within the nuclear family, I will then illustrate the intersection between misogynist and capitalist oppression. On this basis, the socio-economic repercussions of the Cold War and their impact on the capitalist self-understanding and norms will be examined from a Marxist perspective. Next, I will give an overview of the standard of psychiatric care in the 1950s and situate psychiatry within the contemporary socio-cultural context. Once the cultural and socio-political situation of 1950s US-America has been outlined, I will relate the corresponding conceptions of the norm to the construction of 'madness'. Clearly, labelling a person suffering from any sort of mental illness or disorder as 'mad' does not align with contemporary standards of politically correct language. However, I have chosen to use this term, put into quo-

tation marks, for two reasons. Firstly, it is the term used by Michel Foucault in his discussions of the historical constitution of 'madness' within Western civilisations (cf. Venable 12 f.). Secondly, it takes the clear dichotomy between 'madness' and 'sanity' or 'rationality' into account, which has shaped the perception of madness and the social stigma attached to it. Hence, the term 'madness' shall signify the intersection of the psychological term 'mental illness' and the socio-cultural concept 'deviance'. In this chapter, the production of the 'mad', i.e. the cultural and social stressors facilitating the production of mental illness, and the construction of the 'mad', I .e. the definition of deviance, will be addressed. On this basis, I will draw on the Foucauldian concept of discipline to examine how deviance is processed within modern Western society.

In the second section of this paper, I shall employ a feminist, Marxist, and Foucauldian approaches to read Esther's decline and recovery as a result of her socio-cultural environment. Especially Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* pairs well with a Marxist approach to economic oppression, as they concern the maintenance of hierarchal power dynamics on a social, cultural, and economic level. Yet, both approaches traditionally lack a perspective on gender, which I will include into my analysis for an intersectional approach on discipline. Instead of following the narrative arc, I will divide this chapter up thematically. First, Esther's relation to patriarchal norms will be discussed regarding the performance of femininity, the prospect of motherhood, and the reclaiming of her body. Next, I shall consider the ways in which liberal meritocracy and consumerism ultimately strip Esther's internship in New York and her academic ambitions of a fulfilling prospect. Finally, I will compare the repercussions of the psychiatric treatment at the hand of Dr Gordon, as a manifestation of a patriarchal medical institution, and Dr Nolan, as a gateway into a sense of female community. Essentially, the aim of this paper is to understand the ways in which Esther's 'madness' is not an individual fate, but a product of disciplinary power arising from intersecting hegemonial systems. By deconstructing the dichotomies at the basis of modern Western thought, this reading shall provide a dialectic approach to the reconciliation of deviance and discipline to reduce the disassociation between internal desires and external demands.

2. (De)Constructing the Norm, (De)Constructing 'Madness'

2.1. The Cultural and Socio-Political Context of 1950s US-America

2.1.1. The Gendered Norms of 1950s Heteropatriarchy

Understanding deviance in any given historical context always requires taking a closer look at the norm from which an individual or group can set themselves apart– whether that be by choice or involuntary circumstance. In the case of Esther Greenwood, a young woman struggling to find a satisfactory place in society, examining the gendered norms in the early 1950s that determine her material and interpersonal circumstances allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complex stressors fostering mental illness. Hence, I will describe the system of oppression, heteropatriarchy, from which these expectations arise, as well as the socio-economic circumstances it creates for women. Additionally, I shall consider how and why the idea of deviance is constituted by the reproduction and enforcement of heteropatriarchal norms.

Fundamentally, the concept of 'heteropatriarchy' describes the dominance of two tightly interwoven identities: While the morpheme 'hetero' signifies the attraction to the opposite sex, the morpheme 'patriarchy' points to the hegemony of men on a social, cultural, economic, and political level (cf. Kelley and Arce-Trigatti 256). Consequently, the two genders 'male' and 'female' are constructed both as inherently different and naturally complementary. On the one hand, the reality of men is shaped by entitlement and the power of decision-making, as well as, due to their place in the workforce, financial autonomy (cf. Kandaswamy 36). On the other hand, women's place in society was frequently restricted to the domestic sphere, where they functioned as "reproducers of the nation" (36) or, put simply, as mothers and housewives. While the former expression seems rather stiff, it points towards the idea that the nuclear family functions "as a template for state power" (34). While, during World War II, women were deemed essential wage-labourers in striving towards victory of the allied forces (cf. Hendricks xix), they were back to being "someone's wife and someone's mother rather than […] individuals" (2) by the 1950s. This harsh break highlights that the roles allocated within the nuclear family are not in fact natural, but rather historically produced (Weinstein 7). Nonetheless, a life of independence could not be achieved by just staying childless and unmarried. For example, the fact that obtaining a credit card, a loan, or another form of financial independence was nearly unfeasible, especially without a husband's permission, proves that the discriminative mechanisms of heteropatriarchy function on institutional levels (cf. Clark xvii). Besides, if a woman did work, she would not earn nearly half of a man's salary (cf. Warren 215). In this case, intersection of misogyny with

capitalist structures, upon which the United States are fundamentally built, become tangible. Like the aforementioned pursuit of wage labour, receiving college education was out of the ordinary for most women as well (cf. Hendricks 22). Yet even those who did receive it, often placed little value on their academic studies. For instance, one contemporary survey showed that over two-thirds of female students named finding a partner as their primary ambition in college (cf. R. Smith 38 f.). This underlines the role of internalised misogyny in the reproduction of patriarchal values (cf. Cixous 878). What must be emphasised here is that any ideology is inherently linked to one's own sense of identity and desires, that there is no self-conception isolated from ideology (cf. R. Smith 43). However, women were clearly not the main perpetrators of their own submission. Considering the frequently overlooked domestic and care work constantly provided by women, it must be stressed overall that women did in fact work hard: they were simply robbed of financial compensation and prospects aside from motherhood.

As previously established, the submission of the woman and her displacement into the domestic sphere is the result of actively constructing both the female sex and gender as inherently weaker and predisposed to submission (cf. Butler 43). This heteropatriarchal production of a female ideal did not merely work on the level of medially representing the norm, but also by strategically limiting women's scope of action in their day to day lives. Another striking example is, of course, the inability to refuse motherhood from the start. Here, the body of women becomes the target of heteropatriarchal control, underlining that, just like gender, sex is also an entity socially inscribed upon. While contraceptive methods such as the diaphragm already existed, they could usually only be obtained through spousal approval (cf. Hendricks 26). Medical research lead by predominantly male scientists within patriarchal research institutes largely failed to accommodate for reproductive autonomy. For instance, birth control pill was not developed until the 1960s. (cf. 28). Moreover, abortions, if not already fully prohibited, were heavily stigmatised, dangerous, and often unaffordable (cf. 26). Further restriction of women's self-determination set place in their homes on a quite physical level. Due to an increase of suburban single-family homes, women were often rather isolated "with only children and appliances for companionship" (10). Not only was the need for close friendships or other communal networks often supposedly eradicated by the self-supporting entity of the nuclear family; domestic labour and child-care also were a permanent endeavour, not limited to a nine-to-five schedule, which often left little room for the development of a functional community (cf. Warren 17, 52). Therefore, the communication and organisation necessary for large-scale emancipative movements were hindered greatly. While these movements did of course exist, they were often driven forward by women of

colour and working-class women with smaller amplitude due to further racial and classist oppression. Instead, media attention was granted to the representation of the ideal mother and wife within her perfect family both on TV and in the many women's magazines (cf. Hendricks 10 f.). While the unachievable perfection of the woman presented naturally caused dissatisfaction in female audiences as well, the mostly male editors and producers were able to regulate any deviances from the norm. Even though smaller rebellions were tolerated, such as TV presenter Betty Furness wearing smart clothing instead of an apron in her home appliance commercials, anything but such mild nonconformities was clearly undesired (xxv). As a foil to the ideal, "the Other (adulterous women, effeminate men, commie roots from outer space)" (Macpherson 3) became target of ridicule, social exclusion and harmful clichés that radically and purposefully demonstrated the consequences of dissidence. This emphasises that it is not in fact the behaviour itself, but the reaction towards it that renders behaviour deviant or 'unnatural' (cf. Lauderdale 1 f.). By culturally tying the ideal to a plethora of opposing social identities, and, as aforementioned, by socially and institutionally restricting women, a national ideal could practically be produced on a conveyor belt.

This exact idea of endless production relates back to the question of why gender oppression by the means of such strict, heteropatriarchal norms is intrinsically linked to Western culture: it contributes to the maintenance of capitalist exploitation (cf. Federici 25). In light of the Cold War, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, this dynamic is fundamentally anchored in the culture of the 1950s. The supposedly natural division of labour in heteropatriarchal relationships ensures that the husband can dedicate his life to wage labour, while the wife can patriotically "spend money on the nation's manufactured goods" (Hendricks 12). Conversely, the isolated nuclear family's dependence on the husband's wage labour manifested the necessity of this dynamic. Furthermore, the family economically represents "a locus of privatization" (Kandaswamy 85), functioning as a manifestation of the (neo-)liberal aversion against state regulation. This way, US-American exceptionalism and individualism, which supposedly proved the country's superiority over the "'godless' Communist enemy" (Hendricks 22), ensured the exploitation of its own people. By subsuming to the threat of homosexuality, the 'Lavender Menace', under the threat of communism, the 'Red Scare', (cf. 26), citizens were additionally incited to enforce and reproduce heteropatriarchal ideals as if they were protecting themselves from foreign aggression.

To conclude, the role of the woman in the 1950s was strictly limited by systemic, institutional, and cultural oppression that fostered pervasive heteropatriarchal norms. Stylising the striving to become a mother as the only viable and sensible option for every young

woman aims to naturalise gendered identities. However, sex and gender are no fixed or isolated entities; they function within a “constituted social temporality” (Butler 179). In the case of 1950s US culture, one must acknowledge the divided labour within nuclear families as a site of not only male domination, but also capitalist production. Ultimately, the restriction of the mother into the domestic sphere, where she carries out uncompensated care and housework serves as a template for power dynamics and labour exploitation on a state level (cf. Kandaswamy 33).

2.1.2. Capitalism and Consumerism in Light of the Cold War

Since the Cold War began in 1947 and in Joseph McCarthy started his “anticommunist crusade” (Halliwell xii) in 1950, it is no wonder that set in 1953, *The Bell Jar* repeatedly thematises the tensions between capitalist and communist ideologies. Already in the first sentence, Esther states “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer the Rosenbergs got electrocuted, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York” (BJ 1), pointing towards Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a US-American couple convicted of espionage for the Soviet Union (cf. Clune 1). Besides the gender roles discussed in the previous chapter, it is the cultural climate of capitalist superiority that impacts Esther’s reality of life most gravely. On the one hand, anti-communist narratives shape the idea of the ‘Other’; on the other, setting oneself off from the socialist ideas aids the development of a national sense of self. Therefore, considering the socio-cultural tensions of 1950s US-America is crucial for the examination of deviance within the novel.

Firstly, implementing an anti-communist agenda allowed the US to create a clear binary system of values. These surpassed the pure antagonism of two economic systems. Briefly, this can be explained with Karl Marx’ idea of base and superstructure: The economic system with its means and relations of production forms the base of every society. On top of it builds the superstructure, which consists of every social entity besides economy, e.g. law, politics, religion, art, or philosophy (cf. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 12). In turn, the superstructure’s pervasive ideology, present in every part of society, upholds the current economic system (cf. Kristiansen 15). Though a very short summary of this fundamental concept, it becomes evident that economic systems impact much more than the way in which finance and production work – they are socio-cultural determinants as well. As for the creation of binary value systems, this means that national identities are constructed around the Cold War dynamic. Through the propagandistic attribution of deviant, abnormal, and threatening behaviours to the Soviet Union, the US were able to construct their own values as natural, benevolent, and protective of its citizens freedoms. For instance,

individualism, as opposed to collectivism, was considered the basis of national economic flourishing; the meritocratic sentiment provided valuable social mobility and a possibility for self-empowerment (cf. Hendricks 71). Drawing on the previously examined gender dynamics within US American culture helps demonstrate this idea. On American behalf, the Soviet woman was described as "frumpy, worn down by years working outside the home" (12). She rejected child-care, domestic labour and consequently, American values of womanhood and the nuclear family (cf. Peel 210). In fact, under the assumption "that specific forms of families dialectically relate to forms of capital and to its political and cultural concomitants" (Haraway 27), she threatened the American way of life as a whole. Enemies within the state, as the Rosenbergs, were similarly seen as a threat that demanded a production of a narrative – and oneself. The Rosenbergs' trial became a medial spectacle providing just that. Suddenly, the determination of the couple's guilt was overshadowed by what essentially became an "advertising campaign" (Clune 2) where "it was not the truth, but the perception of reality that was important" (2). Sylvia Plath herself considered the trial equivalent to the Salem witch trials, which led to the prosecution and execution of women deviating from newly arising gendered norms in the early modern period (cf. Clark 251). What united the witch trials and the electrocution of the Rosenbergs was their publicity and its consequential disciplining function for society, which ultimately ensured the hegemony of systems of oppression; whether that be patriarchy or capitalism (Federici 112, 249). Even though the trial sparked world-wide public protests, the Rosenbergs' fate was sealed and the message clear: Anti-capitalist attitudes are to be prosecuted as a threat to the state and authorities were to be trusted. Generally, citizens did have faith and trust in their administrations, even though – or rather because – "an underlying feeling of fear due to McCarthyism, nuclear weapons, and the threat of communism" (Hendricks xviii) prevailed. From a postmodern point of view, one might argue that the detection and denunciation of deviant political opinions within and outside of the US aided the construction of righteousness and naturality of a capitalist nation. After all, the clarity of good versus bad provided a mental safe haven to the paranoia-ridden citizens of the Cold War era.

Secondly, the self-perception of superiority was created by the means of consumption. In that, one could not only distance oneself from the Soviet Union, but also express patriotism and construct one's personal identity. The surge of consumerism as it appeared in the 1950s was a relatively new development. Historically situated after the Great Depression of the 1930s as well as the dismay and austerity measures during World War II, Americans entered a decade of sudden safety and affluence (cf. xx). Winning the war had required a surge in industrial production that could consequently be converted into the fabrication of

consumer goods (cf. xx). Due to technological advances, e.g. the mass production of plastic or synthetic fibres, materialism became quite literally more accessible (cf. 130). Returning to the ideal of the American woman as an example, consumerism allowed her to achieve and prove her status by catering to Western patriarchal beauty standards – especially in contrast to the idea of the frumpy Soviet woman. As a counterpart to their money-earning husbands, a surge of advertisements targeted at women also expected them to be the primary spenders of the nation (cf. Warren 16). After all, aiding the economy and manifesting the superiority of capitalism rendered shopping a patriotic act (cf. Hendricks 49). As previously discussed, patriarchal and capitalist exploitation profit of one another, which of course, serves to shape a sense of national identity and ideals. In fact, one could go as far as saying that "Western heteropatriarchy has long displayed female sexuality for male consumption" (Ruti 108), fostering the idea of domination and submission being gendered traits. Another demographic relevant to the novel and one in which the effects of consumerism became most overt were teenagers. While previously, children entered adulthood with their entry into the wage labour market, constantly needing to support one's family, the economic boom largely relieved them from such responsibility (cf. Hendricks 6). In light of systemic oppression, such as racism, ableism, and classism, this privilege naturally was not granted equally to all adolescents. Consequently, white middle-class teenagers did not merely become the medially represented norm, but also the default group of potential spenders in the eyes of advertisement companies. A shift in "the expectations and patterns of consumption" (Bessant 124) took place as teenagers began expressing themselves through purchases or their participation in cultural events in line with their personal interests. Naturally, within some of those spaces, they also expressed rebellion and nonconformity, e.g. through the genre of Rock'n'Roll, which was newly established and frequently considered closely connected to delinquency (cf. 235). Yet on a larger scale, mass media, especially teen magazines such as *Seventeen*, still functioned as signposts for teenagers' personal development. These magazines and their advertisements tied their advice on items to purchase to a promise of increased popularity, implementing the idea that superfluous consumerism equates to a high social standing in a new generation (Hendricks 52). The individualism closely associated with the meritocracy of the American Dream had extended to consumerism as well: Success could no longer only be achieved "through hard work and determination" (71) alone, one also had to purchase accordingly.

In summary, the 1950s were a decade strongly determined by the construction of a national identity based upon capitalist superiority (cf. Halliwell 234). On the one hand, this self-conception was the result of the demonisation of anti-capitalist sentiment due to the

tensions of the Cold War and the Red Scare. Thus, those Western conceptions of communism became the foil the US could distinguish itself from. In contrast to the oppressive Soviet Union, the US would pride itself with supposed social mobility and freedom under the premise of meritocracy. Furthermore, the public perception and treatment of dissidents both in- and outside the state entailed a normative function. Considering the prevalent Cold War paranoia, an individualist focus on oneself and one's family also provided a supposed sense of safety. On the other hand, newly formed habits of production and consumption implicated an increase in affluence. Among US citizens, this led to pro-capitalist sentiment and the perception of spending money as an act of patriotism. In addition to that, the connection between consumerism and superiority was further manifested by individualist identity formation and a rise in popularity through by means of purchasing widely advertised consumer goods, especially among teenagers.

2.1.3. The Institution of Psychiatry in the 1950s

Before examining the way that US-American culture in the 1950s produces, constructs, and deals with 'madness' or deviance from the norms explained above, the standard of psychiatric care at the time must be illustrated. This chapter shall provide an overview of the material circumstances, types of therapeutic measures, and predominant structures of psychiatric care, as well as the social stigma attached to it. Drawing the connection to its normative functions will be reserved for chapter 2.2.3 in which I will discuss the concept of discipline.

When describing the conditions of mental health institutions in the US in the 1950s, the majority of which being inpatient psychiatric hospitals as opposed to outpatient ambulant therapeutic aid, the difference between private and state hospitals must be addressed first and foremost. Prior to the Great Depression, many hospitals functioned on a sliding scale, which adjusted treatment options to a patient's solvency; but as the financial toll of the crisis hit the institutions, many hospitals began to solely accommodate for wealthy patients to prevent bankruptcy. Accordingly, those hospitals were equipped with "tennis courts, […] golf course[s], riding stables, gymnasiums, badminton courts and bowling alleys" (Clark 284) to justify the high costs. Notably, the American approach to psychiatry was relatively progressive compared to other nations at the time. Even state hospitals offered "occupational […], recreational […], and physiotherapy" (287) beside occasional talk therapy and medical interventions, and the removal from harmful social environments proved beneficial for the process of recovery (cf. Warren 97). Still, the care provided by state hospitals was "substandard" (Clark 926) overall. With frequent changes and shortages in staff, lack of diverse

therapeutic services, harsh medical treatment, and a lack of routines for patients, many patients saw little improvement, while others were entirely deterred from continuing their treatment (cf. 285 f.). Furthermore, less affluent patients frequently had to rely on third parties such as insurance companies for reimbursement. This usually required a diagnosis predefined by the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders*, *DSM* in short, authorised by the *American Psychiatric Association* (cf. Horwitz 150). Often, the diagnoses lacked accuracy due to "paternalistic terminology" (Metzl 48) and disease mongering of nonconform behaviour, such as women who were opposed to taking on motherly duties (cf. Clark 268). Working under such premises merely lead to the treatment of symptoms arising from underlying societal issues. Nonetheless, this was the reality of the multitude of people who could not afford to stay at private hospitals – especially considering the prolonged periods, often years, patients would spend institutionalised. Ultimately, the extensiveness of the duration usually spent in psychiatric treatment led to the number of patients peaking in the mid-1950s. With over half a million patients in prolonged inpatient care alone, American legislators decided to deinstitutionalise the mental health sector in the following decades (cf. Grob 318).

Aside from hospitals' destitution, the rudimentary knowledge in psychiatry and psychotherapy at the time heavily exacerbated recovery processes. Psychotropics, for instance, were barely in their early stages of development in the 1950s (cf. Metzl 48). Still, they quickly gained their reputation as "the helpers of men [, i.e.] the white, male psychotherapists and psychoanalysts" (37). Despite its strong neurological side effects, such as loss of memory (cf. Warren 130), these clinicians disproportionately administered psychotropics, lobotomies and electroconvulsive therapy to women under the assumption that "they needed their brains less" (Mizock and Carr 20). Frequently, these underdeveloped treatments had traumatic effects on patients. For instance, electroconvulsive therapy was administered in far higher doses and much more frequently than today, and insulin therapy, which is now proven to be ineffective, led to seizures that had to be endured without anaesthesia and often ensued broken bones (cf. Warren 23; Clark 268). Likewise, psychotherapeutic approaches were still in their infancy and mostly relying on Freudian psychoanalysis. With a strong focus on sexuality, early childhood experiences, or the gendered dynamics of the nuclear family, psychoanalysis took to finding fault in the patient's biography – instead of actively reducing their suffering by addressing maladaptive patterns in their cognition or behaviour. Further manifesting patriarchal structures, the newly developed family therapy also took to the nuclear family as a site of development for mental illness. Even though family therapy successfully clarified that (female) reproductive organs were not a root cause for mental

illness, it failed to address the overarching repressive structures from which harmful “cyclical patterns of family interactions” (Weinstein 2) originate. Rather, patriarchal dynamics were fuelled by the common accusation of mothers being at fault for their children’s ailments (cf. Clark 302).

Despite all its flaws, the nuclear family could still provide a vital source of resilience for many patients. While close and stable relationships are vital for recovery (cf. Mizock and Carr 45), the social stigma surrounding mental illness frequently isolated the ‘mad’ from their social environments. Of course, the stigma has not been eradicated since the 1950s; but considering that “those suffering from it were deemed almost ‘untouchable’” (Clark 305), it has notably improved. With the entire family or even whole neighbourhoods being subjected to the prejudices surrounding mental disorders, to many, these communities were the only social support outside of the hospital. Even though the number of patients in mental hospitals increased at the time, the social stigma attached to them did not relent, as they were considered precarious and cruel institutions by large parts of the population (cf. Grob 4 f.). Although therapeutic approaches slowly began to change in that regard, many also still considered (mental) health conditions intrinsically biological and unaffected by one’s environment (cf. Stone and Schroeder 365). Ultimately, this stigmatising and deterministic approach to mental illness reduced hope for a “renewed sense of purpose and self” (Mizock and Carr 27) despite its necessity for recovery.

In sum, mental health care in the 1950s was heavily impacted by the patriarchal structures and class division in psychiatry. This led to biased diagnoses and stark differences in the treatment received. Partly, the administration of treatment considered cruel or unsuccessful from a modern perspective was due to a lack of research and knowledge at the time; but overall, the inadequacies of psychiatry are both symptomatic of and beneficial to systematic misogynist and classist oppression. Besides that, the social stigma surrounding mental illness was fostered by the excessive long-term commitment of people into psychiatric hospitals, especially women, who were simply deemed nonconform.

2.2. The Relation between Social Norms and Mental Illness

2.2.1. Producing the ‘Mad’: Cultural Circumstances and Social Stressors

While mental illness is often attributed to chemical imbalances in the brain or a matter of genetics, this approach has its shortcomings. Solely considering biological triggers denies that socio-cultural factors profoundly influence the development and course of mental illness, as well as one’s recovery. Having established the circumstances most relevant to Esther’s experience has already introduced the patriarchal and capitalist power dynamics. So

before examining the construction of 'madness' as deviance from the norm, concrete ways in which these systems of oppression create cultural circumstances and social stressors that foster the development and sustainment of mental illness shall be pointed out. Instead of attempting to compile a comprehensive list of stressors, I will highlight patterns within the heteropatriarchal, capitalist structures of 1950s America.

The underlying assumption of this approach to mental illness is that biological conditions alone are not responsible for the development of mental illness. Of course, there is strong evidence for certain genetic factors that impact one's resilience or susceptibility. Likewise, the success of medication, e.g. impacting the reuptake of neurotransmitters such as serotonin or dopamine, strongly implies a link between physical and psychological states (cf. Pietikäinen 306). However, "[n]obody is born insane" (10) and many can most certainly recover (cf. 10). In its definition of mental illness in the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders*, the *American Psychiatric Association* stresses the interaction of several factors in the development of mental illness:

> A mental disorder is a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning. Mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities. (APA 20)

Hence, the exclusion of cultural and social circumstances – including systems of oppression – would lead to a reductionist approach (cf. Mizock and Carr 91). Nevertheless, this does not imply that behaviour deemed deviant is readily considered mentally ill. Rather, the prevention of and reaction to deviance create circumstances that foster behavioural maladaptation and mental distress (cf. Pietikäinen 8 f.).

The oppressive mechanisms of 1950s heteropatriarchy, for instance, create stress due to the permanent tension between women's internal needs and external demands. As previously established, the labour division within the nuclear family effectively restricted women to the domestic sphere. Isolated within their homes, women found themselves unfulfilled and void of stable extra-familiar support systems vital for stress resilience (cf. Ghandeharion et al. 68). Besides that, the hard labour, the strong dependence on their husbands, and the lack of reproductive autonomy entailed the neglect of personal liberties (cf. Kuruvilla and Jacobs 1). Individual expression suffered under the often objectifying, strict ideals of mother- and womanhood that required the repression of needs and generated feelings of inadequacy (cf. Mizock and Carr 113). Hence, the home could quickly become not just a blueprint for hegemony, but also an ideal substrate for the development of mental illness (cf. Warren 38).

Similarly repressive in its nature, the cultural climate of the Cold War also demanded conformism to the capitalist order of production. Intrinsic to both capitalism and the American Dream, the idea of meritocracy creates pressure by stressing the role of individual responsibility (cf. Hendricks 71). The neoliberal idea that success can be achieved through hard work alone liberates society of the need to function solitarily. Being systemically unsupported in case of emergency, e.g. through federal unemployment benefits, the freedom of choosing one's path of life from a plethora of possibilities can suddenly become an unknowing decision towards rapid social decline with stark material consequences (cf. Klapes 1). Furthermore, the ascription of worth to the merit generated instead of the person itself establishes a connection between self-worth and productivity (cf. Sen 12). This subsequent lack of stability within one's own personhood as well as the constant incentive to achieve and self-improve create permanent pressure and diminish resilience. Aside from that, the instability of individualism was a key to the constant anti-communist paranoia of the Cold War era (cf. R. Smith 34). Knowing that "the gathering of intelligence against those deemed dangerous or subversive" (Bailey 54) fostered an environment of distrust and isolation – detrimental since "social support is one of the most protective factors" (Martinez de Arrieta and Arenaza 618) from mental illness.

While the exact causes for mental illness are complex and manifold, the oppressive mechanisms of patriarchy and capitalism facilitate the psychological stress heavily impacting its development. Drawing on the cultural conditions of 1950s America provides insight into some of the ways in which these systems create tensions difficult to reconcile. For instance, the strict norms at the time amount to stark discrepancies between lived reality and ideals – and consequently in feelings of permanent inadequacy, especially in women. Furthermore, the structures in which individualism manifests, e.g. the nuclear family or the focus on individual generation of merit, mark the absence of vital support systems. Likewise, the prevailing sense of social control during the Cold War heightened paranoia, fear, and mental strain. Thus, this artificially produced, hostile environment increases the likelihood "significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities" (APA 20). The repression of personal needs and desires is vital to one's functioning within the structures of neoliberal heteropatriarchy; but the tension created often results in mental distress or coping techniques in the form of pathological cognition or behaviour.

2.2.2. Constructing the 'Mad': Defining Deviance

Having examined the role of culture in the development of mental distress alludes to the fact that the dichotomous rendition of 'mental health' versus 'mental illness' is not a naturally

given entity. While the idea of 'madness' as deviant behaviour has been persistent through all recorded societies (cf. Warren 20), it shifts with the cultural gaze through which it is viewed. Therefore, I shall demonstrate how the pathologised 'Other' is created by the implementation of a culturally specific normal/deviant dyad.

In *Madness and Civilisation*, Michel Foucault uses the French term 'déraison', "'as opposed to' (dé-) 'reason' (raison)" (Venable 93), to situate the concept of 'madness' in history. Since the early modern era, the concepts of 'reason' and, conversely, "affect-unreason" (Biswas 29) are inextricably linked to and fetishised by Western civilisation. As they are considered "deficient […] in reason, explanation or order" (Venable 13), those who are deemed deviant or irrational suddenly pose an existential threat to the functioning of civilisation. Usually, the norms function under the premise of presenting the only viable and reasonable action or behaviour. In *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* Mark Fisher succinctly states that "[i]t's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (1), stressing the fact that alternatives to current operating principles are widely eradicated from social perception. While madness is, to some extent, conceived in opposition to rationality that can be factually attested – "like a man speaking to his imaginary friend even though in external reality there is nobody there" (Venable 14) – in many cases, rationality appears to be constructed by being linked to a society's specific moral code (cf. 14). Consequently, in awareness of the fragility that arises from the construction of truth and the subversive potential of the 'Other', the unreasonable must be ostracised. Instead of the scalar view of sanity as introduced by psychiatrist C. G. Jung, which considers madness an exaggeration of healthy traits (cf. Pietikäinen 1 f.), a dyadic conception allows for quick judgement and a simplified construction of "the Enemy Within" one's society (Peel 203). Adopting the vocabulary of behavioural psychology, one can say that binary organisation aids the maintenance of hegemonic power by culturally implementing the cognitive distortion of black-and-white thinking (cf. Mieda et al. 2.).

Regarding mental health, the construction of diagnoses aids the legitimisation of the binary differentiating between normal and deviant, or healthy and mad. At the same time, the temporality of diagnoses highlights what this process of objectification attempts to obscure: that 'madness' is a socially produced entity. The *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders* was first published by the *American Psychiatric Association* in 1952 to standardise psychiatric diagnoses (cf. Horwitz 3). At the time, the most prominent diagnoses made were "broad notions such as 'psychoses,' 'neuroses,' and 'nerves' or psychoanalytic processes such as Oedipal or inferiority complexes, repression, and the id, ego and superego" (2). Almost all of those have vanished from the *DSM-5*, the handbook's most current version.

Since then, the *DSM* has become vastly more differentiated upon extensive research and concrete monitoring of the patient's body and mind (cf. Saénz-Herrero et al. 166). Nonetheless, the circumstances of production of mental illness are still not taken into account. Rather, the *DSM* continues the ascription of labels to individuals that effectively disease monger adequate responses to hostile, oppressive environments (cf. Kuruvilla and Jacobs 7). Furthermore, the *DSM* also plays a vital economic factor in psychiatry, as health care providers usually require a diagnosis for the absorption of costs. Consequently, the process of diagnosing and finding objectifiable faults within the 'mad' has become a source of income for psychiatric institutions (cf. Horwitz 150). Until the advent of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI), the most prescribed anti-depressant drug, in the 1980s, the diagnosis of depression was rather unusual. Yet with their widespread applicability and marketability, SSRIs "catapulted depression into diagnostic stardom" (Pietkainen 305). This highlights the interaction between the 'economic base' and the 'superstructure', the capitalist process of implementing schemes that foster the accumulation of capital in every part of modern life (cf. Beach and Labree xxii f.). Consequently, the classification of deviant behaviour underlines that "power produces knowledge" (DaP 27).

Furthermore, the role that the gendered demonisation of nonconform behaviour had in the history of institutionalisation and the construction of diagnoses alludes to the way in which the construction of deviance or the 'Other' is inherently linked to constructions of gender (cf. Clark 268). The diagnosis 'borderline personality disorder' provides an example of these patterns still being prevalent today. About BPD, Olatz Nepal-Fernández states:

> It is not by chance that this diagnosis is more frequent in women, homosexuals, transsexuals, transgender, etc. in a society in which the concept of the universal 'Subject' has been built from the masculine model. Anyone outside of its margins is considered the 'Other' and can be labelled unhealthy (783)

Consequently, psychiatry perpetuates heteropatriarchal values, while heteropatriarchal conceptions are fundamental to psychiatric conceptions of 'healthy' and 'ill'. Even positive deviance in women, i.e. overachievement, has historically been met with suspicion or hostility, as it poses a threat to male superiority (cf. Shoenberger 25). Consequently, psychiatrists showed a tendency to disease monger ambition in women (Clark 268). Furthermore, heteropatriarchy has produced reasons for women's madness in order to legitimise the submission of women. Whether it be "the wanderings of a dissatisfied womb, […] a case of weakened nerves in the age of empiricism, […] repressed sexual fantasies in Freud's time [or] a disturbed hormonal balance in the discipline of gynaecology" (Biswas 29 f.), heteropatriarchal mechanisms constantly endeavoured to portray their explorations as natural conditions,

disguising their fictionality from the start. Similarly, legislature was instrumentalised to objectify heteropatriarchal hegemony and construct the ‘Other’. For instance, same-sex attraction was both illegal and to be treated, as it threatened the gendered dynamic of the nuclear family (cf. Hendricks 26).

In conclusion, deviance and the norm are two entities that mutually construct each other. By presenting the adherence to norms as the only rational option, deviant behaviour has been deemed irrational, i.e. as ‘void of reason’ in Western school of thought since the early modern era. Ultimately, the imposition of the notion of ‘lack’ onto deviant behaviour creates a binary system with a judgemental incentive that aids the sustenance of systems of oppression. The tendency to classify deviant behaviour to portray the normal/deviant or healthy/ill dyad as objective truth becomes evident in the conceptualisation of psychiatric diagnoses. Not only have these diagnoses changed over time, which stresses that conceptions of deviance lack their supposed universality; they also underline that deviance must be understood both as a product of and as a threat to the socio-economic system in place.

2.2.3. Disciplining the ‘Mad’: Preventing and Processing Deviance

Having situated the concept of deviance in modern capitalist society raises the issue of how nonconforming behaviour is prevented and processed. Michel Foucault argues that Modern society operates under the incentive of discipline in order to exercise social control as opposed to the predominantly punitive mechanisms in place prior to the 18th century (cf. DaP 10). After outlining the concept of discipline, I will specifically examine the prevention and the treatment of mental illness – an idea to first originate at the same time the exercise of social power shifted – as tools of implementing social order.

According to Foucault, the 18th century marked a change in the exercise of power. Prior to this change, social control was ensured by setting warning examples targeting the body, e.g. in the form of public executions or mutilation (cf. DaP 8,14). Deterring people from committing delinquencies or deviant acts by means of fear of direct, physical consequence required visibility of the punishment itself as well as the executors (cf. DaP 200). Meanwhile, the subject could remain indiscernible if the punishment it endured was visible, “emitting the signs of its potency” (DaP 200). This dynamic changed drastically as the deployment of physical force and “torture as a spectacle” (DaP 7) fell into disgrace. Under the guise of humanising the exercise of power, this economy of visibility was radically reversed into the ever-present disciplinary mechanics of modern society (cf. DaP 7). Concerned not only with those having already committed an act of delinquency, also those who potentially

could, everybody is disciplined by being constantly and inevitably being examined and assessed (cf. DaP 9). Foucault illustrates the disciplinary power of 'being seen' with the architectural structure of Bentham's Panopticon, which he describes as

> "an annular building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; [T]he peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends to the whole width of the building […] All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. . […] He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication." (DaP 200)

Effectively, modern society and all its institutions, whether it be hospitals, churches, psychiatric hospitals, or schools, function in this way – having "doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, [or] educationalists" (DaP 11) take on the role of the executioner. Within these institutions, systems of "infra-penalty" (DaP 178) are established that keep track

> "of time (lateness, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity (inattention, negligence, lack fof zeal), of behavior (impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body (incorrect attitudes, irregular gestures, lack of cleanliness), of sexuality (impurity, indecency)" (DaP 178).

With the aid of grading scales, timetables, and other means of organising replicable units, every individual is subjected to the same systems of examination (cf. DaP 143, 149). Based upon arbitrary, but conventionalised systems, the subject's skills, merits, and physical properties are punished or rewarded accordingly. Ultimately, such assessment results in the creation of a normative semiology (cf. DaP 181). Notably, disciplinary punishment does still exist as a reaction to and the correction of nonconform behaviour. However, it occurs in concealment or by means of seclusion from society (cf. DaP 178 f.). Usually, disciplinary punishment presents itself in ways that avoid any direct or visible impact on the body, such as with fines (cf. DaP 11). Consequently, the possibility of subverting norms or threatening the social orders that ensure capitalist production is severely limited – without the executive power having to reveal itself or be permanently present (cf. Spitzer 642). Therefore, power does not function by ostracising it, but – quite the contrary – by subtly implementing it into every part of modern life and its subject's subconscious to the point of barely being perceptible. Having internalised the mechanics of control and the feeling of constant surveillance leads to the subject's close self-monitoring as well (cf. DaP 140). Over time, the power implicitly exerted over the subject and the power it exerts onto itself "explores [the body], breaks it down and rearranges it" (DaP 143) – makes it docile. The docile body functions meticulously and like a synecdoche, as it implies a connection of every action with the subject's worth. Foucault calls these coded, but not legally grounded behaviours "infrapenalties" (DaP 178). For instance, handwriting implies physical fitness and rigor; or a tidied room presupposes the order of its occupants' life (cf. DaP 152). Thus, discipline does not

merely inscribe a semiology of examination onto the mind, it shapes the material conditions of every subject.

From a standpoint of this “machinery of power” (DaP 143), the behaviour and cognition of mentally ill people require extensive discipline – as opposed to acknowledging that the constant submission to strict normative ideals and mechanisms as well as the sense of constant surveillance pose factors of severe stress. Naturally, the psychiatric hospital is an institution in which the discipline of the subject becomes concretely evident. The expression of deviant behaviour within the patient has become sufficiently excessive so that it requires confinement and exclusion from society (cf. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* 34). From a Marxist perspective, Steven Spitzer even considers the birth of the clinic as a symptom of class control (cf. Spitzer 641). As a response to growing population, an economic way of dealing with problem populations had to be configured (cf. Kristiansen 15). Since its origin, the mental institution secludes those who were unable to fend for themselves instead of creating an inclusive environment that is sensible towards societal stressors. Therefore, psychiatric care, to some extent, presents a “quick fix” (R. Smith 36) that finds fault within the individual instead of systemic oppression itself. Within a frame of capitalist exploitation, the goal of deviance processing is not to recover patients completely either (cf. Mizock and Carr 29), but rather to isolate them permanently or nurse them back to a state in which they can successfully create merit. Lobotomies, for instance, with their side effect of memory loss benefited the maintenance of the marital gender roles, as they helped women repress the memories of their unfulfilled lives as mothers and housewives (cf. Warren 136). The idea that psychiatry could produce quick fixes spread with the technological advances in treatment and later because of deinstitutionalisation. Yet due to its failure to address the faults of exploitative structures, psychiatry ultimately benefit those exact systems of oppression, creating further suffering – even if it did improve conditions of individual patients.

Overall, discipline has largely eradicated the need for public punishment from Western society. Instead, hegemonies, such as sexist or classist oppression, are ensured by subtly implementing comprehensive systems of measurement, assessment, and examination. The Foucauldian approach to social control focuses on the power wielded by institutions, meticulously surveilling and disciplining its subjects with the aim of creating docile bodies and minds shaped by normative semiology (cf. DaP 102). Psychiatric measures as a way of processing deviance aim to find fault within the individual instead of the stressors that arise from systemic oppression. Functioning as “the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject” (Butler 9), discipline manifests concretely in the institution of psychiatry, where it is faced with those it has failed.

3. Navigating Deviance and Discipline within Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

3.1. "I was my own woman" – Men, Marriage, and Motherhood

3.1.1. Imagining the Other within Encounters in New York

Far from her home in New England, Esther finds herself lost amid a myriad of possible futures and overwhelmed by the city. As she struggles with her sense of self Esther turns to defining herself in contrast to the people around her. Consequently, the encounters with the several men in New York first mark Esther's nonconformity in comparison to gendered expectations and the other young women around her. Aside from that, the commitment to one single future is problematised.

By mirroring the character of Doreen, another intern at the *Ladies' Day* magazine, Esther attempts to adequately perform femininity in concrete relations to men. To Esther, (hetero)sexual encounters are a crucial part in her socialisation. Esther's reckoning that they are not accommodated in "a proper hotel" (BJ 5) as in "a hotel where there are both men and women mixed about", alludes to the notion that she feels incomplete without men at her side. At the same time, Esther repeatedly claims that she is unwilling to get married (cf. e.g. BJ 24), which introduces a major conflict of interest right at the beginning of the novel. Whether it be her jealousy of the other girls, which appear cosmopolitan to Esther, who had never left New England (cf. BJ 6) or the belittling pseudonym "Elly Higginbottom" (cf. e.g. BJ 11) she gives herself: Esther radiates an inexperienced youthfulness she is desperate to overcome. In contrast to Doreen, who she admires in her effortless presentation of femininity, Esther describes her body as "skinny as a boy and barely rippled" (BJ 7). In relation to the Foucauldian body politics, this utterance marks her perceived nonconformity by the contrast of 'woman' and 'boy' as well as with the objectifying and unfit use of 'rippled'. While in a bar with Doreen and her friends Frank and Lenny Shepherd, Esther orders a plain glass of vodka, fearing she "might make a fool of [herself] by saying [she]'d have it with ice or soda or gin or anything" (BJ 10). Instead of showing supposed weakness by asking for advice, Esther assumes that rules in social behaviour have come naturally to everyone beside her. Following Simone de Beauvoir's idea that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (330), one can argue that Esther is as lost in achieving womanhood as she is lost in "the world" (BJ 16) after leaving Lenny's place alone one night. Although she very much admires Lenny's apartment (cf. BJ 13), Esther feels alienated within his space: While Doreen and the men are dancing, she physically isolates from and submits herself to the others by

sitting still on the floor (cf. BJ 15). Disengaged, Esther observes and describes their mannerisms in detail, assuming that she shall get involved with men to adequately perform femininity (cf. C. J. Smith 10). Yet she finds her drink "wet and depressing" (BJ 15) and even the prospect of "dancing with that little runt in his orange suede elevator shoes and mingy T-shirt and droopy blue sports coat" (BJ 11) is laughable to her. Though at first, this reaction seems unfitting considering her dissociative state, it is the absurdity created by the strict gendered norms that presuppose male superiority and the simultaneously underwhelming reality that create humour here. Later that evening, as Doreen is brought back to the hotel blackout drunk, Esther is also faced with the duality of child- and adulthood representative of the coming-of-age narrative. Here, Doreen addresses her with her pseudonym "Elly" (BJ 20) and a hotel employee with "'Miss Greenwood […]', as if [she] had a split personality" (BJ 20). That Esther perceives the time as neither day or night, but rather as an eternal third state, further underlines her disorientation in the reconcilement of her own desires and her perceived ideals of femininity. Consequently, Esther distances herself from Doreen as a role model (cf. BJ 21) though she previously considered "everything she said […] a sacred voice speaking straight out of [her] bones" (BJ 7). Suddenly, Esther temporarily gravitates toward the innocent, motherly Betsy as a role model instead (cf. BJ 21). Nonetheless, Esther goes along with Doreen once more in the night before departing from New York. Here, the character of Marco immediately becomes representative of male aggression with his tight grip around Esther's arm bruising her instantaneously (cf. BJ 101). Esther clearly labels Marco a "woman-hater" (BJ 102 f.), as she notices his preoccupation with power. Stating "I happened to be dealt to him, like a playing card in a pack of identical cards" (102), Esther feels objectified and interchangeable. Additionally, Marco reacts to her rejection by calling not only Esther but all women "sluts" (BJ 105) repeatedly and marking her face with his blood (BJ 105). The next morning, as she leaves the hotel with Marco's blood still on her face, she sees a "sick Indian" (BJ 108) in the mirror instead of herself. Likewise, she had seen a "big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman" (BJ 17) in the mirror after her first night out with Doreen and Lenny Shepherd. Far from her identity as a white American woman and as a representation of the violently oppressed (cf. Ferreter 98), her reflections signify alienation from herself. By having followed Doreen in pursuit of womanhood, she ultimately feels as if she has failed in her performance of femininity.

In her encounters with Constantin, Esther engages with a version of the 'Other' less tainted by her previous experiences. As a Soviet interpreter at the United Nations, Constantin represents the possibility to think outside the box and leave American ideals of womanhood behind. At the UN building, Esther admires a "stern Russian girl with no make-up who was

a simultaneous interpreter like Constantin" (BJ 70). Naturally, the girl's presentation and occupation lie far outside the American ideals of womanhood. Yet the feeling of intimidation Esther experiences breaks with the monolithic, demonised conception the US had of the Soviet Union at the time (cf. Ferretter 90). Rather, she is intimidated by her positive reception of the girl who is so deviant from American notions of femininity. Realising that femininity as a construct is fragile and an entity relative to other socio-cultural variables both opens new possibilities to Esther and simultaneously fortifies her confusion about expression of womanhood. What Esther perceives as a threat here does not align with the imaginations of the Cold War rhetoric: It is the feelings of inadequacy instilled into her by patriarchal ideologies. Seemingly unrelated, Esther notices that she has not been happy since the age of nine; the age at which the Girl Scouts and other gendered activities confronted her with restricted prospects of American womanhood and the age at which her father died, leaving her to experience the isolated, unfulfilling nature of the nuclear family (cf. BJ 71). Similar to her encounter with the Russian girl, Esther does not meet Constantin with any sort of suspicion either – although his occupation and nationality could render him "an excellent candidate for espionage for the Soviet Union" (Ferretter 108). Instead, she enjoys the multicultural atmosphere of the restaurant Constantin takes her to, admiring the posters of Swiss and African landscapes, drinking Greek wine (cf. BJ 73 f.). Prompted by the encounter and atmosphere, Esther tells him "how [she] was going to learn German and go to Europe and be a war correspondent like Maggie Higgins" (BJ 73 f.). This emphasises her willingness to cross established boundaries if it were not for the cultural reception of deviance. Nonetheless, her feelings of inadequacy do not fully subside in Constantin's presence. Equating her physical appearance and intellect with her value as a person and with Constantin's willingness to be intimate with her (cf. BJ 78) stress the way in which Esther has also internalised consumerist and meritocratic ideas regarding womanhood. However, she falls asleep at Constantin's place without any previous physical engagement and after decisively removing herself from the conversation. This marks her retreat from Western conceptions adulthood that centre around the development of intimate, heterosexual relationships (cf. Mizock and Carr 52). Additionally, Esther's disengagement is impacted by a rejection of the confining idea of a home. Instead of residing in a safe heaven, she wants "to shoot off in all directions, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (BJ 79 – a flailing attempt to reconcile her identification as an American with her inability to identify with the dominant ideal of the American housewife. The underlying significance of her American identity becomes noticeable here as Constantin touches her hair accidentally and she feels "[a] little electric shock" (BJ 81) – as if engaging with a Russian man and enjoying it was to be reprimanded

for like the Rosenbergs. While Esther is first truly engaging with ideas of the 'Other' in relation to Constantin, their encounter stresses the degree to which Esther has internalised distinctly Western ideas of womanhood.

Although Esther repeatedly states her aversion to marriage, she fantasises about it frequently. Her pseudonym 'Elly Higginbottom', which she uses in many interactions with men, is a manifestation of her genuine desire to fulfil the concept of the ideal woman being the mother of a family. Statements such as "I would be simple Elly Higginbottom […] I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family" (BJ 127) show a longing for simplicity and normalcy (cf. Ferreter 150). The contrast between her fantasies as Elly Higginbottom and her repeated statements of aversion also stress that it is not merely the stigma of conformity or deviance from the norm that burden her; rather, it is the process of making the choice to fit into a distinct version of womanhood, which would repress her complexity as a human being. As she tells Marco, who is heartbroken over his cousin: "If you love her, you'll love somebody else someday" (BJ 104), it becomes clear that she does not merely assume the potential for different paths of life in herself. Yet while liberating to a man, the assumption of simultaneous potential is fundamental to the crisis Esther is faced with as a woman. She sees herself in need to make a possibly detrimental choice, essentially depriving the process of becoming a woman in the sense of de Beauvouir of its continuity and discursivity (cf. Saénz-Herrero et al. 273 f.).

Esther's encounters with several men in New York set the theme for the course of the novel by introducing her struggle with finding her place within narrow constructions of femininity. In this narrative, 'coming of age' is inherently linked with 'becoming a woman', though ridden by disorientation. In her encounters with men, she also largely focuses on the women present, i.e. Doreen and the Russian girl at the UN, as templates for the performance of femininity. Yet while the encounters confront her both with the harshness of American patriarchy and with a different cultural notion of womanhood, Esther ultimately leaves New York strained by the possibility of choice.

3.1.2. Buddy Willard and The Prospect of Motherhood

Esther's aversion to the strict and narrow ideals of femininity in 1950s America becomes overt in her relation to Buddy Willard. Burdened with the expectation of eventual marriage, Esther finds herself in progressive aversion to Buddy, who synecdochally stands for the double standards of patriarchy and an unfulfilling future as a mother and wife. Only through Buddy, Esther's mystified ideas of birth and motherhood are deconstructed – further reinforcing her rejection of the role of the ideal housewife.

To Esther, Buddy Willard stands for the possibility of pursuing a future as a wife and mother according to traditional expectations. Though Esther does not overtly state her initial opinion on motherhood, she does mention her admiration of Buddy at the beginning of their relationship. After having admired him for several years (cf. BJ 88) and having taken his word "as the honest-to-God truth" (BJ 53), Esther loses interest in him early in the relationship. In retrospect, she even clearly states that she looks down on him, that "he was stupid. Oh, he'd managed to get good marks alright, and to have an affair with some awful waitress […], but he didn't have one speck of intuition" (BJ 7). By linking two apparently unrelated statements to one another, Esther critiques the flailing logic of patriarchal double standards. Buddy considers Esther, who is honest about her dating history (cf. BJ 58), promiscuous (cf. BJ 67) – under the pretence of his own innocence (cf. Peel 205). As he deprives her of vital information, Buddy creates a power imbalance that both resembles and feeds into patriarchal hegemony. Thus, Ester does not just feel betrayed by Buddy's affair, but rather by the stark difference in which patriarchal value systems pass judgement on men and women. Consequently, she is deterred from the idea of a romantic relationship: Being confronted with Buddy's naked body, Esther shows no interest in physical intimacy and imagines his penis as a turkey instead (cf. BJ 64); when asked to marry him, she immediately responds by laughing (cf. BJ 89). In response to her unwillingness to get married, Buddy clearly labels her as deviant using the word "crazy" (BJ 89). Once more, this instant reprimand of Esther's attempt to assert herself as an independent individual reminds her of the passive submission socio-cultural norms allocate to her as a woman (cf. Harding 189). When Buddy Willard leaves for tuberculosis treatment, his mother arranges for Esther to work as a waitress at the sanatorium to keep Buddy company (cf. BJ 18) – a plan entirely fulfilling the idea of the caring, subservient woman. Much to their incomprehension, Esther rejects the offer, determined to never marry Buddy, even "if he were the last man on earth" (BJ 49). Yet in the end, when she asserts to Buddy that he was not at fault for her or Joan's illness, Esther does not lie (cf. BJ 229 f.). Buddy has simply become a figure for the hypocritical structures and power imbalances of patriarchy Esther has learned to violently reject.

As a medical student, Buddy offers Esther insight into the workings of patriarchal institutions by having her witness a woman giving birth. This experience radically deconstructs Esther's imagination of childbirth as an experience so mystical "a woman had to be mentally deranged not to accept [it] as a blessing" (Ghandeharion et al 65). The reality Esther is faced with could not be further from her innocent imagination of birth that leaves her "smiling and radiant" (BJ 63). Instead, she watches the proceedings on the "torture table" (BJ 61) in horror. The woman "shaven […] between her legs" is cut "like cloth" (BJ 62) –

and reduced to a female docile body disciplined into objectification. Besides that, Buddy's fellow student Will belittles the woman giving birth by telling her "Push down, Mrs Tomolillo, push down, that's a good girl" (BJ 61). Esther even states directly that the drug which lets women forget the pain of childbirth sounds "just like the sort of drug a man would invent" (BJ 62). Thus, Esther recognises the patriarchal structures in the institution of medicine. In a patronising manner, Will also states that letting women watch the process of childbirth would ensue "the end of the human race" (BJ 16), universally implying that said structures and the exclusion of women from these institutions is vital to the functioning of society. By excluding the woman from the field of medical expertise, she is, to some extent, robbed of her position as a subject – instead, she becomes an "[object] of knowledge" (DaP 28) to the predominantly male professionals. Furthermore, this aspect of exclusion relates back to Foucault's demand to state the consequences of power in the positive, instead of focussing on the way "it 'excludes', […]'represses', […] 'censors', […] 'abstracts', […] 'masks', [and] 'conceals'", (cf. DaP 194). as examining dynamics of power demands looking at the production of truth. In contrast to the male professionals, Esther is rather naïve and ignorant about human anatomy. For instance, she asks why the new-born is covered in flour, which Buddy lectures her about quickly (cf. BJ 63). Throughout the scene, Esther seems progressively removed from her surroundings: Once the child is born, she can barely rely on her senses anymore, stating "I think somebody said, 'It's a boy, Mrs Tomolillo', but the woman didn't answer or raise her head" (BJ 61). Both Esther's dissociation and Mrs Tomolillo's unresponsiveness represent the tendency of the patriarchal medical institution to alienate women from their bodies by assuming control over them (cf. Ferretter 125). Further on in the novel, as Esther is admitted to the psych ward after her first suicide attempt, the character of Mrs Tomolillo returns (cf. BJ 171). Whether a coincidence or a figment of Esther's imagination, this underlines her perception of birth as traumatic and implies similarly patriarchal circumstances in the mental hospital.

To Esther, motherhood signifies unfulfillment due to the way in which the role of the mother is restricted to the domestic sphere and childcare. Simultaneously being a mother and having a fulfilling occupation is beyond of Esther's imagination. While Peter Klapes accuses Esther herself of creating this "false dichotomy" (5), the material and social hardships of reconciling both realities within the patriarchal structures of the 1950s must be considered. Buddy Willard, for instance, directly assures Esther that she would not want to write anymore once she became a mother (cf. BJ 81). Thus, Esther considers motherhood a means to subject women like "a slave in a totalitarian state" (BJ 81). Here, Robin Peel draws an analogy to Ethel Rosenberg who stated that she and her husband were the "first victims of

American fascism" (207). Both Esther and Ethel Rosenberg express disapproval of the strategic reproduction within oppressive systems. Additionally, the focus on mutual exclusion within binary systems and its relation to the conception of normalcy and deviance is examined during Esther's and Buddy's discussion about settling down. In that, Esther admits "'Well, you were right. I *am* neurotic. I could never settle down in either the country *or* the city' […] 'If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell" (BJ 90). Consequently, motherhood on its own requires the repression of certain parts of her personality. Unwilling to make this sacrifice, Esther states later that children make her sick (cf. BJ 113) – a stark resignation from the idea that, under those circumstances, motherhood could fulfil her at all. At a time when women were told that they would naturally find completion and happiness in motherhood, this utterance is the ultimate manifestation of irrationality and, hence, female deviance. Especially considering the concurrent Cold War paranoia (cf. R. Smith) stresses the large-scale socio-political implications of the attempt to escape distinctly Western, binary systems essentially based upon the division of rationality versus irrationality. Thus, meeting the desire escaping black-or white-thinking, to be two things at once with suspicion, eventually sustains a "Cold War male dreamwork" (Piette 127).

In sum, the character of Buddy Willard represents the possibility of a future as the mother within a nuclear family. In that, he offers Esther insight into the dynamics of heteronormative relationships and, by letting her witness childbirth, into the patriarchal structures of institutions. Shocked by the way medicine treats the female body and Buddy's betrayal, Esther begins to consider marriage and motherhood as ultimate compliancy and unfulfillment. Simultaneously, her increasing aversion to Buddy and the idea of having children represent the flailing attempts to gain power by adopting the binary rhetoric of Western culture. Yet Esther's unwillingness to restrict and submit herself to patriarchal ideals result in social stressors ultimately crucial to her decline in mental wellbeing.

3.1.3. Reclaiming Her Body through Contraception

During the baby boom in the mid-1950s, the eugenics movement regained popularity in the US (cf. Inoue 358). Many people, specifically those institutionalised in psych wards or prisons, were sterilised to curb the procreation of groups deemed socially deviant (cf. Grob 171 f.). Nonetheless, the Bell Jar, as a feminist text, overturns this narrative of forced sterilisation and shows the emancipative effects of birth control.

To Esther, the prescription of a diaphragm allows her to temporarily escape the suppressive mechanisms of patriarchal forcing her into motherhood. As the pressures of choice

is one of the major contributors to her mental distress, the freedom to delay the decision of whether she wants to become a mother is crucial to her recovery process (cf. Warren 63). Previously, Esther aptly describes a woman's reliance on men, as a mean "to keep [her] in line" (BJ 212), which results in her psychologist Dr Nolan referring her to a gynaecologist (cf. BJ 212). Skimming the magazine *Baby Talk* in the waiting room, Esther inspects the plethora of "Eisenhower-faced babies" in the catalogue like "mass-produced constituents of the homogenised society" (cf. BJ 212). Consequently, the fitting of her diaphragm becomes a mean to escape her role in an oppressive system of capitalist production, in which she, as a woman, is responsible for reproduction and childcare (cf. Inoue 358). Notably, Esther pays for her diaphragm with five dollars Philomena Guinea, the wealthy writer who absorbs the costs of Esther's hospital bills, had gifted her (cf. BJ 212). This underlines the material relation women have to freedom within liberal structures: once the body has been commodified, freedom becomes a purchasable good to only those who can afford it. Despite the value of liberty being intrinsic to the American self-understanding, Esther's achievement freedom is severely inhibited by her state, which prohibited contraception for single women like her until 1972 (Ferretter 124). Thus, her anaphoric stream of thoughts, expresses an implicit critique on the patriarchal laws and capitalist superstructure ensuring the reproduction nuclear family:

> 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…' (BJ 213)

Esther must no longer fear the stigma of pregnancy, the horror of birth or sexual taboos (cf. de Lauretis 130). Additionally, that her suspicion of Catholics having X-ray vision subsided alludes at the diminishing influence of the institutions that surveil and discipline her (cf. BJ 213). As Cixous demands in saying "I write woman: woman must write woman" (Cixous 877), coining the idea of an écriture féminine, or a female gaze, Esther marks her narrative of emancipation in stating "I was my own woman" (BJ 213) after her fitting.

In her encounter with Irwin, her newfound independence is put to the test and the importance of losing one's virginity is deconstructed. Adopting the Western, binary mentality of splitting people into "Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women" (BJ 77), Esther's world view initially distinguishes between those who have had sex and those who had not. With the cultural value placed on female virginity and her own obsession about purity, Esther even assumes that losing it would ensue a fundamental change to her

personhood (cf. BJ 78). The consensus about virginity becomes most evident through the character of Esther's mother. She sends her an article warning her of premarital sex, most specifically the risk of involuntarily having to provide for a child and the consecutive loss of respect towards the woman (cf. BJ 76). Yet the medial male gaze bothers Esther, who critiques that "this article didn't seem to consider […] how a girl felt" (BJ 77). Besides that, Esther has become increasingly occupied with the idea of losing her virginity, which "weigh[s] like a millstone around [her] neck" (BJ 218), since learning about Buddy Willard's affair. Heavily bothered by the gendered double standard attached to premarital loss of virginity, Esther decides to liberate herself from the socio-cultural obsession with purity (cf. BJ 77). Once freed from the risk of involuntary pregnancy by her contraceptive, Esther seizes the opportunity to lose her virginity to Irwin, a young professor she meets one afternoon on day pass. Yet in her encounter with him, Esther is faced with the fact that her diaphragm protects her from pregnancy only, not male violence altogether. Like with Buddy Willard, Esther is deceived by Irwin, who she respects, considers intelligent, and trusts (cf. BJ 218). By ignoring Esther's expression of and questions on the "sharp, startlingly bad pain" (BJ 218) she feels upon penetration, he blatantly abuses her trust (cf. BJ 218). Besides that, the conservative consensus becomes overt in Esther's lack in sex education. Esther is dependent on the imbalanced knowledge dynamic between her and Irwin: Too afraid to ask, she wonders naively if her "virginity had obstructed him in some way" (BJ 218) and whether she "was still a virgin" (BJ 218). Though the awaited miraculous change stays absent, Esther's ultimate inkling that she is no longer a virgin fills her with joy (cf. BJ 219). To her, the loss of virginity symbolises fulfilment and no longer having to depend on men – although she fears that she might be dying (BJ 221). Eventually, Irwin drives the bleeding Esther to Joan who helps her to get medical aid – marking a stark contrast between male exploitation and female support systems. Yet Esther is still unable to escape the violent neglect of patriarchal institutions, as it is "Sunday – the doctor's paradise! Doctors at country clubs, doctors at the seaside, doctors with mistresses, doctors with wives, […] doctors everywhere resolutely being people, not doctors" (BJ 222). At last, Esther and Joan must take a taxi to the hospital, where Esther is finally tended to. Nonetheless, Esther leaves this moment of crisis relatively emancipated: By confronting Irwin, making him pay the hospital bill and clearly rejecting him (cf. BJ 231), she gains a position of power.

To conclude, obtaining a means of contraception is a vital component to Esther's recovery, as it allows her to break with the idea of purity without the fear of

motherhood. For once, Esther receives “a fitting” (BJ 213) instead of having to fit into specific roles herself. Though still illegal, the reversibility of the diaphragm allows her to postpone the decision-making weighing so heavily on her. Nonetheless, Esther is not spared from patriarchal violence. In fact, her traumatic involvement with Irwin radically demystifies her idea of sex. Yet finally, Esther absolves herself and defends female sexuality by confronting Irwin one last time (cf. Ferretter 33). Within the bounds of the patriarchal circumstances in the 1950s, she proves her emancipation by stating “I was perfectly free” (BJ 232).

3.2. “A wonderful future beckoned and winked” – Promises of Consumerism and Meritocracy

3.2.1. New York as a Site of Failed Fulfilment

Her summer internship at the fictional *Ladies' Day* magazine in New York allows Esther to gain new perspectives and experiences independent from the expectations of domesticity she is faced with at home. Through her admiration of Jay Cee, novel experiences, and the consumption of luxury items, she can gain insight into a possible future of literary achievement. Nonetheless, Esther's self-perception of deviance and inadequacy increases over the course of the summer. Esther realises that she is unfulfilled by the opportunities she is presented with and the superficiality of performing conformity, no matter how hard she tries to compensate through consumerism.

The character of Jay Cee, editor at *Ladies' Day*, functions as a role model to Esther, as she is the first woman in Esther's life occupying a position outside of the norm of motherhood she could envision herself in. Despite her being a woman, Jay Cee is not labelled as deviant due to her success. While unmarried career women were frequently considered “old maids” (Ghanderharion 67) at the time, their ability to create merit within a neoliberal order protected them from becoming social outcasts. Since Jay Cee knows about the ways and expectations of the corporate world, Esther considers her a mentor figure. She even wishes that Jay Cee was her mother, as her actual mother solely provided a role model for the fulfilment of the traditional role of the mother and housewife (cf. BJ 36). Thus, Jay Cee functions as an extension of the guidance regarding the navigation of social events, purchase advice or recipes that lifestyle magazines provided to women at the time (cf. Hendricks 73 f.). By presenting correct ways of performing every part of life, essentially defining “infrapenalties” (DaP 178), media outlets have a disciplining function and reproduce prevalent gender roles. Similarly, Jay Cee implicitly disciplines Esther in asking whether her work truly interests her and confronting Esther with the reality of her disassociation (cf. BJ

29). Comparing her to the "[h]undreds of girls [flooding] into New York every June thinking they'll be editors", Jay Cee stresses the need for constant self-improvement and determination. In light of meritocratic competitiveness, Esther perceives herself as deviant, as unable to fit in, and is taken in by feelings of inadequacy. While she has ideas of "getting some big scholarship to graduate school or a grant to study all over Europe" or becoming "a professor and writ[ing] books or poems or [writing] books of poems and be an editor of some sort" (BJ 30), these visions are based upon unachievable perceptions of positive deviance. Admitting her disorientation provokes Jay Cee to state "You'll never get anywhere like that" (BJ 30) – a prophecy of eternal deviance that irrevocably puts great pressure on Esther. Feeling caught out as an imposter (cf. BJ 27), Esther's mental health decreases rapidly and severely. When having her picture taken at the end of the summer, Jay Cee provocatively states "She wants […] to be everything" (BJ 97). Only in a reserved manner, Esther admits to her aspirations of becoming a poet. In stating "Show us how happy it makes you to write a poem" (BJ 97). and "Give us a smile" (BJ 97)., the photographer demands Esther to perform both femininity and determinism. Metaphorically, these expressions represent the capitalist necessity to mechanically perform on demand, void of genuine conviction and regard for humanity. A temporary relief from her dissociative state, Esther finally bursts into tears (BJ 98). In response, Jay Cee vanishes and returns with manuscripts for Esther to read for amusement, trying to distract her with professional coolness instead comforting her with motherly warmth (cf. BJ 98). As Esther's true needs remain unfulfilled, her emotional response is disciplined as well. Strikingly, this depersonalising removal from her inner life by emotional repression fuels the exact feelings of derealisation Esther describes as living beneath a bell jar (cf. e.g. BJ 227).

The same day Esther is confronted by Jay Cee about her lack of determination, a *Ladies' Day* lunch event takes place (cf. BJ 27). The banquet represents Esther's flailing, but ultimately vain attempts to achieve conformity and to fill the dissociative void within herself. Fully aware that she is lacking the knowledge of appropriately handling social situations, she describes mirroring those around her to fit in. For instance, she remembers a poet's arrogance while eating a salad without cutlery at a lunch with Jay Cee and replicates his confident demeanour (cf. BJ 25). In contrast, the insight offered into her true emotions shows Esther much more vulnerable than her performance would suggest. Thus, she can only inquire Betsy about the fur show once she is "no longer worried about competition over [her] caviar" (BJ 26). Esther's anxieties about food are not concerned with supplying for her basic needs: instead, she is trying to counteract her chronic feelings of emptiness by over-

filling herself. She develops a fascination with luxury items, as shown in her detailed descriptions of the banquet and her habits of ordering the priciest items on the menu (cf. BJ 23). Esther's desperation becomes clear as she devotes herself to this strategy despite knowing better. At the very beginning of the novel, she states "how stupid [she]'d been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet" (BJ 2) and that all her previous achievements meant nothing compared to the luxurious grandeur the lifestyle of the Upper East Side exudes. Giving in to consumerism is constructed ambivalently: On the one hand, it is associated with guilt and her inability to adapt to her surroundings; on the other hand, it is her only strategy to integrate notions of luxury and success into her identity. In a fundamental attribution error, Esther confounds the latter with truly fitting in. Nonetheless, she cannot deny her failure, as the feelings of emptiness will not subside. Even while following her busy schedule, Esther is not distracted, but instead feels like a depersonalised "numb trolley-bus" (BJ 2) bumping from one place to another. As Esther is the first to notice the food poisoning caused by the shrimp at the luncheon (cf. BJ 39, 43), she fears that she is being punished for her gluttony (cf. Caroline J. Smith 16). Thus, her relief provided by the fact that the other girls have also been affected emphasises the role of her self-perception in her suffering. It is not merely the concrete feedback received by her surroundings, but also the constant act of self-disciplining in fear of presenting deviantly that poses one of the major stressors contributing to her increasing mental distress. Quite in contrast to Esther's initial perception, the luncheon also functions as a critique of the general habit of excessive consumerism in the US at the time (cf. Clark 251). Compensating for the tenuous circumstances during the Great Depression and the World War II, the sudden affluence in the 1950 led many Americans to hedonistic spending. Not only was spending money an act of patriotism within the framework of the American Cold War agenda, but also a way to numb the trauma of the past decades (cf. Hendricks 49). Essentially, these tendencies are represented in Esther: While consumerism is a vital component in her striving for conformity, it does not ensue profound relief of her mental burdens. Instead, the dopamine rush of being provided with advertisement gifts merely gives her a "kick" (BJ 3) that temporarily lifts her out of the constant state of disassociation.

Once Esther resigns from consumerism entirely by throwing her clothes off the hotel roof in her last night, the acuteness of her deterioration becomes critically overt. Specifically, the physical aspects of consumerism that allow her to perform femininity have previously presented guidance to her. At one point, for instance, she inspects Jay Cee closely, describing her in full detail as "she slip[s] a suit jacket over her lilac blouse, pin[s] a hat of imitation lilacs on the top of her head, powder[s] her nose briefly and adjust[s] her thick spectacles"

(BJ 36). Then, Esther imagines herself in place of Jay Cee as the editor Ee Gee, merely performing the role of the editor instead of fulfilling its actual tasks (cf. Schneeberger 550). Consequently, letting go of her clothes "like a loved one's ashes" (BJ 107) into a city with "buildings blackened, as if for a funeral" (BJ 106) truly appears like the commemoration of a future written off. This is stressed by Esther's unspecified statement "It was my last night" (BJ 107). Furthermore, this action marks Esther as deviant more distinctly than ever for the process of purging as opposed to accumulating presents an antithesis to the mentality of capitalist America. Only shortly before, the cultural response to 'un-American' behaviour has been exemplified in the character of Hilda. As Esther asks "Isn't it awful about the Rosenbergs?" (BJ 96), expressing her pity and shock, Hilda misunderstands her entirely. Instead of voicing her disagreement, she avows "Yes! […] It's awful such people should be alive […] I'm glad they're going to die" (BJ 96). Despite her obsession with the Rosenberg's fate (cf. BJ 1), Esther seems unaware of the implications of her actions. No longer having the means to perform femininity or the objects reminiscent of her failed attempts to conform, Esther feels freed by her rejection of the norm instead. Furthermore, this action does not lead to a loss of identity exceeding the one she has already perceived; rather, it manifests her experience within the real world, bridging the dissociative gap between her mental state and her environment. However, Esther also deprives herself of the tools that help her navigate society. If it were not for the help of Betsy, who trades an unusual dirndl for Esther's bathrobe, Esther would not have had any day-clothes for her journey home (cf. BJ 108). Once again, consumerism is presented ambivalently. Having made the decision to reject it, Esther also denies herself contingency and sets herself up for the performance of deviance.

Despite its promising insight into and prospect of a successful future, Esther's internship in New York leaves her ultimately unfulfilled. While she acknowledges Jay Cee as a role model and can envision herself in her position, Esther is confronted with her own lack of dedication and the dissatisfaction of her emotional needs. In an attempt to relieve her constant fear of seeming deviant, Esther finds supposed refuge in superfluous consumerism – though essentially in vain. Stuck between the desire to fit in and the futility of her performance, Esther tiredly resigns from her strives for conformity by the means of consumerism.

3.2.2. Esther as the Model Student without Prospect

Esther's feelings of inadequacy highly contrast with the fulfilment she has been constantly experiencing in response to her extraordinary, or positively deviant, academic success. Very much conform to the discipling mechanisms of high school and college, Esther faces a crisis of identity when having to adhere to a specific role in adulthood. Her inability to decide what

path she wants to take regarding her future further exacerbates the accomplishment of meritocratic standards.

Even though Esther has performed well academically, she feels unsatisfied and underqualified in prospect of every possible career. In college, Esther successfully structured her personhood around "studying and reading and writing and working like mad" (BJ 29), "winning scholarships and prices" (BJ 73) as well as the encouragement of professors (cf. BJ 29). She has even navigated failures, such as in her physics class, into success by employing her image as a model student (cf. BJ 32 ff.). Yet reductively perceiving herself as synonymous to her grades, it seems that over-conformity to the disciplining and normalising mechanisms of academic institutions (cf. DaP 184) has eradicated Esther's individual sense of self. In fact, she has become "the principle of [her] own subjection" (DaP 203) by taking on the examining gaze of academia and solely deducing her self-worth from hierarchies of grading (cf. DaP 148). Once faced with the structures of the working world, she asks herself "what [do] I do but balk and balk like a dull cart horse" (BJ 29). Thus, Esther feels a loss of her drive and personhood. But this response is not a symptom of illness in and of itself; rather, it is an adequate response to capitalist meritocracy, which considers a person's actions as indicative of their worth to society (cf. Sen 12). Since she is a student in her first internship, Esther has not yet engaged in wage labour, accumulated capital, or created any economic merit through surplus value. In other words: She has not yet partaken in the capitalist process of production that could potentially render her valuable from a capitalist standpoint (cf. Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* 246, 505). Deploying Foucauldian terminology, one can say that Esther is shocked by the reduction of the complex human to the 'homo economicus' serving the maintenance of the capitalist social order (cf. Schneeberger 546). In fact, she is very much opposed to her own subjection, especially "the idea of serving men in any way" (BJ 72). Instead of learning shorthand, which symbolised "the soft bigotry of low expectations for women in the 1950s" (Clark 261), Esther wants to write in her own words (cf. BJ 72). Heather Clark claims that those exact ambitions, this nonconform dedication to writing as a creative pursuit instead of a family- or even career-oriented path, render Esther sick to her doctors (cf. Clark 267). Thus, deviance must always be understood regarding the present economic superstructure (cf. Spitzer 640). Compensating for Jay Cee's rebuke, Esther even fantasises about submitting an extraordinary short story anonymously and then revealing herself to Jay Cee once she has stated her admiration (cf. BJ 99). After all, Esther can only reconcile her desire to write with the economic pressure to create merit by being published. Additionally, this shows Esther's striving to prove herself without her good reputation in college or Jay Cee's preconceived opinion, as if revealing her

true prowess. Ultimately, this does not merely stress her desire to succeed, but also considering the individual's submission to capitalist modes of production, her attempts to regain her sense of self through achievement.

Still, Esther is faced with feelings of failure and inadequacy that leave her unsure about an attainable, fulfilling future. Overwhelmed by the possibilities and their potential short comings, she struggles to see a future for herself at all. Most notably, this is portrayed in the metaphor of the fig tree, in which Esther states:

> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, […], and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose […] and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (BJ 73)

In a truly neoliberal manner, Esther is faced with the consequences of individualism that leave her alone under the fig tree, unnurtured and without a system of support. At the same time, she is determined to somehow reconcile her own desires with the moral codes and expectations of her community (cf. Klapes 1). In a conformist, binary way of thinking, navigating two possibilities at once appears irreconcilable – a perspective Ghandeharion et al. attribute to Esther's socio-cultural environment, which does not trust her with the ability to synthesise two futures (69 f.). Realistically, Esther merely reproduces the values patriarchal meritocracy has inscribed upon her: while a working mother could barely care for her children adequately from a patriarchal point of view, a person having to reconcile wage labour and emotional labour would most likely fail at creating maximal merit from a capitalist perspective. Furthermore, the rotting of the figs alludes to her perception of the irreversibility of deviance and the capitalist need for constant production. Thus, Esther cannot give herself rest despite her growing agony. Back from her internship and having been denied her place in the summer writing school, Esther is faced with the detriment of choice more concretely: Unable to decide whether she would "spend the summer reading Finnegans Wake and write [her] thesis" (BJ 118) or "put off college for a year and apprentice [her]self to a pottery maker" (BJ 118.) or "work [her]way to Germany and be a waitress until [she] was bilingual" (BJ 118), Esther ends up idly slipping into depression. Once more, the repressive mechanisms of heteropatriarchal capitalism clash with Esther's unwillingness to reduce or submit herself. Considering Foucault's conviction that there is no 'true self' outside of power relations (cf. Stekl 26), Esther's severe emotional stress arises from the irrational determination not to subject herself to any oppressive structures.

Overall, Esther seems to have ultimately reconciled this crisis characteristic of a coming-of-age narrative. The 1st person, past tense narration of the novel alludes at her becoming

a writer and, despite her determination not to get married in the end (cf. BJ 232), at the beginning, she mentions becoming a mother after the events of the novel (cf. BJ 3). Yet initially, as she is unable to continue her success outside of university, the meritocratic connection between a person's productivity and their worth causes Esther to lose her sense of self. Still, she is determined not to submit herself to arbitrary power relations. Aptly manifested in the metaphor of the fig tree, in which she describes herself as starving, Esther therefore suspects that she is unable to live in a system that fundamentally requires her oppression.

3.3. "I didn't think they had women psychiatrists" – Pathology and Psychiatric Institutions

3.3.1. Dr Gordon and the Trauma of ECT

Once Esther has returned home to her mother, her mental state declines further. Consequently, her aunt's sister-in-law and the family doctor, Theresa, refers her to Doctor Gordon, a psychiatrist. Yet in his treatment, Esther is faced with the disinterest and harshness of male psychiatry, even having to undergo traumatic, maladministered electroconvulsive therapy. The patriarchal structures fundamental to her suffering fail to provide the care necessary for recovery – ultimately provoking Esther to consider suicide the only alleviation of her misery.

Dr Gordon's disinterest in Esther is representative of the objectifying male gaze that fails to consider her entire personhood and the extent of her mental struggles. While Esther's suffering has become increasingly acute in New York, culminating in her emotional breakdown during the photoshoot and the ridding of her wardrobe, not being accepted to the writing course critically worsens her mental state (cf. BJ 111). Suddenly and fatalistically, Esther fails to see a reason to tend to herself or fulfil her daily needs, since everyone "only died in the end" (BJ 123). Most notably, she does not sleep, change her clothes or wash herself for several weeks (cf. BJ 123), meaning that she suddenly stops the performance of neat femininity. Thus, rejecting the maintenance of the docile body becomes an acute manifestation of her illness as it implies "disability in social, occupational, or other important activities" (DSM 20). Yet when describing these symptoms to Dr Gordon, he shows little reaction, merely asking her "what [she] think[s] is wrong […] as if nothing was *really* wrong" (BJ 124). Besides that, Dr Gordon answers in the same self-absorbed manner twice in response to Esther telling him the college she attends – dwelling in his own memory instead of asking her about the circumstances that could have contributed to her suffering (cf. BJ 126, 139). Thus, he does not consider that Esther's anguish might be a reasonable response to her dire situation and little guidance she receives socially (cf. Ferretter 129). Instead, it is her angry response to his lack of empathy, her throwing the remnants of her letter to Doreen

on his desk that leads him to the conclusion that she must receive treatment (cf. BJ 129 f.). Strikingly, Dr Gordon does not take Esther's voicing of her suffering as a reason to provide care, but rather considers the expression of resentment against his authority that does not conform with patriarchal ideas of feminine passivity as a need for disciplining mechanisms. Besides that, the only explicit information the reader receives of Dr Gordon is Esther's description of the picture of his nuclear family. Considering Esther's aversion to even the prospect of such a lifestyle, they are constructed as inherently incompatible. Notably, this is the only time when the "dissociation of the see/being seen dyad" (DaP 202) in their unequal power dynamic is disturbed – a term which Foucault describes to use the dynamic within the panopticon. Though missing reciprocity is characteristic of therapeutic relationships (cf. Mizock and Carr 51), his disregard of Esther's struggles is blatant. Thus, Dr Gordon is not characterised as a figure of care, but rather as one of social control. In stating that "Dr Gordon cost twenty-five dollars an hour" (BJ 126), Esther does not merely highlight the economic implications of this unsuccessful treatment, but that she does not see him as a person either: she sees him as equivalent to his disciplinary therapeutic function. Her fundamental rejection of Dr Gordon's treatment even becomes overt in her dismissal of "the very idea of the eighteenth century, with all those smug men […] so dead keen on reason" (BJ 120). As Cixous describes the fetishisation of reason as a "phallocentric tradition" (Cixous 879) and Venable highlights the role of 'madness' as a foil to reason (cf. Venable 5), Esther implicitly rejects a male narrative of her suffering. Instead, she wants to be heard in her own words – which she ultimately achieves in the narration of her story.

After only those two sessions, Dr Gordon prescribes Esther electroconvulsive therapy (cf. BJ 130), which leaves her traumatised due to maladministration. The ECT under Dr Gordon's supervision is characterised as a quick fix, one of the psychiatric measures presented "as the helpers of men" (Metzl 37) and a clear response to Esther's unwillingness to comply. As expressed in the removal of Esther's watch by the nurse and the changed positions of her hairpins afterwards (cf. BJ 137 f.), ECT goes hand in hand with a feeling of alienation and a loss of autonomy. Experiencing excruciating pain, Esther then wonders "what terrible thing it was that [she] had done" (BJ 138). Thus, her electroconvulsive therapy, with the incentive of healing, is reminiscent of the electrocution of the Rosenbergs as a disciplinary punishment. While the Rosenbergs were punished for their anti-capitalist, political dissidence, Esther's crime of not submitting herself capitalist and patriarchal oppression – though neither publically nor legally penalised – echoes a similar objective (cf. Peel 207, Rosi Smith 41). Both were disciplined under the incentive to punish "exactly enough to avoid repetition" (DaP 93). Both times, electrocution provided an example of a modern

disciplinary technique, representative of the immense power wielded by various institutions of a capitalist superstructure. Thus, the diffuse presence of disciplinary practices, even of disciplinary punishment, becomes evident once more (cf. DaP 215). Furthermore, the localised administration of ECT to the brain provides insight into the reductionist conception of (female) mental illness at the time. Since ECT was predominantly administered to women, it serves as a manifestation of the conception that 'madness' originated within the woman's body. Thus, a narrative is reproduced that is reminiscent of the localisation of hysteria in "a suffocated uterus in antiquity [or] weakened nerves in the age of empiricism" (Biswas 31). Ultimately, the disguise of misogynist sentiments in medical terminology further anchors sexist structures within the field of psychiatry. Besides that, the idea of a 'quick fix' relates to the neoliberal sentiment of finding progress in the development of technologies instead of tackling a system that creates the suffering in the first place. Hence, both aspects, the specific localisation of the origin of an illness and the idea of a technological solution, highlight the individualistic aspect of ECT: In the sole focus on the patient and their body, the part that social, economic, cultural, and political circumstances play in the course of a disease are negated entirely (cf. 30). While this does not necessarily have to be the case, as the reader gets to see later in the novel, the ECT as administered by the distant Dr Gordon shows up these exact faults.

In response to the trauma of ECT and the medical neglect of patriarchal psychiatry, Esther considers her own suicide the only option to end her suffering. Not only is this a means to escape another administration of ECT, but her violent and enfored submission within capitalist patriarchy overall. This is first exemplified as Esther attempts to cut her wrists in the bathtub. Here, she suspects that she did not indeed want to kill herself, but something "else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get" (BJ 142). Upon cutting herself, she feels no pain, but a "small, deep thrill" (BJ 142), which underlines her depersonalised state. Additionally, inflicting harm on herself becomes a means to express her suffering (cf. Gray 164) without being silenced by male figures of authority. According to Theresa de Lauretis, all her suicide attempts express Esther's desire to objectify herself (cf. 130). Not only is this a response to the socio-cultural demand for female passivity; it also appears to be Esther's self-determined solution to being subjected by others. As she swims out into the sea to drown herself, she hears her heartbeat, mentally echoing it as "I am, I am, I am" (BJ 153). In stark contrast to her inability to choose her path of life within a strict cultural code of norms and expectations, the immediate danger she puts herself in reawakens a primal survival instinct. In that moment, she is neither deviant nor normal, but simply driven by instinct. Similarly, her "back-to-the-womb suicide attempt" (Miller Budick 877) does not

only express her isolation from community within liberal individualism (cf. Pascal-Guarrido 75); it also represents the desire to revert to a state void of power dynamics and the necessity of choice. However, from a Foucauldian perspective, this is technically impossible due to the omnipresence and internalisation of power dynamics (cf. DaP 211). Ultimately, this is reflected in her survival. As much as she yearns for it, and as solemnly the overdose of sleeping pills lets her fall asleep in her cellar (cf. BJ 162 f.), Esther cannot retreat into a state that leaves her unscathed by power dynamics. While her suicidal ideations stress the detriment of systemic oppression, death does not equate to freedom. Instead, her death would symbolise an act of ultimate compliancy.

To conclude, Esther's confrontation with patriarchal psychiatry constitutes a major driving force within the first part of the "mythical descend-ascend pattern" this narrative of female empowerment is embedded in. In the character of Dr Gordon, intertwinement between the patriarchal conceptions of femininity and mental illness are exemplified (cf. Ferretter 130): Here, any deviance from the idea of female docility is characterised as in need of remedy. The traumatic ECT administered to Esther illustrates this aptly, since both represent the liberal idea of technological 'quick fixes', negating the need for fundamental change, and the extra-legal disciplining punishment ensuing nonconformity. Finally, Esther's isolation, inactivity, and subsequent suicide attempts are representative of her striving to escape the omnipresent mechanisms she is faced with. Yet ultimately, suicide does not offer her freedom. Instead, her survival requires her to enter a dialectic process, attempting to navigate her life within intersectional repressive structures through communicative action.

3.3.2. Dr Nolan, the Fellow Patients, and the Lifting of the Jar

Having survived her suicide attempt, Esther is admitted to the town hospital, the city hospital (cf. BJ 169, 176), and finally, with the financial aid of Philomena Guinea, into the private psych ward Caplan (cf. BJ 177). There, under the care of the female Dr Nolan and in company of her female fellow patients, Esther enters a phase of holistic recovery through the engagement in communicative processes devoid of stark hierarchies.

The treatment Esther experiences at the hand of Dr Nolan is defined by personal interaction, genuine care, and trust. Quite in contrast to Dr Gordon and his distant embodiment of patriarchal psychiatry, one could consider the depiction of the medical relation between the two as determined by a 'female gaze' (cf. Miller Budick 873). Even in the city hospital, Esther solely describes the depersonalised doctors during medical examination as "Dr Soandso […] Dr Syphilis […] [or] Dr Pancreas" (BJ 172). She considers psychiatry as male dominated as shown in her statement "I didn't think *they* had women psychiatrists"

(BJ 179, my emphasis). Yet once Esther meets Dr Nolan, she is instantly described as "a cross between [actress] Myrna Loy and my mother" (BJ 179) – a combination that reflects both admiration and familiarity. Implicitly, the character of Dr Nolan shows Esther the possibility of uniting care work and wage labour – a crucial point in the deconstruction of Esther's dichotomous thought patterns. Even apparently banal actions such as Dr Nolan's question "Do you mind if I smoke?" (BJ 181) and her leaning back into the chair (cf. BJ 181) create a comfortable atmosphere in stark contrast to Dr Gordon's constant disregard. Dr Nolan takes Esther's concerns seriously, determined to create trust. For instance, she assures Esther that the ECT she experienced was maladministered and that she will notify her in advance in case she shall ever receive such treatment again (cf. BJ 182). Still, Esther lives in fear about reliving the traumatic experiences (cf. BJ 194) – mirroring the cultural zeitgeist of Cold War paranoia (cf. Peel 205). After all, she must endure insulin therapy and suffers the consecutive weight gain (BJ 184), which implies that Dr Nolan's care does not provide a sudden vacuum of the neoliberal 'quick-fix' mentality or patriarchal beauty standards. Nonetheless, Esther builds a fundamental basis of trust, even love, towards Dr Nolan (cf. BJ 203) that leaves her feeling severely betrayed once she realises that she does not get breakfast one morning – indicative of impending ECT (cf. BJ 202). As during the *Ladies' Day* lunch, the notion of food consumption is constructed as a performance of 'normality' (cf. Caroline J. Smith 20). Yet crucially, Dr Nolan clarifies her intent to Esther: "I've come specially early to tell you, and I'm taking you over myself […] I only thought it would keep you awake" (BJ 203). She even appears visibly remorseful to Esther and leaves her room for consideration (cf. BJ 204). Once done with the successful, painless treatment, Dr Nolan shows consideration and cooperativeness in saying that the duration over which the treatment would be administered several times a week depended on both her and Esther (cf. BJ 206). Thus, Esther states "The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air" (BJ 206). While this might partly be due to the successful treatment, the experience of kindness and care after her trust was put to the test has sustainably shaped Esther's cognition. The difference to her previous treatment becomes noticeable to Esther: When she asks what "a woman [sees] in a woman that she can't see in a man" (BJ 221), she is silenced by Dr Nolan's response "Tenderness" (BJ 221). Additionally, Dr Nolan does not reduce Esther to "Egos and Ids" (BJ 214). Rather, she fulfils Esther's dire need of care and community. When Esther provocatively expresses her resentment to her mother, Dr Nolan does not disease monger her, but benevolently expresses her comprehension of the implications (cf. BJ 195). Dr Nolan understands Esther's rejection of the traditional ideal of femininity that her mother embodies and of the patriarchal psychiatry her mother subjected her

to (cf. Macpherson 62). Thus, true recovery is constructed as a communicative process, not as a result of neoliberal ideas of individualistic self-empowerment (cf. Schneeberger 558).

While Dr Nolan as a medically and emotionally caring figure plays a fundamental part in Esther's experience of a functional support network, the other women in the psych ward constitute a vital support network as well. Whether it be Ms Norris, next to whom Esther sits "in a close, sisterly silence" (BJ 184), or Ms Huey, who calms Esther before her ECT – Esther is never labelled as deviant in the psych ward. While this might seem intuitive considering the presence of other mentally ill women, it is not self-evident to Esther. When unexpectedly being moved up to Belsize, the ward with the lowest security levels and most luxurious treatment possibilities, she initially still fears "Joan and DeeDee and Loubelle, the blond woman laughing and gossiping about [her] […] saying how awful it is to have people like me in Belsize" (BJ 198). Once more, this shows how the repercussions of the capitalist and patriarchal norms remain present. Even though Caplan and Belsize are presented as places relatively void of direct demonstrations of male hegemony, Valerie's account of her lobotomy and the consequential loss of her anger also allude to the pervasiveness of gendered constructions of 'normality'. In the character of Valerie, who has no intention of ever leaving the psych ward, Esther is faced with the acceptance of being labelled as deviant (cf. BJ 185). Since their interaction takes place before Esther's second ECT, this is the first time the predicament of choice is introduced in the psych ward. Valerie's willingness to undergo a lobotomy has offered her the freedom to move from Wymark, the highest security ward, to Caplan; nonetheless, she is personally too content with her current position to bother with further improvement. Suddenly, compliancy is not only connoted with restriction and freedom at the same time – demanding a dialectic navigation of the two concepts according to one's needs and desires. Aside from that, the differentiation of the wards counteracts the effect in which disease surrounded by disease loses its property of standing in contrast to health (cf. Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic* 36). This indicates the presence of culturally prevalent (binary) notions of sickness and health, 'normality' and nonconformity despite the sense of female community Esther experiences. Yet, engaging with the women at Belsize, some of them married and fashionably dressed (cf. BJ 197), helps Esther to deconstruct her monolithic idea of deviance. The simultaneity of the women's performance of femininity and their divergence from cultural or psychiatric conceptions of the norm demonstrates to Esther that deviance expresses itself in various forms; that complying in certain ways does not necessarily imply oppressive conformity in every part of life.

The prevalence of such contrasts also becomes evident in Joan vitally catalysing Esther's recovery. Conflictingly, Esther looks down upon Joan on the one hand, describing her

as horse-like (cf. BJ 187), feeling superior to her in recovery (cf. Clark 299); though on the other, she considers her a friend, seeking her place after her encounter with Irwin (cf. BJ 214). Since both women share various similarities, such as visiting the same church, being former girlfriends of Buddy Willard, fellow successful college students, and recent survivors of suicide attempts (cf. BJ 55, 189 ff.), Joan appears to be constructed as a foil to Esther. Yet decisively, Joan, as a lesbian, is considered irrevocably deviant in the 1950s, with homosexuality being constructed as "the necessary Other" (cf. Macpherson 81) to the heteropatriarchal norm. Thus, Joan's suicide (cf. BJ 225) becomes a reductive, narrative device in providing Esther with crucial insight that finally helps her rehabilitate into society. In contrast to Joan, Esther's 'Otherness' is of potentially temporary nature (cf. Macpherson 97). Hence, Joan's death proves to Esther that, despite her reluctance, a certain extent of conformity is required to dialectically navigate modern society as dominated by omnipresent disciplining mechanisms. During Joan's funeral, Esther becomes aware of her liveliness once more and echoes her heartbeat "I am, I am, I am" (BJ 233). Without a predicate, Esther relieves herself from the need to fulfil specific roles and the self-perception of deviance (cf. Klapes 8). Both with the help of and in contrast to her surroundings, Esther has engaged in a communicative process of recovery that strongly contrasts with the isolated, individualist experience of her previous treatment. In opposition to the neoliberal notions of individualistic self-sufficiency, the experience of a functional community is constructed as a prerequisite for determination to affect one's recovery. Naturally, this includes Esther's privilege of receiving private care with the help of Philomena Guinea. In other words: *The Bell Jar* demonstrates an awareness of the impacts one's socio-cultural environment has on successful self-empowerment (cf. R. Smith 41).

All in all, none of the psychiatric wards Esther is institutionalised in are void of oppressive power structures. They all function under the dichotomy of healthy/ill based upon one's (non)conformity to systems of hegemony deeply rooted in every part of American society. However, Dr Nolan as an expression of genuine care and Esther's fellow patients, as an expression of community, constitute a social environment that enables Esther to actively engage in her recovery. Consequently, recovery is constructed as the product of a communicative process at eye level that builds on the simultaneity of two opposing forces (cf. Pascual-Garrido 81): she is pronounced healthy, yet aware of her past experiences (cf. BJ 227) and unable to know that "the bell jar […] wouldn't descend again" (BJ 230) eventually. Upon her departure, she performs femininity through her clothes, wearing "[s]omething old, something new" (BJ 233), but is still unwilling to get married (BJ 233). In the end, Esther does not leave the hospital feeling "analyzed" (BJ 233) but seeing "question marks"

(BJ 233). Equipped with the tools for the dialectic re-evaluation of apparently natural socio-cultural ideals (cf. Macpherson 5), Esther realises "What was there about us in Belsize, so different from the girls […] in college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort" (BJ 227). In consequence, she is able to bridge the dissociative gap between her lived reality and the idealised expectations she is faced with. Finally, as Esther's struggles alleviate and her bell jar lifts, she uncovers the detriment of disciplining mechanisms building on a "binary division and branding [of] mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal" (DaP 200).

4. Conclusion

Understanding normative conceptions within 1950s US-America has essentially proven two distinct aspects: First, as socio-cultural values are temporally and locally configured, they must in turn be deconstructed to uncover and dismantle the hegemonial systems that produce them. Secondly, systemic oppression and the ideals generated by them do not exist in isolation, but mutually benefit one another. For instance, the divided labour in nuclear families do function both as a place of gendered oppression and capitalist exploitation. In this way, the strict and reductive role expectations require the disassociation from one's own desires. Consequently, individuals are disciplined by a dichotomous evaluation of conform vs. deviant behaviour. Hence, behaviour serving the maintenance of prevalent power dynamics is generally constructed as the only rational and natural option. Conversely, deviance from the norm must be processed due to its threatening of central pillars of national self-perceptions and power dynamics. According to Foucault, this happens by the means of a normative semiology impacting every part of modern life, or in other words: the diffuse, omnipresent network of disciplinary power.

In terms of the socio-cultural context of *The Bell Jar*, the repression of the housewife into the domestic sphere after World War II and the cultural climate of the Red Scare determine the material circumstances of Esther Greenwood most prominently. In this coming-of-age narrative, the fulfilment of gendered expectations and meritocratic ideals is problematised by the various mental strains it creates, such as the detachment from oneself and a functional community. Besides that, the patriarchal structures within psychiatry as exemplified by Dr Gordon, which aim towards disciplining Esther into female docility, heavily infringe on her scope of action. Especially the traumatic electroconvulsive therapy stands out as a disciplinary punishment. According to Sylvia Federici, the displacement of the woman into the domestic sphere for the original accumulation of capital in the early modern age was achieved by the burning of witches. In the 1950s, political dissidents such as the communist Rosenbergs were electrocuted for treason. Thus, the disproportionate administration of ECT to women specifically appears to have served the purpose of maintaining their subjected position within the domestic sphere. In finding fault within the individual, prevalent hierarchies are protected from being dismantled by those considered deviant.

Yet at the same time, the strict resignation from all socio-cultural ideals and power imbalances is neither constructed as freeing nor truly possible. Instead, Esther succumbs to suicidal ideation since she is unable to navigate life within the given structures. Unable to choose a prospect, one of the many figs on her metaphorical tree, she sees herself starving, because she is unable to comply with repressive structures. Thus, what is demanded of her,

is the dialectic navigation of deviance and discipline. This re-evaluation of the apparently natural dichotomies of healthy vs. ill, or nonconform vs. conform happens under the care of Dr Nolan. Providing an alternative, distinctly female perspective and communication at eye level counteracts the neglect of her needs and the reduction of her personhood into a 'mad' person caused by the normative, patriarchal gaze Esther has previously experienced and internalised. In consequence of the reduced disassociation between external and internal demands, Esther's suffering is reduced – and the bell jar separating her from her environment finally lifts.

In further analysis, considering the ways in which Esther profits of her privileges, especially in regard to race, would offer further insight into the social determinants that foster the development of 'madness'. Such reading would consider those aspects of the novel that engage with the socio-political circumstances at the time in a non-deconstructive manner. Furthermore, examining the effects that the novel itself had on alleviating a sense of isolation among mentally ill women at the time would offer further perspective on the positive ramifications of female, deconstructivist writing. However, those considerations would surpass the limits of this paper.

From a perspective joining feminist, Marxist, and Foucauldian theory, *The Bell Jar* ultimately implements a subversive, female gaze to give voice to the 'Other' within a system of intersectional oppression.

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