



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Master's Degree
in European, American and Postcolonial
Languages and Literatures

Final Thesis

Femininity, Talent, and Insanity

An Analysis of Female Madness through Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Alda Merini's *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*.

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Academic Year

2022/2023

INTRODUCTION.....	iv
CHAPTER ONE: AN INTRODUCTION TO FEMALE MADNESS.	1
1.1. <i>The Definition of ‘Madness’ and the Concept of Mental Illness.</i>	1
1.2. <i>Women, Madness, and Society.</i>	2
1.3. <i>Women and the Male Figure: The Role of Husbands and Psychiatrists.</i>	6
1.4. <i>The Rise of the New Women.</i>	10
CHAPTER TWO: SYLVIA PLATH and ALDA MERINI.	15
2.1. <i>The Life of Sylvia Plath.</i>	15
2.2. <i>The Life of Alda Merini.</i>	33
CHAPTER THREE: A COMPARISON OF SYLVIA PLATH’S <i>THE BELL JAR</i>	
AND ALDA MERINI’S <i>L’ALTRA VERITÀ. DIARIO DI UNA DIVERSA.</i>	45
3.1. <i>An Introduction to The Bell Jar and L’altra verità. Diario di una diversa.</i>	45
3.2. <i>On Being a Mad Woman Writer in The Bell Jar and L’altra verità. Diario di una diversa.</i>	48
3.3. <i>Schizophrenia in The Bell Jar and L’altra verità. Diario di una diversa.</i>	72
3.4. <i>The Experience of the Mental Hospital in The Bell Jar and L’altra verità. Diario di una diversa.</i>	78
3.5. <i>Treatments and Psychiatrists in The Bell Jar and L’altra verità. Diario di una diversa.</i>	89
CONCLUSION.....	100
BIBLIOGRAPHY	103

INTRODUCTION.

[...] any woman born with a great gift in the 16th century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, mocked and laughed at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty. [...] That woman, then, who was born with a gift of poetry in the sixteenth century, was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself. (Woolf, 1977, pp.55-7)

Women, for the longest time, have been trained to limit themselves and the range of their activities to the toned-down sphere of domesticity. A woman had to be beautiful, obedient, and silent. She did not have to speak out for herself, but instead, she must accept that the only thing she can do is align to her prescribed gender roles: she must be a perfect daughter, wife, and mother. A woman cannot be ambitious, or gifted with an intellectual talent that would make her closer to the opposite sex. They just had one duty in life: to embrace femininity and fulfill her duties as a stay-at-home partner.

Thus, if any woman behaves differently from what she is supposed to, she is portrayed by those who decide what is “normal” from what is not, as a crazy witch, something non-human; or better, mad.

Virginia Woolf, the author of *A Room of One's Own*, was forbidden by George Savage, her attending physician, to study and attend lectures with her stepbrothers. He was particularly concerned with her situation, suspecting that “the danger of solitary work” might endanger her psychological condition. (Showalter, 1987, p.126) By reading biographies written posthumously by those who were close to her, it is evident that Virginia Woolf suffered from frequent mental breakdowns. Her traumatic childhood,

characterized by patterns of abuses perpetrated by her stepbrothers, was heightened by the limited opportunities offered to her in life as a girl struggling to define herself. In fact, it has for long been speculated that her “madness” might be related to her choice of profession, that is to say, her writing. As a matter of fact, her husband Leonard Woolf firmly thought that “her madness and genius somehow proceeded from the same part of the mind.” (Kenney, 1982, p.164-5) In short, her madness seems to have permeated her entire existence, since the death of her mother, which happened when she was thirteen. After this painful loss of her parental figure, she started despising her father for his asserting aggressiveness. She was a determined girl, defying Victorian values, and her father did not like her bravery. Victorian girls did not need to fuel their intellectual activities by reading and writing like their male brothers, they just needed to understand what their place in the domesticity of their homes was.

Nancy Topping Bazin, the author of *Postmortem Diagnoses of Virginia Woolf's "Madness"*, admitted that, in the end, Virginia's mental breakdowns and consequent suicide attempts were the result of an attempt to conform to societal norms which “set up [sic] conflicts for her that threatened her life.” (Topping Bazin, 1994, p.137)

Virginia Woolf's controversial life and ambitions to become a great writer serve as a starting point to analyze what being a brilliant woman writer trapped inside a strong patriarchal society meant. In her, the paradigm of a mad woman writer is presented. Traditionally, women were taught that they did not need education and high-achieving careers to become “true” women. Women in the twentieth century were not expected to be intelligent, they only needed to be obedient and prescribe to the man-made gender roles of mother and wife. Therefore, if a woman tried to defy the rules she was trained to observe from a very early age, which were designed to limit her life and activities within the four walls of domesticity, she was deemed to be the privileged subject of madness. As a matter of fact, Elaine Showalter, the author of the revolutionary *The Female Malady*, has for long suggested that “Biographies and letters of gifted women who suffered mental breakdowns have suggested that madness is the price women artists have had to pay for the exercise of their creativity in a male-dominated society.” (Showalter, 1987, p.4)

Women writers like Sylvia Plath and Alda Merini were hospitalized for their frequent mental breakdowns. Although different in cultural and social background, both Merini and Plath were extremely talented and determined to make themselves heard. Like many other women, they had tried their best to bury their interests and confine themselves to the privileges that a stay-at-home life would bring. Having been refused acknowledgment and professional admiration, they had been exiled into mental institutions.

Esther Greenwood, Plath's heroine in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, perfectly portrays the condition of women writers trapped within male conventions:

I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket. [...] That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security [...] The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters. (Plath, 1963, p.72-9)

Twentieth-century women writers were starting to defy their own "natural" role in the world. Women needed a change; they wanted to be responsible for their destiny, the main actors of their existence.

This thesis, therefore, poses itself as an analysis of the condition of women, especially those of Sylvia Plath and Alda Merini, trapped within the conventions and confines of an extremely patriarchal society. These two powerful female authors have highlighted through their most famous prose writings, *The Bell Jar* and *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*, how their mental disorder is the result of an essentially social situation, which forced them to conform to their prescribed roles of mothers and wives, instead of letting them express their poetic natural gift. After briefly analyzing how women, especially those belonging to the movement of the *New Women*, were essentially the privileged subjects of "madness," this thesis will then delve into the analysis of Alda and Esther's quest for one's own identity and freedom to express their literary "selves," all while

dealing with the most repressive patriarchal institutions, one's family and society. Finally, it will analyze the protagonists' relationship with the mental asylum, a convenient place for inconvenient people, and the formative relationship they had with their empathetic psychiatrists, who will help them liberate themselves from the constrictions and brutality of a life led in patriarchal society.

CHAPTER ONE: AN INTRODUCTION TO FEMALE MADNESS.

1.1. The Definition of ‘Madness’ and the Concept of Mental Illness.

In the great reorganization of relations between madness and reason, the family [...] played a decisive part [...] a real social structure. [...] The prestige of patriarchy is revived around madness. (Foucault, 1965, p.253)

When discussing the concept of madness, it seems necessary to point out the theories developed by one of the most influential sociologists who evaluated the concept of madness in relation to gender and society, Michel Foucault. He challenged the original concept of mental illness, showing how power in society is “connected to knowledge, which in turn has a regulatory function.” (Ussher, 2011, p.4) Accordingly, those who have power in society can carefully choose what is deemed ‘insane’ from what is considered perfectly and mentally healthy. One could say that, following Foucault’s point of view, madness could very well be seen as a social construct, shaped and modified through time and place. Madness is therefore not a fixed category. The boundaries of its categorization are shaped by those who are in charge, those who have power over these same definitions. Psychiatrists seem to have, in fact, “formal jurisdiction over the boundaries of sickness, madness and badness, and compete with one another over where the boundaries should fall.” (Bushfield, 1994, p.261)

Given that categorizations and discourses of experts in the field of insanity have shaped the identities of mental patients, representations of madness included in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 1994), not only define what having a mental issue means and the consequent construction of the “mad woman/man,” but it also legitimized the right of these same doctors to treat and speak out about these problematic conditions, without acknowledging personal boundaries, humiliating and

treating these poor patients as non-humans. The authors of the DSM describe mental disorders as the “manifestation of a behavioral, psychological, or biological dysfunction in the individual”, which is not “an expectable [*sic*] and culturally sanctioned response to a particular event.” (DSM-IV, 1994) What is implicitly clear in this definition is that madness is defined and shaped by cultural and social standards, hence the term ‘dysfunction’. Thus, it leaves space for personal interpretation of what one considers mad (and, consequently, what can be considered perfectly balanced). To further justify this position, Thomas Szasz, who has always been vocal regarding the establishment of psychiatry and its prejudices, has defined madness as “a potpourri of emotions and behaviors [...] The ingredients are anger, aggression, fear, frustration, confusion, exhaustion, isolation, conceit, cowardliness, and difficulties getting on with each other.” (Szasz, 1996, p.12) Here, all elements of social inappropriateness are presented, highlighting the impossibility of mad people to get along well in society with others. Consequently, those who suffer from all kinds of madness must be locked up in a mental institution, where outside contacts are completely limited.

As Jane M. Ussher reminds us, “Social norms and subjective judgment are central to the diagnosis of the disorders of the mind. The use of the term ‘madness’ reminds us of this fact.” (Ussher, 2011, p.4) For all these reasons, we can consider the conception of madness as a social construct.

1.2. Women, Madness, and Society.

There’s only one kind of people at a social disadvantage nowadays—a whole class of people who are treated as slaves and exploited shamelessly—and that’s the young wives. They are educated as well as men and the moment they give birth to a baby, they are slaves ... they have a 22-hour workday, no holidays, and they can’t even be ill. (Lorenz, 1970, New York Times)

For the longest time, the female gender has been characterized by a weakness of spirit. Women were said to be inferior because they belonged to the sphere of nature, men to

that of culture and refinement. According to Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thompson in *The Evolution of Sex*, “men, like the flagellate sperm, were aggressive, competitive and inventive; while women, like the ovum, were placid, altruistic, and nurturant.” (Geddes and Thompson qtd. in Showalter, 1987, p.122) Moreover, according to Darwinian psychiatry, given that the brain depended on the reproductive organs for determining its development and faculties; women were therefore inevitably inferior to men. They were endowed with the capability of taking care of others without perceiving it as a burden; they were born to be mothers. However, they were not biologically gifted to be enriched with scientific and artistic powers.

What is more, scholars have long argued that the biological evolution of the sexes is also a matter of energy consumption. Herbert Spencer in *Principles of Sociology* claims that “since women depleted, or sacrificed, their energy in the reproductive process, they were heavily handicapped, even developmentally arrested, in intellectual competition.” (Spencer qtd. in Showalter, 1987, p.122) Not only in the reproductive process, however. From puberty, women are forced to bear the most important monthly expenditure of energy. Menstruation, being one of the most intense physical activities a woman is forced to experience in her daily life, leaves little opportunity for them to concentrate on their mental work. Intellectual demands and physiological changes struggle to get along, because “[...] what nature spends in one direction, she must economize in another direction.” (Maudsley, 1874, p.5) Some go even further, asserting that it might even be lethal for them to concentrate on something that is not properly domestic. Thus, it is not surprising that women have been deemed “mad” because they were attempting to do something that would go beyond their “natural function.” This long-standing distinction between female irrationality and male reason was used to reinforce the tradition of male dominance, and the consequent subjugation of the *second sex*, highlighting how women were mad and, thus, something that must be tamed at all costs.

However, Barbara and Bruce Dohrenrend have admitted in *Social Status and Psychological Disorders* that, in reality, men are as “psychologically disturbed as women are.” (Dohrenrend qtd. in Chesler, 2011, p.94) Given that psychiatric incarceration or

being labeled as a delirious person is determined by what society considers acceptable versus what is not, one could say that the range of acceptable behaviors that are given to men is wider than those that are allowed to women. Hence, since women's authorized behaviors are much more limited, as it is the role-sphere they need to act within, their demeanor is more sensitive to being targeted as a symptom of being out of their minds. As a consequence, high rates of admittance within psychiatric facilities might be justified also in terms of society having "limited social tolerance for 'unacceptable' behavior among women." (Chesler, 2018, p.168) Accordingly, women might have felt, especially in the past, extreme pressure to adapt to society's standard of well-being. What is more, a contemporary study made by Zigler and Philips has shown that, if one compares the symptoms presented by female and male patients, the latter "are significantly more assaultive than female and more prone to indulge their impulses in socially deviant ways like 'robbery, rape [...]'. Female patients were often found to be 'self-deprecatory, depressed, perplexed, suffering from suicidal thoughts, or making actual suicidal attempts.'" (Zigler and Philips qtd. in Chesler, 2018, p.101) Interestingly, women seem to exhibit internal problems, putting the blame on themselves whilst men, on the other hand, are displaying dangerous and damaging actions for others. All of the characteristically male behaviors have an undertone of violence, such as "sex addiction, alcoholism, drug addiction, personality disorders, sociopathic personalities, and brain diseases." (Chesler, 2018, p.101) Still, fewer men have been psychiatrically hospitalized for these "male" problems than have women, often secluded in asylums for displaying typically female symptoms. In short, men are just as disordered as women are, but their insanity incoherently appears not to be as socially worrying as that of the opposite sex. Women could portray the same behavior as their male counterparts and could still be deemed crazy. It is perhaps for this reason that the theme and character of "mad women" have much more appeal in the literary world than that of "mad men". Notwithstanding this claim, men, bearing the regulatory function in society, have always tried to shun madness from the sphere of masculinity. This is also seen in the fact that, in the past, male madness was symbolically represented as feminine. "Drag queens in French are defined as 'the madwoman', *la folle*." (Showalter, 1987, p.4)

Klonoff, Landrine, and Campbell (2000) have analyzed, by comparing various studies on psychology and gender issues, the connection between women and madness. They have noted that, generally, women experience “more depressive, anxious, and somatic symptoms” than men because they must deal with something peculiar to their gendered experience in society: sexist treatment. It might not be the main cause, but it has been highlighted how gender distinctions have contributed to the enhancement of stress levels, which play an important role in shaping the definition of the so-called female maladies. In fact, women:

Have a higher level of exposure than do men to generic stressful life events (e.g. getting fired, lack of money, and death of a loved one), and that this greater stress contributes to women’s greater symptoms. (Klonoff, Landrine, Campbell, 2000, p.93)

All in all, one could infer that the different treatments that the female gender experiences in society might be determinant for the development of mental issues and the consequent need for psychiatric help. This is further confirmed by an article published by the World Health Organization in 2000 which confirms the previous statement. In this document, it has been made clear that women, more than men, “face demanding social pressures in a context of gender-based disadvantages; many experience physical and sexual violence, with consequent high rates of depression and anxiety disorders.” (WHO, 2002, p.2)

The subjection that women experienced in society and, to some extent, still experience, can be referred to as a “slave state.” (Szasz, 1966) As a matter of fact, psychiatrist Thomas Szasz stated that women can be regarded as one of the first groups to be subjugated and enslaved by those belonging to the “dominant” sex. It is not by chance that Simone de Beauvoir, by analyzing how women were treated in society, defined the female sex as *le deuxième sexe*, that is to say, “the second sex.” Gendered roles assigned to females, such as working around the house and tending to their husbands and children without any

monetary compensation, is just one way through which men have limited women in their power to express themselves and their wishes for change.

In a sense, ‘woman’s work’, or woman’s psychological identity, consists in exhibiting the signs and symptoms of slavery - as well as, or instead of, working around the clock in the kitchen, the nursery, the bedroom, and the factory. (Chesler, 2018, p.102)

In short, one could argue that women’s high rates of mental disorders, and their consequent hospitalization, might be both a result of their social situation, which confines them in their roles within the house (daughters, wives, and mothers), and the mistreatment they receive within this male-dominated type of society. However, women seem to be doing nothing right: “Women are at risk of being deemed mad for simply being ‘woman’ – for displaying archetypal feminine traits, or paradoxically, for rejecting their feminine role.” (Ussher, 2011, p.65) Whatever they do, they will always be labeled mad because of their very gender and the social condition that is, for this same reason, imposed upon them. Therefore, “should we be calling [women] the mentally ill... or society’s wounded?” (Caplan qtd. in Ussher, 2011, p.1) Thus, one could say that women are at a psychological disadvantage simply because they belong to the “weaker”, second-rate sex, who must be tamed through male rationality. Given this situation, one should not be surprised when reports of psychiatric treatment and hospitalization show that females’ asylum admission rates have always been higher than those of men, regardless of race, nationality, and social status. (Ussher, 2011, p.232) Women were seen as disturbed and mentally troubled both by those who performed their roles as mental health professionals and by their husbands. It is for this same reason that, according to female experiences of hospitalization, women felt that their husbands and their male psychiatrists were essentially plotting against them, joining together to make the poor mental patient’s life a living hell.

1.3. Women and the Male Figure: The Role of Husbands and Psychiatrists.

Ciò che mi riusciva incomprensibile è come fossi capitata in quel luogo, e che odio mai avesse potuto ispirare mio marito a chiudermi in una casa di cura.” (Merini, 2007, p.65)

In the asylum, madwomen were imprisoned and treated by male psychiatrists who, as we already mentioned, functioned as agents for their husband’s will. This is most evident in Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard’s case. She was one of those few lucky women who was able to study and engage in intellectual activities since she was a young girl and, thus, she had the opportunity to become a well-educated woman. After having been forced by her parents to marry Theophilus Packard, a Calvinist minister, her religious husband decided to shut Elizabeth in an insane asylum – or better, prison, as she defined it – because she started inquiring about religious matters without his permission, engaging with people who had different religious perspectives. What is more, he was particularly worried because “never before had she so persistently refused my will and wishes [...] she seems strangely determined to have her own way, and it must be that she is insane.” (Lombardo, 1992, p.794) For this reason, he brought her to a mental institution that would cure her rebelliousness without her permission, or better, against her will because he was clearly in the right to do so. Dr. MacFarland, the attending physician in charge of the Jacksonville asylum, stripped her of everything in her possession, from her clothes to her books and papers. Despite their attempts to dehumanize her, she never lost her will to change her condition and that of all women locked into that barbarous institution with her. Dr. MacFarland knew that Elizabeth Packard was not insane, thus, his cure aimed at making her understand her position within her family’s structure, which consisted of “imprisonment and domestic servitude to the other women.” (Chesler, 2018, p.71) He clearly thought that the right cure for her was re-establishing the cultural sex roles within her family.

When she was discharged from the mental institution after three years of incarceration because she was deemed incurable by MacFarland, her husband incarcerated her in their home, forbidding her to ever go out. Because of her extreme will to live her life freely,

she filed a request in 1865 to the Illinois State Legislature to understand if her husband, Theophile, had legal rights over her properties, earnings, and – what is more important – her body. Dr. MacFarland, Elizabeth’s jailer, offered to testify in favor of her husband at her hearing, which was supposed to decide upon her degree of insanity. This goes on to show how the doctor and the husband figure – or better – the dominant male in the house, merge into one when dealing with female independence and their relationship to gender roles. They do not care about saving their wives/daughters/patients and they would often unite to demonstrate that the poor woman they are attempting to cure is terminal, with no hopes for the future whatsoever. Elizabeth Packard was extremely important in the development of a series of laws that aimed at protecting women from their husbands. In 1867 she influenced politicians in Illinois to ratify a new law, called “An Act for the Protection of Personal Liberty”, better known as “Mrs. Packard’s Personal Liberty Law”, which assured the possibility of a jury trial to those who were accused of being mad, including women trapped in their marriages. In addition, she had been “credited with influencing 34 bills in various state legislatures, as well as success on the national stage, including an 1875 law allowing asylum inmates mail access.” (Wheeler, 2021)

After having read Packard’s experience on marriage and mental institutions, one may argue that perhaps women are as “hospitalized” within their marriages as they are within the environment of the asylum. In the same way, it might also be said that mental institutions seldom provide asylum. The cruelty and inhumanity towards those who are deemed “socially” inferior within the asylum appear to mirror the brutality of “outside” society. Similarly, Mary Wollstonecraft, regarded as the founder of modern feminism, in *A Vindication of the Right of Women* has shown how Maria, the protagonist, has been forcefully admitted to a mental hospital because of her husband’s will. Throughout the whole book, one can feel the oppression that she is subjugated, to the point that the asylum becomes a symbol for all institutions in which men have power over women, from marriage to law. In the sequel, *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman*, the protagonist asks herself: “Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?” (Wollstonecraft, 1798, p.64)

Moreover, as it is shown in Elizabeth Packard's case, it can be said that women, given that once they were hospitalized were constantly supervised by a male psychiatrist, would simply pass from one patriarchal figure of restraint to another. It was relatively easy for husbands who were tired of their complaining wife, who was not fulfilling her duties anymore, to incarcerate her under the excuse that she was "sick", or better, "mad". Wives and young daughters were legally kidnapped by their husbands and fathers and were locked into mental institutions most probably without being aware of what was happening to them, against their own will. It is not therefore surprising that in female "mad" literature, which primarily focuses on the experience of incarceration within the domestic world and mental institutions, "the doctors, the demons, and the fathers begin to sound alike; their voices merge in a chorus of condemnation." (Showalter, 1987, p.213) The voice of judgment that comes from within is inevitably male. What is more, given that both husbands and therapists find typical female behavior bothersome, this underlying gender bias would influence the treatment and the will to cure these women. For instance, as it was previously mentioned, self-destructive behaviors such as suicide, are typical female characteristics. Thus, men doctors would not feel the need to find a "cure," a reason for this specific type of conduct. For them, it was the simple externalization of femininity. The most important thing for both doctors and husbands is that this specific type of behavior would not damage other people, aside from the "mad woman."

All in all, given that women were under the yoke of both their husbands and physicians, one could say that female oppression was both within the four walls of domesticity and mental institutions. It has been speculated that most of the patients locked in mental asylums were women perhaps because "they feel, quite horribly, at 'home' within them." (Chesler, 2018, p.92) Accounts written by mental patients have highlighted how mental institutions have stripped them of their freedom, and in general, their right to self-affirmation. It is for this reason that many authors have noticed similarities between the experiences of confinement in mental institutions and historical symbols of tyranny. Elizabeth Packard, for example, likened her experience within the asylum to the historical movement of the Inquisition. She stated that asylums were institutions of "absolute

despotism” and, therefore, were in desperate need of “a universal and radical reconstruction in this department of humanitarian reform... which should at once command the attention of every philanthropist.” (Clark, 2015, p.63)

1.4. The Rise of the New Women.

Some of us [...] were already committing the unpardonable sin of working outside the home to help pay the mortgage or grocery bill. Those who did felt guilty, too - about betraying their femininity, undermining their husbands’ masculinity, and neglecting their children by daring to work for money at all, no matter how much it was needed. They couldn’t admit, even to themselves, that they resented being paid half what a man would have been paid for the job, or always being passed over for promotion, or writing the paper for which *he* got the degree and the raise. (Friedan, 1975, p.1-2)

During the 19th century, women were progressively allowed to experience new opportunities for achieving their personal goals. A new group of independent women called the *New Women*, demanded emancipation in the fields of education, work, and personal life. Contemporary to the rise of these newly educated and culturally refined women, “the female disorders of anorexia nervosa, hysteria, and neurasthenia became epidemic.” (Showalter, 1987, p.18) By stressing the connection between this new wave of independence and the rise of female mental illnesses, one could therefore say that mental breakdowns would happen when women tried defying their own “nature” and escaping from their assigned roles. For the longest time in history, a woman’s main aim, according to patriarchal standards in society, was to become a good wife and mother. Thus, if one did not necessarily fulfill these domestic roles, by trying to put herself in an equal intellectual position to that of men instead of cheerfully serving them, she was believed to be out of her mind. These “imperfect women” must therefore be contained, before they permanently damage themselves. As a matter of fact, Maudsley argued that

adolescent girls who were pursuing intellectual fulfillment were extremely vulnerable to permanent injuries to their reproductive system and brain, given that in the past they thought them to be interconnected. The competitive environment, typical of the educational world, would permanently damage young girls' already unstable psychological equilibrium. (Maudsley, 1874) Therefore, to stop this pandemic of female emancipation, and its consequent rise of mental maladies, the Darwinian nerve specialists – also called Evolutionary Psychiatry, an all-male movement that dictated the rules for psychiatric treatments between the 18th and 19th century – decided to take charge and started dictating proper feminine behavior, “to oppose women’s effort to change the condition of their lives.” (Showalter, 1987, p.18) Given that in a world controlled by male normality and its laws women and madness appear to share the same cultural space, ladies of all ages were often shut in asylums against their will and, most probably, without any notice because they needed to “recover” from their unexpected rebelliousness.

To further confirm this claim, feminist activists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in 1861:

Could the dark secrets of those insane asylums be brought to light... we would be shocked to know the countless number of rebellious wives, sisters, and daughters that are thus annually sacrificed to false customs and conventionalisms, and barbarous laws made by men for women. (Anthony and Stanton qtd. in Chesler, 2018, p.62)

Nonetheless, most women incarcerated in mental institutions were not insane. As stated by Adeline T.P. Lunt in *Behind the Bars*, “A close, careful study and intimacy with these patients (finds no) irregularity, eccentric, or idiosyncrasy, either in language, deportment, or manner, then might be met with in any society of women thrown together, endeavoring to make the most of life under the most adverse and opposing circumstances.” (Lunt qtd. in Chesler, 2018, p.68) If anything, hospitalized females were rightly worried that the conditions inside the asylums and the violence they experienced during their stay would drive them mad.

As previously mentioned, those incarcerated by their psychiatrist or husbands were removed by society and alienated from any form of sociability because of their apparent insubordination towards the role they were assigned as women in a patriarchal-driven society. Therefore, if asylums were places where females were imprisoned for defying their “natural” sex roles, it has been highlighted how these women would express this underlying alienation especially when isolated from the outside world. This is particularly evident in the fact that female wards in mental hospitals were much louder than male ones. As Jane Ussher puts it: “If asylums are where you go for being alienated from your sex role, then you might as well act out that alienation as much as possible.” (Ussher, 2011, p.67) However, male doctors in charge of maintaining order inside the asylum could neither accept confusion nor insanity. For this reason, punishments reserved for women were conceived for “fixing” their loudness: “Noisy women were also kept silent through the use of a ‘scold’s bridle’, a metal helmet framing the head with a metal ‘bit’ placed in the mouth.” (Ussher, 2011, p.67)

Notwithstanding these claims, some psychiatrically institutionalized women believed that there was something wrong with them just because they were not able to fulfill their gendered duties. Taking into consideration everything said thus far, one could assume that mental breakdowns present themselves in the same way both when women tried everything in their power to oppose their own “natural” place in the world, but also when they were not able to successfully align to their prescribed roles. In short, a woman might be deemed mad whether she acts out her feminine characteristics, typical of her gender, (e.g. depression, anxiousness, and suicide attempts) or when she completely rejects them, trying to become an independent and intellectually active human being. Therefore, female insanity acquires a double meaning when analyzed in the context of the relation between opposite sexes: madness could be both identified as “one of the wrongs of women”, wanting to evade the social construction reserved for the weaker sex – confining themselves to the roles of mothers, wives, and daughters – and as “the essential feminine nature” which clashes with male rationality. (Showalter, 1987, p.10)

This is the case of one of the most famous women writers, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the author of the first piece of feminist literature, *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do? I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal - having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition. I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus - but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. (Perkins Gilman, 1892, p.1-2)

In her, both causes of madness are heavily influencing the state of her well-being. After having given birth to a baby girl in 1885, she plunged into a depressive spiral. Diagnosed with postpartum depression, which made her “domestically disabled,” she was unfit to care for her newborn daughter. Given that being unable to tend the house indirectly meant that she was refusing her natural feminine aim, she blamed herself for her sudden craziness. She never thought that what she was feeling and experiencing at that time was the only way to unintentionally rebel against those same feminine, traditional standards that society pressured her into fulfilling. What is more interesting is that when she decided to leave her husband and daughter to spend the winter with her friends, she ironically wrote: “From the moment the wheels began to turn, the train move, I felt better.” (Tuttle, Kessler, 2011, p.162)

Contemporary to the rise of the group of the *New Women*, thanks to which females started to break free from the limited roles offered within their familial context and wished to finally express their true identities, the convergence between women and madness becomes a topic of interest within the literary field. In the twentieth century, the Romantic stereotype of the mad genius, whose price to pay for the creation of beautiful pieces is inevitably madness, began applying to women writers too. As a matter of fact, Bushfield suggests that the correlation between genius and madness becomes “somewhat less

exclusively perceived as a male attribute - at least in certain spheres of creativity.”
(Bushfield, 1994, p.272)

The debate between femininity and creativity reaches its highest point in diaries and autobiographies of “neurotic” women writers. Literary symbols such as Sylvia Plath and Alda Merini could not survive just as “women,” they needed to express themselves beyond their assigned roles of wives and mothers, by becoming accomplished writers. For these women, as we will see in the analysis of *The Bell Jar* and *L'altra verità*, madness and hospitalization can both be considered as the failed attempt at trying to come to terms with their femininity, as well as the striving for intellectual independence. It was the perception of the mutual exclusiveness of these roles – that of wife and writer – that, eventually, drove them mad. One could even argue that their “madness” might be interpreted as both the cause and the consequence of their social situation. In the end, both insanity and experiences of confinement are symbols of the feminine experience, as punishments for being female as well as desiring not to be.

CHAPTER TWO: SYLVIA PLATH and ALDA MERINI.

2.1. The Life of Sylvia Plath.

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1932 to Aurelia Schober, an Austrian American teacher and Otto Plath, a German professor of biology. Her parents have been extremely influential throughout her life, at the point of highlighting how she felt that “in her parents lay the root of her anxieties.” (Clark, 2020, p.30) Plath, like many other writers, deployed her parents as an important fictional resource. It becomes therefore necessary to analyze the context of her parents’ meeting before delving into Sylvia’s biography.

Otto and Aurelia met in 1929, while he was teaching German, and she was a master’s degree student in English and German at Boston University. One would be surprised at seeing how Aurelia – depicted by Sylvia as a strict adherent to patriarchal standards of femininity – was a highly educated and refined woman. Indeed, Aurelia has for long suggested that Sylvia inherited her literary gift, sharing a special intellectual bond between them.

The path toward their marriage, however, was not smooth. Otto Plath was already married to Lydia and had to divorce from her before marrying Aurelia. For this reason, Otto and Aurelia rushed to Nevada in 1932 to obtain a formal divorce from Lydia and, on that same day, they got married.

Once they settled down, Aurelia was forced to deal with the expectations society imposed upon her. She was forced to give up her career as a teacher of English and German to become a full-time housekeeper. Later in her life, whilst editing *Letters Home* (1975), she admitted that her expectations of married life and those of her husband did not exactly match. (Clark, 2020, p.78) She was twenty years younger than him, and therefore accustomed to a different lifestyle. As a third-generation American woman, she acquired

a certain degree of independence, Otto instead expected her to adhere to her prescribed duty.

She resented the fact that he commandeered the dining room table as his desk for a year while he was writing 'Insect Societies,' not allowing anyone to move a single book or paper. (Clark, 2020, p.59)

Sylvia, born on 27 October 1932, was Aurelia and Otto's first child. Their second, Warren, was born just two and a half years later. Suffering from frequent asthma attacks and pneumonia during his childhood, Warren required constant attention and care from their parents. As a consequence, Sylvia spent most of her time by herself, displaying her artistic talents at the age of three to make herself seen by Otto.

Nonetheless Otto, the Nazi "bastard" described in her most famous poem *Daddy*, only seemed to care when Sylvia excelled. Described as a patriarchal tyrant, his health began to decline due to an advanced form of diabetes, soon after Warren's birth. Otto died in 1940 - when Sylvia was eight - of an embolism in the lung, a complication of his neglectfulness in handling diabetes.

When Otto died, Aurelia found herself the sole breadwinner in the family; "Here I was, a widow with two young children to support. I had a man's responsibilities, but I was making a single woman's salary." (Clark, 2020, p.84) Money was an issue for the family, Otto did not have a pension and the costs of his illness and funeral exhausted any spare savings. Aurelia's parents moved in with them to help her with childcare whilst Aurelia began working as a substitute teacher to sustain her entire family. Sylvia's mother devoted all her time and attention to her children, trying her best to allow them every opportunity available, even at the price of overworking herself.

Their troubled, yet close relationship has been the inspiration for most of Plath's literary works, especially *The Bell Jar* (1963). Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Sylvia wanted to alleviate her mother's grief by being a good daughter. Though Sylvia, feeling

that academic success and winning prizes were the only sure way for her to win her mother's approval, outperformed herself each time to the point of exhaustion. However multifaceted their relationship was, Sylvia Plath seems to portray only one version of Aurelia in her literary work, that of a meddler in her daughter's life, a mother who does her best to remind her daughter she was not popular, wealthy, and modest enough. Despite Sylvia's apparent distaste towards her mother, sources close to the family defended Aurelia from a wave of hatred directed at her, after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, for having treated Sylvia poorly. Sylvia's childhood and college friends claimed that whatever Aurelia did, it was all for her daughter's benefit. Moreover, Warren, Sylvia's brother, did not think that his sister was forced by her mother to overwork herself in the literary world; "Sylvia didn't need any pushing." (Clark, 2020, p.52)

In 1942, after Otto's financially devastating death, Aurelia moved her whole family to the suburbs of Boston, in hopes of ensuring a better education for her children. Aurelia chose this suburban small town because it offered, at the time needed, a town-funded scholarship to the renowned Wellesley College. Together with her academic success (she had been an A-grade student during her school years), it was at this time that Sylvia started establishing herself as a talented writer and artist. By the time they moved to Wellesley, she had been writing and sending out publications for about eight years. Only eight months after her father's death, she published her first poem, simply titled *Poem* (1941), in the *Boston Herald*. Her perseverance in sending out manuscripts and poems to local magazines, in spite of rejection, was her greatest strength. Her willingness and determination to make herself heard, noticed by the literary community was one of her distinguishing traits throughout her short life.

Whilst living in Wellesley, the Plaths came to know the Nortons, a Boston university family who has been extremely influential throughout Sylvia's life. Mildred Norton and her son, Dick, will later inspire Sylvia to write two of the most crucial characters in her only novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). Mildred had been a student in Otto's class before she graduated from Boston University. Despite having obtained, for a woman of her age, the

highest degree of education (she graduated with a master's degree in English), Mildred firmly claimed that women should not work outside the home. Plath will later mock her domestic conservatism in *The Bell Jar*, transforming her into a caricature of the 1950s American approach towards marriage and womanhood. The Nortons had three boys: Perry, Dick, and David. Sylvia became immediately close to Perry; however, it was Dick who caught her attention. As a matter of fact, Mildred and Aurelia promised each other that they would get Dick and Sylvia to marry one day. Despite the mothers' failed attempt at keeping their children together, Sylvia and Dick dated for most of their adolescence. This troubled relationship and especially Dick's self-righteous ideals played a formative role in Sylvia's life and art.

Money was a constant concern for the Plaths. Sylvia, living in a town in which people were obsessed with money and status, felt the pressure of adjusting to an unaffordable reality. Louise Giesey White, a fellow Wellesley citizen who knew Sylvia when she was young, said:

“I did not think of her as ‘poor.’ But her mother worked. None of our mothers worked... She was probably more vulnerable than people knew. Vulnerable about class, and those distinctions.”
(Clark, 2020, p.107)

The majority of those who lived in Wellesley owned mansions with servants; Sylvia instead lived in a small house in which she was even forced to share a room with her mother. Because of her mother's iffy finances, Sylvia felt that her duty was to help her family by accepting little work opportunities. When Plath was attending seventh grade, she helped around school, by dusting the school offices for a scant dollar. But she did not stop there. Despite her awareness of being exploited, she took up every opportunity possible; housecleaning and babysitting were her most frequent occupations. However, when Sylvia began to disclose typical symptoms of fatigue, Aurelia immediately released

her from her chores so that she could focus on the improvement of her intellectual abilities.

In 1950 Sylvia Plath graduated from high school as the first in her class. Curiously enough, however, Sylvia was not awarded the “Best Girl Student” prize and, expectedly, felt extremely bothered by it. (Clark, 2020, p.187). In that same year, Sylvia has been accepted and awarded a full tuition scholarship to Smith College, fulfilling her own and her mother’s dreams. Sylvia received most of her grants from Olive Higgins Prouty (portrayed by Philomena Guinea in *The Bell Jar*), a renowned novelist in the 1950s, who immediately realized Sylvia’s talent and decided to take her under her wing. Mrs. Prouty’s scholarship of \$1,250 was the largest ever awarded at Smith College, and allowed Sylvia, for the first time in her life, to not feel the financial pressure that would prevent her from giving her best academically. However prestigious this position was, Smith College heralded a period of extreme anguish for examination and self-judgment for Sylvia. Smith College was a demanding and competitive university, in which students felt a constant need to succeed. Having too many people who believed in her and helped her fulfill her dreams, weighed heavy on her mental well-being. For this reason, she was determined to make the best out of her Smith years, focusing on creating connections and making a name for herself.

Although Smith College fostered and supported women’s ambition, it was still founded on conservative Christian principles. In the 1950s, women with higher educations were encouraged to give up on their ambitions and spend the rest of their lives fulfilling their domestic duties. Adlai E. Stevenson, the Democratic Illinois governor in office at that time, was called to deliver at the all-female Smith College the commencement address in Plath’s graduation year (1955). He urged the gifted, ambitious young women who were graduating that day to focus their energies on their homes.

I think there is much you can do about our crisis in the humble role of housewife [...] This assignment for you, as wives and mothers, has great advantages. In the first place, it is home—you

can do it in the living room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hand. If you're really clever, maybe you can even practice your saving arts on that unsuspecting man while he's watching television! [...] But even more important is the fact, surely, that what you have learned and can learn will fit you for the primary task of making homes and whole human beings in whom the rational values of freedom, tolerance, charity, and free inquiry can take root. (Stevenson, 1955)

This passage shows us how American society was not interested in women's quest for self-fulfillment and determination. These pressures haunted Plath's life repeatedly, reaching their highest point in Esther Greenwood's mental breakdown in *The Bell Jar*, where the impossibility of reconciling a professional life with the expectations of marriage and childbearing will, in the end, break her. As a matter of fact, Aurelia highlights that, in her high school years, Sylvia was aware of "the prejudice boys built up among themselves about 'brainy' girls." (Plath & Schober Plath, 1999, p.38) One of Plath's friends from England recalls that after Sylvia got married to Ted Hughes, she admitted: "Jane, you can't imagine what a relief it is to be free of that dreadful social pressure." (Gill, 2008, p.5) Women were forced to deal with the contradictory and incompatible requirements of being both clever and attractive, to strive for the highest achievements possible, yet keeping always in mind that their complete fulfillment would be reached only through marriage and children.

Sylvia entered college with a greed for knowledge and social recognition. On her first day, she was approached by students working at the *Smith Review* who offered her an editorship position at the university's newspaper. She was already well-known to her peers; her reputation clearly preceded her. Her professors too were aware of her immense talent and encouraged her to write and take up extra classes. However, Sylvia felt burdened by the high expectations that were set upon her. She was particularly worried that she would let down her professors if she did not perform the best she could.

Overwhelmed by her weighty curriculum and the prospect of failing, Sylvia confessed to Aurelia her inability to sleep and her troubled state of mind:

Today has been utterly hell-hot, sunny, and I had 4 hours of classes this morning & one this afternoon. My desk is loaded with books, all the classrooms are on the third floor, and I am physically & mentally exhausted. (Plath, 2017, p.185)

Wishing to go back to domestic peacefulness, something had shifted in Sylvia's state of mind. In October 1951, her *Journals* entries were characterized by a troubled state of mind, for which she used words such as "without identity: faceless," "mad," and "a knot of nerves, without identity." (Plath, 2000, p.27) Sylvia drove herself too hard, she was afraid of time passing by without having achieved anything, of not performing well enough.

What is more, Sylvia felt she did not belong to the all-female community of Smith College. As much as she wanted to fit in, she scorned those girls who felt that the university of her dreams was an expensive finishing school, in which they had to focus all their energies on dating the wealthiest eligible bachelor. One of Sylvia's college friends, Janet Salter Rosenberg admitted, "I remember Sylvia telling me with great resentment that the biggest problem these people had was which fur coat to wear on a date." (Clark, 2020, p.202) Feeling the only truly intellectual woman at Smith, Sylvia lacked a sense of community, which was detrimental to her well-being. The only "true" friend she found was Ann Davidow. They used to spend their time together studying in the library and engaging in meaningful conversation. Ann, however, was just as troubled as Sylvia. In December 1951, Ann contemplated suicide because of her growing depression and never went back to Smith. Sylvia was, once again, all alone in her troubles. As a matter of fact, after Ann's departure, Sylvia stopped writing her journal and admitted:

My mind is, to use a disgustingly obvious simile, like a wastebasket full of waste paper; bits of hair, and rotting apple

cores. I am feeling depressed from being exposed to so many lives [...] I've got to admire someone to really like them deeply - to value them as friends. It was that way with Ann: I admired her wit, her riding, her vivacious imagination - all the things that made her the way she was. I could lean on her as she leaned on me. Together the two of us could face anything - only not quite anything, or she would be back. And so she is gone, and I am bereft for awhile. (Plath, 2000, p.216)

Sylvia's mental health declined rapidly. Depression was devouring her, to the point that rumors spread in the dorm halls that she had "locked herself in a dormitory kitchenette and turned on the gas oven." (Clark, 2020, p.276)

After a period of editorial disappointments and latent depression, Sylvia Plath wrote the most important creative accomplishment of her university years, *Sunday at the Mintons* (1952), with which she earned the first prize (\$500) in *Mademoiselle's* college fiction contest. Plath saw this fictional short story as an artistic turning point. In May 1953, *Mademoiselle*, struck by Sylvia's immense talent, offered her an internship position as guest managing editor in New York. *Mademoiselle*, at that time, was considered the most prestigious women's magazine, specifically designed for smart, young girls with higher education and refined taste.

During her four-week stay in the city that never sleeps, Sylvia came to abhor her internship and the fashion industry as a whole. The New York environment provided her with the seeds for her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, published under a pseudonym in 1963, a few months before her suicide. Her protagonist, Esther Greenwood, perfectly embodies Sylvia Plath's disillusion with the greedy fashion environment. Plath described Esther's stay at *Mademoiselle*, as a period in which she was "beginning to crack under the pressures of the fashion magazine world which seems increasingly superficial and artificial. She is unable to connect with her destiny, or even to imagine it." (Clark, 2020, p.308) During her internship, Sylvia was depressed, and suffocated by the expectations that her superior Miss Abels pressed upon her. On her last day at

Mademoiselle, she confessed to Warren, her brother, that she was worn out by the exhausting days at the office and the evenings out in society. She felt dirty and corrupted, in need of “bleaching, airing.” Her weariness is particularly visible in the news about her return home: “I will let you know what train my coffin will come in on [...] oh God, it is unbelievable to think all this at once... my mind will split open.” (Plath & Schober Plath, 1999, p.641-643)

When Sylvia arrived back home in Wellesley on June 27, Aurelia and her grandmother were upset to find her exhausted and hollow-eyed. Sylvia’s stay in the New York environment left her unsure of herself and disoriented about her future and career. Already emotionally unstable, and on the verge of a mental breakdown, Sylvia was about to receive perhaps the worst news of her life thus far. Plath had applied for Frank O’Connor’s creative writing class at Harvard Summer School before interning at *Mademoiselle*; but unfortunately, her application had been rejected by the committee. Plath applied to the course with *Sunday at the Mintons* (1952), her most renowned story, and still, she was not able to gain access to his course. What Plath did not know was that she was rejected because her writing was, according to O’Connor, too advanced for his introductory-level class. (Clark, 2020, p.332) Aurelia, however, noticed Sylvia’s “look of shock and utter despair,” to the point that she was worried about her daughter: “it alarmed me [...] Sylvia was too demanding of herself.” (Plath & Schober Plath, 1999, p.123) Sylvia, thus, after having abandoned the prospect of studying and refining her writing, decided she would have used the time off from college the best she could. Similarly to Esther in *The Bell Jar* (1963), Sylvia thought that she could spend her “quiet” summer by writing, learning shorthand from Aurelia to develop a practical skill that would help her if her writing would not be successful, and focusing on researching and studying for her Bachelor’s Degree thesis’ topic, James Joyce. Instead, she experienced a rush of depression and insomnia which made her unable to carry out her duties.

You are an inconsistent and very frightened hypocrite: you wanted time to think, to find out about yourself, your ability to

write, and now that you have it: practically 3 months of godawful time, you are paralyzed, shocked, thrown into a nausea, a stasis. (Plath, 2000, p.161)

Her two *Journals* entries of July 1953 record Sylvia's sense of confusion and horror in understanding that she was finding it impossible to carry out the easiest daily tasks. Her lack of goals and incapability to write were what she was mostly worried about. She was terrified of letting down her sponsors and losing her honors scholarship. At that time, Sylvia was already committing self-harm: Aurelia noticed on July 14 "red razor gashes" on her daughter's legs. (Plath & Schober Plath, 1999, p.124) Aurelia, terrified at the prospect of her daughter's imminent suicide attempt, booked a psychiatric appointment with Dr. Thornton on July 21. Sylvia despised her psychiatrist, describing him in *The Bell Jar* as a negligent, uninterested doctor, who recommended her shock treatment after having seen her only two times. Aurelia complained in *Letters Home* how she felt she had been abandoned by everyone at the time of Sylvia's diagnosis, and blamed herself for her daughter's condition: "I felt so inadequate, so alone." (Plath & Schober Plath, 1999, p.124)

On July 29, Sylvia Plath was hospitalized at the Valley Head Hospital, where she was prescribed and administered four electroshock treatments. After having woken up from her therapy, she was prescribed some sleeping pills and was sent back home. None ever asked her what was troubling her mind. It appears that this was the exact moment in which Aurelia and Sylvia's mother-daughter relationship underwent its first major crisis. Sylvia repeatedly told Aurelia she would have killed herself ("If this should ever happen to me again, I *will* kill myself.") if she was forced to undergo shock therapy again. Aurelia, however, did not listen. Rather, it has been reported that she forced Sylvia into the car to bring her to the appointment and authorized Dr. Thornton to administer it. (Clark, 2020, p.346) Feeling that ECT treatments were nothing but violence towards her persona, on August 24, Sylvia attempted suicide by a pill overdose. She was terrified at the prospect of living a life confined in a mental hospital, constantly undergoing useless and

permanently damaging treatments. Before committing suicide, Sylvia confessed to her friend Eddie that she saw her future as:

[...] an eternity of hell for the rest of my life in a mental hospital, and I was going to make use of my last ounce of free choice and choose a quick clean ending. I figured that in the long run it would be more merciful and inexpensive to my family; instead of an indefinite and expensive incarceration of a favorite daughter in the cell of a State San, instead of the misery and disillusion of sixty odd years of mental vacuum, of physical squalor — I would spare them all by ending everything at the height of my so-called career...still a memory at least that would be worthwhile. (Plath, 2017, p.655-66)

Alone in the house, Sylvia broke into Aurelia's room and swallowed forty of her mother's sleeping pills in the basement before passing out unconscious. The newspapers, which were alerted by the police after Sylvia's supposed disappearance, devoted their front-page headlines to Sylvia's case: "BEAUTIFUL SMITH GIRL MISSING AT WELLESLEY," and "TOP RANKING STUDENT AT SMITH MISSING FROM WELLESLEY HOME." (Gill, 2008, p.6) Only two days later (August 26), Warren found Sylvia in the basement of their home, drenched in vomit because she had taken too many pills. Moreover, after having woken up, noticing that she was still alive, she made one last desperate attempt by banging her face against a stone, in hopes of knocking herself out.

After having spent eleven days at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, a public hospital, Sylvia was hospitalized on September 14, at McLean Hospital, "the best mental hospital in the U.S.", according to Plath. (Clark, 2020, p.360) Having spent all their available money, Aurelia was forced to ask Mrs. Prouty (Sylvia's benefactress, whose life was just as troubled as Sylvia's: she was forced to stay in a mental hospital too) if she could help Sylvia by financially supporting her transfer to a better hospital, fearing that the "locked doors and other patients" at that mental hospital, would have a "detrimental effect" on the "sensitive Sylvia." (Clark, 2020, p.354) Prouty assured that she would have covered all

the expenses for Sylvia to have the best psychiatric care. There, Sylvia was treated by Dr. Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse Beuscher, the renowned Dr. Nolan in *The Bell Jar*. Sylvia, after having been “traumatized” by Dr. Thornton, felt she finally found a female doctor to whom she could easily talk to. Dr. Beuscher will be present all through Sylvia’s short existence. As a matter of fact, it was Dr. Beuscher who convinced Sylvia to get a divorce from her husband, Ted Hughes, and to whom Sylvia wrote about her suicidal attempts days before her actual suicide.

Diagnosed with severe depression, (Silverman, 2015, p.31) Sylvia was administered both insulin treatment and electroshock therapy during her stay at McLean Hospital. Despite Sylvia’s resistance to shock treatment, Dr. Beuscher’s prescribed therapy seemed to have finally healed her.

Nobody can explain why Sylvia got over her depression after one or two shock treatments. She just didn’t want to have any more shock treatments, so she reorganized herself inside so she wouldn’t have any more. I never saw it happen with anybody else. (Clark, 2020, p.378)

After her “miraculous” recovery, Sylvia Plath was discharged from the mental hospital in December 1953, allowing her to return to college in time to attend her second semester. Back at Smith, she successfully graduated in 1955, obtaining a Fulbright Scholarship to Cambridge University.

At Newnham College, one of the two female colleges at Cambridge, Sylvia studied philosophy and modern literature, all while actively publishing poetry and writing articles for *Varsity*, Cambridge’s most renowned student newspaper. Whilst being externally perceived as in control of her life, Sylvia’s mental health was always on the verge of deteriorating. In her *Journals*, she admits:

The fear that all the edges and shapes and colors of the real world that have been built up again so painfully with such real love can

dwindle in a moment of doubt, and ‘suddenly go out’ the way the moon would in the Blake poem. (Plath, 2000, p.198-99)

Whilst battling with her mental health, Sylvia met her future husband, Ted Hughes, in February 1956. Born in 1930, Ted Hughes was a British scholar who had graduated from Cambridge two years prior to their meeting. At that time, he was working as a reader for a film company in London; but he used to return to Cambridge frequently to meet up with his former peers. (Gill, 2008, p.7) On that occasion, Ted met Sylvia at the launch party of his new poetry magazine, the *St. Botolph's Review*. Having instantly connected, Sylvia and Ted married in London in June 1956, a few months after their first meeting. Their marriage was rushed, just as Aurelia and Otto's had been. Some would already be able to trace some similarities to Aurelia and Otto's marriage, especially in the academic setting of their first meetings. What is more, later in her *Journals*, it is evident that Sylvia too had tried to embrace the role of a perfect housewife in front of her acquaintances. Feeling suffocated about her condition and the injustice of her assigned role, she frequently complained in the privacy of her *Journals*, all the while maintaining the façade of a perfect wife in her daily engagements.

From 1956 to 1957, the couple stayed in Cambridge; Sylvia carried on with her Fulbright scholarship and Ted taught English in a local school. At first, the literary couple decided to keep their marriage a secret, fearing that Sylvia might lose her scholarship if anyone knew about their relationship. In reality, when the news leaked out, she was offered by her scholarship's benefactors special compensations to prevent her “convenient” literary marriage from failing. (Gill, 2008, p.7)

After Sylvia completed her degree at Cambridge University in June 1957, the couple moved to the United States because Sylvia was offered a teaching position by her alma mater, Smith College. Plath, however, soon understood that her teaching position was getting in the way of her writing and complained in her diaries about the impossibility of completing both tasks successfully. (“The year I stop teaching & start writing.” and “More and more I realize how I must stop teaching & devote myself to writing [...]” (Plath,

2000, p.253-303)) The demands of the roles of teacher and writer were exhausting. For this reason, in 1958, the couple decided to quit their academic positions and write full-time for a year, economically relying on prizes and royalties.

In February 1958 Sylvia, troubled by a sudden inability to write, enrolled in Lowell's creative writing seminar at Boston University, with other celebrated authors such as Anne Sexton. Lowell, together with Sexton, encouraged Sylvia to write something that came from within her, something that was closely related to her personal experience. In fact, Lowell thought that modern poetry needed to be "revitalized from an inner source, whether traumatic personal experience or nature's primal life force." (Clark, 2020, p.675) Dianne Middlebrook Wood, Anne's biographer, wrote that this creative writing group used to meet frequently, mostly engaging in "hilarious conversations comparing their suicides and talking about their psychiatrist." (Middlebrook, 1992, p.107) Despite having always been critical of Lowell for his "mental instability", Hughes praised him after Sylvia's suicide for pushing her to write *The Bell Jar*. "Without the combined operation of you and Anne Sexton Sylvia would never have written what she finally did." (Clark, 2020, p.688)

It was during this literary period, characterized by a succession of prolific writing and rejections, (Gill, 2008, p.9) that *The Bell Jar* was first conceived. On June 13, Sylvia read two mental health articles in the monthly issue of *Cosmopolitan* and immediately thought:

I must write one about a college girl suicide. THE DAY I DIED.
And a story, a novel even. Must get out SNAKE PIT [*sic*]. There
is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I
don't relive, recreate it. (Plath, 2000, p.394)

Yet, at that moment, she refrained from writing it because she was self-conscious about her prose writing and feared she could not handle the rejection of a long manuscript after having dedicated all her "time, sweat, and tears" to it. (Gill, 2008, p.9) October entries in

her *Journals* specifically reported that she was actively thinking of writing a semi-autobiography, months after her first approach to prose writing:

Why should a poet be a novelist? Why not? [...] To be honest with what I know and have known. To be true to my own weirdnesses. Record. I used to be able to convey feelings, scenes of youth; life so complicated now. Work at it. (Plath, 2000, p.414)

Contemporary to Sylvia's first approach to prose writing, she was referred to a gynecologist because of period-related issues. In June, a doctor told her that she was not ovulating properly, leaving her with the terrifying prospect of barrenness. To think of herself as a sterile woman, to belong to that same category of women whom she always scorned in her poems, haunted her: "This is the one thing in the world I can't face. It is worse than a horrible disease [...] All joy and hope is gone." (Plath, 2000, p.399) Much to her surprise, the prognosis soon turned out to be completely wrong. After having had her tubes flushed, she became pregnant in July, days after her misleading diagnosis. (Clark, 2020, p.695) In the last months of 1959, Sylvia and Ted left the United States for England, in anticipation of the birth of their first child.

On April 1, 1960, Sylvia and Ted's first child, Frieda, was born. The months in London were gratifying for Sylvia; she mingled with influential writers, such as T. S. Eliot, and secured a British publisher for her writings, Faber and Faber. In October of the same year, Plath published her first collection of poems, *The Colossus* (1960).

Plath became pregnant for the second time in 1961, but immediately miscarried and was brought to the emergency room for an appendectomy. By interpreting letters Sylvia wrote to Dr. Beuscher immediately after her miscarriage, some of her major critics have speculated that she was a victim of domestic abuse, going as far as implying that her miscarriage was the result of having been beaten up by Hughes. (Kean, 2017) However traumatic this experience was, Plath gave birth at the beginning of 1962 to Nicholas, her second child. Sylvia and Ted's marriage, however, was not going to last long. Aurelia

went to London to visit the couple in the summer of 1962 and soon sensed that something was wrong, the “anxiety in the air” was palpable. (Plath & Schober Plath, 1999, p.458)

The downfall of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath’s marriage happened in that same summer of 1962. Sylvia and Ted rented their vacant London flat to another literary couple, David and Assia Wevill. The relationship between Ted and Assia, however, was not that of simple acquaintances. Plath’s poem, *Words Heard, by Accident, over the Phone*, perfectly describes the feeling of how Assia’s phone calls to Ted, intercepted by Sylvia, had a disruptive power within.

[...]
What are these words, these words?
They are plopping like mud.
O god, how shall I ever clean the phone table?
They are pressing out of the many-holed earpiece, they are
looking for a
listener.
Is he here?

Now the room is ahiss. The instrument
Withdraws its tentacle.
But the spawn percolate in my heart. They are fertile.
Muck funnel, muck funnel —
You are too big. They must take you back! (Plath, 1981)

Sylvia, aware that this situation was threatening her psychological well-being, decided to file for a divorce and move to Ireland for the winter, hoping to relax and write.

I hope you will not be too surprised or shocked when I say I am going to try to get a legal separation from Ted. I do not believe in divorce and would never think of this, but I simply cannot go on living the degraded and agonized life I have been living, which has stopped my writing and just about ruined my sleep and my health. I thought I would take almost anything to give the children

an illusion of home life, but I feel a father who is a liar and an adulterer and utterly selfish and irresponsible is worse than the absence of a father, and I cannot spend the best years of my life waiting week after week for the chance returns of someone like this. [...] I want a clean break, so I can breathe and laugh and enjoy myself again. (Plath, 2018, p. 813-14)

Notwithstanding the difficulties, this period proved unexpectedly fruitful in terms of writing. According to *Letters Home* (1975), Sylvia confessed to her mother that, at that time, she was writing “like mad – have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me.” (Plath & Schober Plath, 1999, p.466) The poems (e.g. *Lady Lazarus* and *Daddy*) she was writing at that time would later appear in *Ariel*, published posthumously in 1965, her most famous poetry collection which will make Sylvia an icon in the literary field. This extreme drive, however, further emphasizes her inability to reconcile her choice of profession with the demands of motherhood: “I am fascinated by the polarities of muse-poet and mother housewife. When I was happy domestically I felt a gag in my throat.” (Gill, 2008, p.12)

In January 1963, Sylvia Plath published *The Bell Jar*, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. Although the book was met by the literary environment with mostly positive reviews, it has been reported that she was rather disappointed by the reception of her first novel. (Clark, 2020, p.1662) Sylvia was, once again, entering the well-known spiral of depression. Dr. Beuscher, preoccupied by Sylvia’s state of mind, advised her to contact a local psychiatrist. Dr. Horder saw Sylvia for the first time in January, and every day in February, the month in which she committed her suicide. Differently from her Boston male psychiatrists, Dr. Horder seemed much more understanding and empathetic. It has been speculated that Dr. Horder was particularly empathetic towards writers because he was an artist too and, like Sylvia, struggled with depression. At first, he administered Sylvia antidepressants but soon realized that her despair was not getting any better. What is more, it has been highlighted how the interaction between the antidepressant she was prescribed, and the medicine she was taking because of a respiratory illness, had

“significantly worsened her depression and anxiety; and she had just started taking an antidepressant, which could, in its initial phase, increase anxiety and suicidal thoughts.” (Clark, 2020, p.1063) Dr. Horder advised Sylvia to seek admission to a psychiatric hospital, but she refused. The prospect of entering, once again, a mental institution, destroyed Sylvia’s already precarious well-being.

On Monday, February 11, Sylvia locked her children’s room, opened their windows, and taped around the edges of her door. On her front door, a small piece of paper had been glued, which stated: “PLEASE CALL DR. HORDER AT PRI 3804.” (Clark, 2020, p.1081) The nurse, who was supposed to help Sylvia take care of her children, found her dead, with her head in the oven, a few hours later from her suicide. Her autopsy’s verdict stated, “Carbon monoxide poisoning while suffering from depression. Did kill herself.” (Clark, 2020, p.1090) Speculations around her death suggest that she was not probably ready to die, but simply hoped her nurse would find her just in time for her to achieve a kind of “rebirth,” hinted in her suicidal poem *Lady Lazarus*. Moreover, according to Winfred Davies, Sylvia was simply trying to scare Ted, who was spending his time with Sue Alliston, another woman, whilst Sylvia was taking care of their children: “She was too fond of the children to have made up her mind to do it if she didn’t think she would be rescued before it was too late.” (Clark, 2020, p.1085)

2.2. The Life of Alda Merini.

Alda Giuseppina Angela Merini was born on March 21, 1931, in Milan, Italy, in the years of Benito Mussolini's fascist government. Alda's father, Nemo Merini, was an insurance agent, and her mother, Emilia Painelli, completely dedicated herself to the role of housewife. Alda was the second of four siblings: three girls, and one boy. Her tone towards her siblings had always been cold, detached but, overall, their relationship was "good." In an interview, she revealed that she did not even remember whether she was Nemo and Emilia's second or third child: "Eravamo in quattro: un maschio e tre femmine, una sorella è morta giovane. Io ero la seconda, o la terza. Buffo, non me lo ricordo." (Merini, 1995, p.135)

The relationship between Alda and her parents was multifaceted. Nemo, her father, was "un uomo buono, ma debole, un inguaribile romantico" (Merini qtd. In Alunni, 2009, p.9), her first teacher ("A due anni mi mettevo a tavolino con mio padre che, con pazienza infinita, stringeva tra le mie mani la prima matita." Merini, 1994, p.17) and supporter. In her biography *Reato di vita* (1994) Alda recalled that, despite not having had a literary education, Nemo would encourage her love for literature and writing. Her first book, an Italian dictionary, was gifted by her father as a sign of support for her ambitions. Through their mutual love for the Italian language, their father-daughter relationship developed day by day. Alda wrote how she used to remember longing for her father's arrival home after work so that they could study together the meaning of ten words each night. (Merini, 1994, p.13) Nemo not only passed down his interest in literature to his daughter, but he, being a tenor, encouraged Alda to attend music school to become a talented pianist. Emilia, on the other hand, was a charming and beautiful woman, yet unable to care for her family. Despite being the daughter of two former teachers and a woman of a "naturale cultura e di grande buon senso," (Merini, 1994, p.13) Emilia has always held Alda's gift for poetry back. She used to forbid Alda to enter her father's library and touch his

“forbidden books,” because she did not want her daughter to focus on useless things that would divert her from her domestic duties.

Emilia was a strong-willed, quick-tempered woman who imposed strict discipline on her children. Alda showed how her relationship with her mother elicited her contradictory feelings: although Alda truly loved and admired her mother, she used to hate her because she constantly minimized her talents. In this way, “non creava intorno a me quell’alone di leggenda che avrei voluto per stupire mio padre.” (Merini, 1994, p. 17-8)

Despite the “conflicting” relationship she had with her parents (Merini, 1995, p.81), Alda’s childhood was peaceful, yet she found it difficult to go out and live in the outside world because she was only interested in her writing.

La mia infanzia non ha nulla di caratteristico: un’infanzia apparentemente, esteriormente comune ma, data la mia sensibilità acuta e forse già esasperata, ricca di toni a volte angosciosi, melanconici. Sono sempre stata isolata, chiusa in me stessa, pochissimo compresa anche dai miei [...] A scuola, parlo dei corsi elementari, sono sempre stata prima e senza fatica perché lo studio fu sempre una mia parte vitale. (Merini qtd. in Spagnoletti, 1964, p.945)

In this small autobiographical excerpt, the close correlation between madness and her writing already laid its foundations. Alda was often sick as a child and, because of her poor health, she was obliged to seclude herself in the safety of her home. The only thing that kept her sane were her books, her “piccoli grandi amici.” (Merini qtd. in Alunni, 2009, p.11) It is during these days spent in isolation that Alda approached poetry for the first time, writing her first puerile hendecasyllables.

Because of her strong interest in studying and nurturing her education, Nemo signed Alda up to a female-only technical school, called *avviamento al lavoro*, for three years.

Mi ha usato una grossa violenza quando mi ha impedito di continuare gli studi che preferivo, e ha voluto che frequentassi una

scuola per sole signorine [...] diciamo che era una scuola molto educativa per sole donne. (Merini qtd. in Manni, 2005, p.13)

Alda was disappointed at her father's choice; she was confident that her talent was worthier than a "technical school" reserved only for female students who were forced by their parents to learn a profession. However, unfortunately, her school career was not going to last long.

When Alda was twelve, Italy was about to face the consequences of the infamous Second World War, and the devastating effects it had on the country were about to change the Merini's daily life. The Axis Rome-Berlin-Tokyo was permanently defeated in the Spring of 1942, making Milan and the rest of Italy's bigger cities, not a safe place anymore. In this period of dread and terror, Emilia realized that she was pregnant with Alda's youngest brother. Milan was deeply affected by the consequences of this humiliating loss all while going through the biggest carpet bombing it ever experienced. During this period, Alda lost her house and, most importantly, her father's "prohibited" library. Worried for their own lives, Alda's family decided to evacuate the big city to find peace in a smaller town nearby:

Il 14 ottobre un secondo bombardamento terrificante ci obbligò a lasciare Milano. Ci aggrappammo ai primi vagoni che transitavano da porta Genova ed approdammo alle risaie. [...] Arrivati nel Novarese ci buttammo per terra nei campi mentre le bombe fioccarono da tutte le parti. (Merini, 1994, p.25)

Alda's life, far from her hometown, changed drastically. To overcome the absence of basic goods, Alda was forced to work as a *mondina* (rice weeder) during the day and took piano lessons in her late evenings. She was exhausted, "uscivo al mattino a piedi scalzi e tornavo a sera tarda." (Merini qtd. in Alunni, 2009, p.14)

Despite the hunger and the lack of commodities she experienced during the war, Alda had always stated that the time she spent in the Milanese countryside was one of the happiest

periods of her life. (Merini, 1994, p.25) The families in the neighborhood were forced to provide for each other and the sense of community that developed was unlike any other place she previously lived. From the solitary and bashful little girl, Merini lived through her adolescence with a different state of mind: “Ero giovane e mi stavo facendo sempre più bella. I ragazzotti del paese mi facevano la corte e mia madre buttava dalla finestra catinelle d’acqua in piena note su quelli sfaccendati.” (Merini, 1994, p.25)

Back in Milan, the Merinis found their house destroyed. Notwithstanding the difficulties, Milan and the whole of Italy were pervaded by the joys of the *Liberazione*. The Italians were finally free from the yoke of Mussolini and the Fascist movement: everyone was euphoric, except for Alda. Forced to live in a basement on the *Naviglio* with other families, Alda’s state of mind started to progressively decline. Alda was suffering from a severe form of anorexia, which started during the war perhaps due to the lack of primary resources and was heightened soon after they moved back to Milan. As reported by Alda herself, the reason behind the worsening of her mental health was caused by the fact that her mother did not allow her to go back to school.

Quando per ragioni diverse non ho potuto iscrivermi alle scuole medie e anzi mi è stato giocoforza sospendere qualsiasi genere di studio, oltre a soffrirne terribilmente, ho avuto improvvisamente le prime manifestazioni di quello scompenso nervoso che doveva sfociare quasi per sete di equilibrio in forma di poesia personalissime. (Merini qtd. in Spagnoletti, 1964, p.784)

Her mother’s ban on the continuation of her studies had a deteriorating effect on Alda’s already fragile identity. What is more, Alda sought admission to the *Liceo Classico* behind her mother’s back, and, funnily enough, she was rejected because her knowledge of the Italian language was not enough for her to enroll in this institution. Together with her life-threatening anorexia, Alda had been afflicted for three years by a severe form of hysterical blindness. Troubled by her mental status, her family sought help at a mental

institution in Turin where Alda was treated by the best neurologists who realized her “sight” trouble did not depend on her physical being:

[...] per circa tre anni ho girato tutti gli oculisti, nessuno trovava niente finché mi hanno fatto quella cura magistrale del pentotal (a psychiatric drug), che è il siero della verità; me l’hanno fatta a Torino, il primario mi ha detto: Guardi, signorina, che lei ci vede benissimo. Sono scoppiata a piangere. Più che malattia posso dire la mia precarietà: ero una bambina molto emotiva, molto delicata, ero sempre ammalata, piacevo a stento: non ero un gran fiore di bambina. (Merini qtd. in Manni, 2005, p.15)

During her stay in Turin, Alda learnt for the first time the power of poetry within her: “Un giorno il dottor G. alle Molinette ebbe una pensata: mi mise in mano un libro e mi ordinò brutalmente di leggere. Lo guardai negli occhi e nacque dentro di me *La presenza di Orfeo...*” (Merini, 1994, p.22) From this moment on, poetry becomes her only means of salvation, her way of survival from her daily hardships and impending neurosis. The close interconnection between poetry and life has been the focus of her entire literary activity. Her immense talent for writing became her only way of escaping the social and cultural constraints that were imposed upon her. In this specific case, it can be interpreted as a way to cope with the imposed and abrupt end of her studies. Later in her life, her poetry will be her only way to survive the strict patriarchal roles imposed upon her and the violence she experienced in the mental asylum. (Alunni, 2009, p.15)

Back in Milan from her miraculous treatment in 1947, Alda seemed to have recovered completely. During those post-war years, Alda started working as a shorthand typist for different accounting firms. Curiously, both Alda Merini and Sylvia Plath were forced by their mothers to learn shorthand because it was seen as something useful, something practical that would help them find employment quite easily. Poetry, on the other hand, was not a paid profession. Indeed, Nemo, despite having always supported Alda’s

ambitions and education, killed Alda's excitement off when she received her first literary success:

Avevo quindici anni quando tornai a casa con la prima recensione a una mia poesia. Non stavo nella pelle per l'emozione. La portai subito a mio padre, la persona più cara, gridando: "Guarda, papà, che cosa scrive Spagnoletti di me." Lui, senza fiatare, me la strappò dalle mani e la fece in mille pezzi. Poi mi fissò negli occhi: "Ascoltami, cara, la poesia non dà il pane," mi disse serio. Era un uomo di buon senso. (Merini, 1995, p.131)

When Alda and her family moved to a bigger place in the *Navigli*, Alda became the neighbor of Giacinto Spagnoletti, a well-known Milanese poet and literary critic. Alda, only fifteen, mingled with a new literary society, that of *Via del Torchio*, where she got in contact with the most important and renowned poets of the 20th century, including Salvatore Quasimodo, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Maria Conti, and most importantly, Giorgio Manganelli. Maria Conti was impressed by Alda's age and maturity in her writing, though acknowledging in her an unbalanced state of mind: "A regolare il gioco [of her writing] erano le strutture sotterranee della sua psiche, già allora variamente turbata e spesso in cura da psichiatri: sicché quando stava male scriveva testi dal folgorante potere metaforico; quando stava bene, inviava [...] letterine." (Corti qtd. in Alunni, 2009, p.19) It is in this same literary environment that Alda's breakthrough as a poetry writer happened. Her first works were published thanks to the care of one of the most famous Italian poets, Eugenio Montale, in Spagnoletti's *Antologia della poesia italiana contemporanea 1909-1949*. Her first piece, *Il gobbo* (1950), exhibits how at nineteen, Alda was already capable of evoking through her powerful lyricism her deepest feelings. *Il gobbo* serves as a metaphor for the hardships she had to face whilst coping with her mother's pressure to be a good shorthand typist all while always thinking of writing in verse.

Giorgio Manganelli can be regarded as her true teacher and the man who had the most influence in her life. Through him, Alda learned how to perfect her writing and to develop a much deeper self-awareness. Alda and Giorgio had also been lovers for three years, from 1947 to 1949, up until Manganelli, already married and father to a daughter, fled to Rome to escape his domestic obligations. Manganelli's love left a permanent scar on Merini's life: "Quando Manganelli mi lasciò perché non potevamo sposarci io aspettavo un figlio da lui. Avevo sedici anni e lui era sposato." (Veroli, 2011, p.24) However difficult their relationship was, it was Giorgio who, in understanding Alda's extremely troubled mind, recommended she seek help by admitting herself to a private mental hospital, the *Villa Turro*.

Fra i sedici e i vent'anni Alda Merini era già esperta dei segreti della follia e della poesia; allora aperse un conto di fiducia in sé che più volte con gli improvvisi ritorni della malattia mentale la vita tentò di estinguerle. (Corti qtd. in Alunni, 2009, p.21)

Alda's threatening mental state lingered throughout her whole life, forcing her to seek help in mental asylums twenty-four times from 1965 to 1972. Her friends from the literary circle were terrified at Alda's mental instability, Manganelli was shocked by this whole situation and could not get over it. The main reason behind her hospitalization can be regarded as a reaction to the difficulties she was facing while trying to publish her first book: the printing process suddenly stopped due to lack of funds and Alda was well aware that she could not support the expenses of publishing by herself. Thankfully, her benefactress Ida Borletti, an Italian noblewoman, showed up and supported Alda economically, allowing her to publish her first collection of poems, *La presenza di Orfeo* (1953), deeply inspired by her first hospitalization in Turin for her sudden hysterical blindness. (Treccani, 2014)

On August 9, 1953, Alda was forced by her mother to marry Ettore Carniti, a laborer and trade unionist. Alda confessed she was attracted to Ettore because he was a practical

man, later a baker, unrelated to the literary field in which she thrived. The years which preceded her marriage to Ettore were extremely tormented. Alda refused to conform to the expectations that society had on women, she did not want to become a wife and mother. For this reason, she confessed to her parents that she wanted to become a nun and devote herself to a more contemplative existence. (Alunni, 2008, p.35-6)

Mia madre lasciò che mi sposassi prestissimo mentre si era opposta quando avevo chiesto di entrare in convento. Mio padre si oppose, ma lei fu molto decisa e disse giustamente che la vita in famiglia di una madre è molto più meritevole ed onerosa di quella dei Santi e non c'è grazia che possa illuminare una madre se non quella che viene direttamente da Dio. (Merini, 1994, p.27)

Alda's thirty-eight-year-long marriage with Ettore Carniti was plagued by her progressively damaging mental health. Ettore has witnessed Alda's struggle to reconcile her daily and literary tasks since the very beginning of their marriage ("Quando Madama Follia ci prende alla gola, quando si sogna, avviene fatalmente una sfocalizzazione della realtà: l'uomo cade in un panteismo divino, non capisce più quando è ora di adeguarsi al ritmo della vita o, come il filosofo, vi ha già rinunciato." Merini, 1994, p.28), going as far as to think that he perhaps was the sole reason behind his wife's insanity. In 1955, simultaneously to the publication of *Paura di Dio*, Alda gave birth to Emanuela, her first child. In 1958 her second daughter, Flavia, was born. After having given birth to her daughters, Alda felt abandoned and unloved by her husband, who was away from home most of the time: "Ettore andava sempre in giro, questo mi esasperava." (Merini, 1995, p.144). Perhaps because of this sense of abandonment, which will be later explored through *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*. (1997), Alda published *Tu sei Pietro*, dedicated to her daughters' pediatrician, for whom she felt unrequited love and admiration. *Tu sei Pietro* set forth Alda's twenty years of silence ("le mie labbra si sono chiuse," Merini, 2014, p.106), during which she was hospitalized in Milan's insane asylum, *Paolo Plini*. Troubled by the prospect of having to conciliate her two-faceted existence (that of housewife and writer) and the sudden death of both parents; Alda Merini

was hospitalized at the behest of Ettore who, scared of her violent disposition (according to Alda, she punched him whilst they were arguing, Merini, 1997, p.13), called an ambulance on her and made her go through the most violent and humiliating pain between 1964 and 1972. Alda Merini during her stay at *Paolo Plini* was diagnosed with schizophrenia, which could be interpreted as a never-ending spiral of alternating sickness and illusory health, during which she was able to return home to her wrecked family. Her homecomings were each time shorter because the domestic environment brought forth her deepest forms of depression: “Il dolore di ripiombare nel banale del vivere quotidiano.” (Merini, 1994, p.40) During these years, Alda gave birth to two other girls, Barbara and Simona. Her last two pregnancies happened inside the four walls of the mental hospital, and they seemed to have restored Alda’s faith in a possible future with her daughters: “Erano stati quelli i nove mesi più belli della mia vita.” (Merini, 1995, p.92)

Following her discharge in 1979, Alda was forced to learn how to live outside the mental hospital without any support. After fifteen years of forced hospitalization, she struggled to define herself as a fifty-year-old woman who never truly lived outside of the institution. In the meanwhile, Ettore got sick and died in 1981. Alda, once again, was left all alone in her sufferings. Neglected by her daughters and impoverished by the sudden death of her husband, Alda had to seek financial aid by turning, once again, to the power of her words. Canceled from the literary world around her because of her schizophrenia, Alda reached out to Michele Pierri, an elderly poet from Taranto, who expressed sympathy towards her unstable condition. In 1983, motivated by this unexpected love, Alda Merini published perhaps her most famous and renowned collection of poetry thus far: *La Terra Santa*. Through the Biblical analogy of the Holy Land, Alda Merini described the period in which she was forced to live through her mental illness at the psychiatric hospital *Paolo Plini*. According to Roberta Alunni, Alda’s bibliographer, *La Terra Santa* è “la rappresentazione di un collasso, mentale e fisico, di un mondo che non segue più regole umane ed emargina nella solitudine i più deboli.” (Alunni, 2009, p.64)

Ho conosciuto Gerico,
ho avuto anch'io la mia Palestina,
le mura del manicomio
erano le mura di Gerico
e una pozza di acqua infettata
ci ha battezzati tutti.
Lì dentro eravamo ebrei
e i Farisei in alto
e c'era anche il Messia
confuso dentro la folla:
un pazzo che urlava al Cielo
tutto il suo amore in Dio.

Noi tutti, branco di asceti,
eravamo come gli uccelli
e ogni tanto una rete
oscura ci imprigionava
ma andavamo verso la messe,
la messe di nostro Signore
e Cristo il Salvatore.

Fummo lavati e sepolti,
odoravamo di incenso.
E dopo, quando amavamo
ci facevano gli elettrochoc
perché, dicevano, un pazzo
non può amare nessuno.
Ma un giorno da dentro l'avello
anch'io mi sono ridestata
e anch'io come Gesù
ho avuto la mia resurrezione,
ma non sono salita ai cieli
sono discesa all'inferno
da dove riguardo stupita
le mura di Gerico antica. (Merini, 2007, p.230-31)

In that same year, 1983, Alda Merini married Michele Pierrì, at that time eighty-five. As one might expect, their relationship did not last long. When Michele, weakened by old

age, got progressively sicker, Alda's depression worsened. In Taranto, Alda was hospitalized, once again, in a mental hospital, terrified at the prospect that even Michele (sick with a terminal illness) would abandon her. In 1986, Alda moved back to Milan "malata di nevrosi e nostalgia." (Alunni, 2009, p.85) There, she encountered Dr. Marcella Rizzo, the psychiatrist in charge of her mental well-being, with whom she started therapy and got motivated to start writing again, after the years she spent in Taranto. In this same year, Alda published her psychiatric memoir, *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa* (1986). This was Merini's first book she wrote in prose, which aimed at denouncing the terrible conditions she lived through during her days at the mental hospital. *Diario di una diversa* "è il diario di una donna che si è sentita abbandonata e, incapace di ricominciare a vivere, ha trascorso dieci anni in coercitiva punizione." (Alunni, 2009, p.87) Through this "autobiography of madness," Alda had tried to come to terms with her illness and the inhumanity with which she, and her fellow inmates, were treated by both society and the doctors in charge.

After her long silence, Alda immersed herself in her literary works at the beginning of the 1990s. From this moment on, she seemed to have found, once and for all, a literary peace of mind. Between 1994 and 1995, Alda Merini published *Reato di vita* and *La pazza della porta accanto*, two prose autobiographies through which Merini's painful experience of life was thoroughly inspected. It was in these years (1996) that Alda was also proposed for the Nobel Literature Prize, (Corriere della sera, 2001) and was conferred numerous Medals of Honors by the Italian government in the years following her hospitalization.

Alda Merini died on November 1, 2009, aged 78, of osteosarcoma, surrounded by a small group of Milanese poets. Her legacy, however, did not stop there. Alda Merini, just as Sylvia Plath was, became one of the most important Italian writers especially after her death. She was regarded as one of the main proponents in advocating for the rights of the mentally ill, pointing out how the Italian legal and medical structure was not focused on protecting those who were weaker, rather they were just interested in removing them from society. (Merini, 1995, p.102) It is thanks to her daughters, who have "abandoned" her

while she was alive, that Alda's memory keeps its relevance even nowadays. Their cultural association, *Associazione Culturale Alda Merini*, focuses on sharing Alda's story and words with those who did not get to know her whilst she was alive, focusing on keeping Alda's legacy strong by advocating for better psychiatric care.

CHAPTER THREE: A COMPARISON OF SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR* AND ALDA MERINI'S *L'ALTRA VERITÀ. DIARIO DI UNA DIVERSA*.

3.1. An Introduction to *The Bell Jar* and *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*.

The Bell Jar is Sylvia Plath's first and only novel, published in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. Interpreted as a novel that struggled "to define a sensitive girl in a world that denies the development of the female self" (Batten, 2019, p.73), it recounts the painful "coming of age" of Esther Greenwood, the protagonist, troubled by the suffocating air that characterized 1950s American society.

Esther is a bright nineteen-year-old college girl who dreams of becoming an accomplished poet. Her path to fame, however, cannot be an easy one. After having been awarded a prestigious internship in New York at the most important female magazine, the *Ladies' Day*, Esther's mental health started to decline rapidly. Esther, in understanding that women's roles were limited in the society she lived in, finds herself entering "a depressive spiral in which none of the alternatives available to educated women seem satisfactory." (Showalter, 1987, p.216) Career-driven women, such as her internship supervisor and editor at the *Ladies' Day*, were sexless and weird. Housewives, like Mrs. Norton, were docile and subjected to their husbands. In struggling to identify a female mentor whom she can imitate, Esther's mental breakdown is prompted by the realization of the impossibility of reconciling a writing career with motherhood and wifehood. In so doing, Plath perfectly pictures the dreary condition *New Women* were forced to live under in 1950s America, and the devastating effects it had on "women who are slowly driven insane by the gender stereotypic confines of their social world." (Batten, 2019, p.73) America was not interested in women's struggle for self-determination, and Sylvia felt it all through her life.

For all these reasons, *The Bell Jar* still struggles to find a univocal genre; some regard it as a *bildungsroman*, focusing on the development and growth of the protagonist, others

think the right classification to be *roman à clef*, highlighting the undeniable parallels that indicate Esther's life as a mirror of Sylvia's troubling quest for selfhood. Sylvia Plath, instead, regarded her novel as an "autobiographical apprenticeship," a confession "she had to write in order to free herself from the past." (Perloff, 1972, p.507)

Similarly, Alda Merini defines *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*, as an "atto di rivincita sulla vita" (Redaelli, 2013, p.30), a way to liberate herself from the violence and cruelty that represented her twenty-year-long experience in the mental asylum: "Forse la volontà stessa di sconfiggere il male dell'altro, di riuscire a vincerlo con la parola ha fatto scatenare questa rivalse che io definirei unica al mondo." (Merini, 1997, p.138) *L'altra verità* is a diary, a painful recollection of Alda Merini's hospitalization in Milan's public mental hospital, *Paolo Plini*, and the consequent treatment that was reserved for the "mentally ill" once they were forced to go back to their real lives. *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa* poses itself as a memoir, her own story (hence the title "*L'altra verità*"), an alternative version of what has been said about her illness by those who have sanctioned her as a schizophrenic person. The stigma of the psychiatric hospital lingered around her in the years subsequent to her hospitalization and, the only way to restore her literary dignity and liberate herself from the burden of schizophrenia was to write something that would serve her as a new starting point, a way to convert her diagnosis into empowerment through the written word. (Redaelli, 2013) What is more, in her *Diario*, Alda Merini depicts the bitter picture that characterized 20th century condition of women in Italian society, one in which they were unable to decide for themselves. As a matter of fact, according to Alda Merini, women were "educate al delirio" (Merini, 1995, p.141) because of the impossibility of expressing themselves outside of their forced role of mother and wife. Through this piece of life writing, the author aims to expose the discrimination she went through as a female writer, unable to reconcile her literary aspirations with her familial role, and the consequent social stigma that was pressed upon her as a former asylum inmate at the time she was writing.

As it has been proved with Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Alda Merini's *L'altra verità* struggles to classify itself through a single genre label. Because of its autobiographical

nature, this type of writing can be regarded as a “narrative of illness and trauma,” which serves as a “critique of the gendered and dehumanizing treatment accorded by institutions to vulnerable people.” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p.146-47) Drawing inspiration from various studies on autobiographies (see Smith & Watson, Henke, Prize), Alessia Zinnari (2021) argues that Alda Merini’s diary could be regarded as a “testimonial life-writing,” which has been defined by Suzette Henke (1998) as follows:

Testimonial life-writing allows the author to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression or victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone and no-one – to a world that will judge personal testimony as accurate historical witnessing or as thinly disguised fiction. No matter. It is through the very process of rehearsing and re-enacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis. (Henke, 1998, p.xix)

The redeeming power of writing is precisely what has saved Merini and, to some extent, Plath too. (Alunni, 2009, p.85) This type of confessional writing aims precisely at “reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies and of effective agency in the world.” (Henke, 1998, p.xix) Alda Merini, in attempting to recount her own story, although confused and fragmented, tried to restore the humanity and dignity of those mental patients, removed from history, and betrayed by the same society which has labeled them insane.

Both in *The Bell Jar* and *Diario di una diversa* many are the instances of repetition; the narratives are confused, non-chronological, and fragmented. In short, they seem to mirror the confusion that characterized their authors’ mental state. Differently from what one would expect from such talented writers, the language used to describe their mental breakdowns and life through “madness” is simple, almost puerile as to highlight the rawness of what they were going to reveal. Their tendency towards repetition, as Cathy Caruth (2016) analyzed, is one of the most common characteristics of trauma writing and it has the purpose of “repeatedly bringing [the traumatized person] back into the situation

of the trauma, in order to bring it into one consciousness.” (Caruth qtd. in Zinnari, 2021, p.429) The use of dreary imagery and symbols (e.g. the image of the bell jar and the witch-like aspect of the mentally ill patients inside the mental hospital) and their repetitiveness goes on to contribute to the sinister looking, almost haunting, nature of mental illnesses. The suffocating environment of the “bell jar” is only a small anticipation of what they will later experience in the “inferno psichiatrico.” (Merini, 1995, p.137)

3.2. On Being a Mad Woman Writer in *The Bell Jar* and *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*.

Povera Plath troppo alta per le miserie della terra,
meglio certamente la morte
e un forno crematorio
alle continue bruciature del vento,
meglio Silvia l'avveniristica impresa
di una donna che voleva essere donna
che è stata scalpitata da un uomo femmina (Merini, 1991, p.83)

When talking about Alda Merini and Sylvia Plath, it is inevitable to find connections between these two poetry writers, who have decided to narrate their psychological suffering in prose. These two women, characterized by a fairly similar path in life, were both intelligent, extremely talented, and fought to find a way to establish themselves as writers in a typically male environment. Alda Merini and Sylvia Plath, although different by cultural and social background, have something in common that characterizes their path to stardom (and, in general, with all female writers): the price to pay for emancipating themselves in a male-dominated field will make them struggle with their femininity. It is their attempt to refuse the roles that were imposed on them while trying to establish themselves in the male-dominated, literary environment that made them so closely interconnected. This piece of poetry, written by Alda Merini in 1985, demonstrates that she clearly knew her American “counterpart.” Alda perhaps might have found Sylvia Plath’s book and experience of life relatable, thus, this might have also inspired her to

write *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*, which was concluded in that same year and published in 1986.

The Bell Jar starts with Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of the novel, reminiscing about her summer spent in New York in 1953. Esther, an extremely talented young adult, had won the possibility to join the staff of the *Ladies' Day*, perhaps the most renowned female fashion magazine, as a guest editor. This prospect should have excited her, given the high importance she gave to her literary ambitions, instead, she confesses how "I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo." (BJ¹ 2-3) Right from the very first few lines, Esther's breakdown seems to have already found its way into the events of that summer: "It was my first big change, but here I was, sitting back and letting it run through my fingers like so much water." (BJ 4) Esther's sense of discomfort, although in its initial stage, manifests an obvious dissatisfaction that will, later in the novel, force her into seeking help in a mental institution. Esther's apparent dissatisfaction with her life has been addressed, contemporary to the publication of *The Bell Jar*, by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, credited for having sparked a new, second-wave form of feminism in the United States.

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries [...] she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – "Is this all?" [...] books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers. (Friedan, 1963, p.11)

¹ From this moment on, all quotations of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* will be labeled as (BJ page), taken from this version: Plath, S (1963, ed.2019). *The Bell Jar*. Faber and Faber.

Sylvia and, accordingly, Esther's mental discomfort comes close to Friedan's quest for women's intellectual independence. Esther's anxiety and disquiet towards her role as a coming-of-age woman in the 1950s can be easily compared to Friedan's "problem that has no name." (Friedan, 1963) Both published in 1963, *The Bell Jar* and *The Feminine Mystique* spoke to young girls who struggled to define themselves outside domestic pressures. As a matter of fact, the suffocating, stifling environment of 1950s American conformism can be regarded as the foundation of Esther's impending mental breakdown. *The Bell Jar*, therefore, presents itself as a commentary on the society Sylvia Plath lived through whilst writing this semi-autobiography; and her protagonist, Esther Greenwood, becomes the embodiment of the struggling, mid-century American women writer, especially in the light of Betty Friedan's recent discoveries in *The Feminine Mystique*.

The society Sylvia Plath described reflected the values of 1950s Cold War America, one where women were oppressed by patriarchal values and pressured by the government to accept their fate as "second sex." (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.395) According to patriarchal ideals, men should occupy positions of power, women should instead stay at home, running the household. According to Stephanie de Villiers, however, these patriarchal assumptions were not the only major drive that pushed women into accepting their bitter fate. It was the focus on the home and the family by American governments during the years of the Cold War that exacerbated this compliance. Elaine Tyler May claimed that, during the silent battle between America and the Soviet Union, "Americans were more eager than ever to establish families." (May, 1999, p.ix) This eagerness was encouraged by those who were in charge of exhibiting America's superiority over the culturally inferior communist Russia. Indeed, President Nixon claimed that the superiority of American culture "rested on the suburban home... with a male breadwinner and a full-time female homemaker." (De Villiers, 2019, p.4) Taking all this into consideration, as Friedan has pointed out, a woman's priority in life was to be "healthy, beautiful, educated, [and] concerned only about her husband, her children, [and] her home." (Friedan, 1963, p.18) Plath, in describing Esther's dilemma of accomplishment whilst living in a society whose "guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject," (Perloff, 1972, p.511)

has written one of the most acute analyses of the feminist problem in contemporary fiction.

“What I hate is the thought of being under a man’s thumb,” I had told Doctor Nolan. “A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.” (BJ 212)

Esther fights, throughout the novel, with her professional drive and the feminine expectations that, as a young woman, weighed on her. Diane Bonds characterizes Esther’s depression as an “intolerable psychic conflict produced by trying to meet cultural expectations of women.” (Bonds qtd. in Tsank, 2010, p.166) The cause for Esther’s mental instability, and consequent schizophrenia, can be traced in the impossibility of fulfilling her dream of independence: her need to not be defined by a man whilst obliged to cope with the social expectations of her sex. Thus, Esther’s formation of a personal identity centers around her quest to find a female model who can help her decide whether she should follow her literary ambitions or if she should give up on her dreams and accept her bitter fate. (De Villiers, 2019)

Whilst embarking on her journey to maturity, Esther encounters several female “possible” role models which, in turn, will make her even more confused about her own life. Mrs. Willard, the prototypical conservative housewife, does not have a voice in the novel. Her son Buddy, Esther’s boyfriend, talks for her so as to further highlight the oppressiveness she went through as a stay-at-home wife:

“What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security,” and, “What a man is an arrow into the future and what a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from.” (BJ 67)

The real-life Mrs. Willard is Mrs. Mildred Norton, Sylvia’s neighbor. Despite not having a voice in *The Bell Jar*, Mrs. Norton was the narrative force that inspired Plath to write

her novel. (Clark, 2020, p.357) Contemporary to Sylvia's achievement in acquiring a position as guest editorship at *Mademoiselle*, Dick Norton (her boyfriend, Buddy Willard in the novel) got diagnosed with tuberculosis. Sylvia, troubled at the prospect of renouncing her internship position, confessed to Mrs. Norton that she would not be able to take care of Dick. Mildred, angered at Sylvia's refusal, accused her of selfishness. Thus were the seeds of *The Bell Jar* sown. Bothered by the Nortons' behavior, Sylvia would hold a grudge against both Dick and Mildred Norton, highlighting how she was the actual victim of the double standard. (Clark, 2020, p.304)

In Chapter 7, Esther reflects upon Mrs. Willard's life and, consequently, on her prospect of life trapped within the household. According to Esther, Mrs. Willard's life

[...] seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's, but I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself. (BJ 80)

Despite being a cultured woman, who had worked for years before getting married, Mrs. Willard decided to give up on her career to take care of her husband and sons' needs. Moreover, Esther recalls watching Mrs. Willard spending all her time braiding a rug for the family to use as a kitchen mat. Esther reflects on the fact that, if she had created that beautiful rug, she would have hung it on a wall like a worthy piece of art, not leave it on the floor for it to get dirty. Mrs. Willard's approach to the rug demonstrates her willful submissiveness to the familial hierarchy, one which prioritizes marriage and homemaking above personal aspirations and education. Esther, instead, who is aware of her writing talent, cannot imagine devaluing her piece of art as Mrs. Willard did with her rug.

All I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat. (BJ 80)

Mrs. Willard, therefore, embodies Esther's distaste and dread of marriage. This particular view of gender roles, visible through the character of Mrs. Willard, unveils the inferiority of women, viewed as passive nurturers and caregivers, and the superiority of males' intelligence and progressiveness. Women are therefore defined as relative creatures, determined by their relationship to men, and attributed values according to the conditions of that same relationship: their duties and use to society are solely determined by the needs of men. A good wife had to provide their husband "with the support and comfort he needs in order to be successful in his intellectual endeavors." (De Villiers, 2019, p.4) Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* suggests that "in a more or less disguised way, [a girl's] youth is consumed by waiting. She is waiting for a Man." (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.395) Thus, Mrs. Willard's life serves as a sort of "cautionary tale" to Esther, a way to warn her of the consequences of marriage and wifedom. Esther wants something different:

The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket. (BJ 79)

Esther refuses to be passive, she does not need a husband who dictates what she can or cannot do. However, women who do not show interest in marriage are viewed as "defective for failing in their obligation." (De Villiers, 2019, p.4) Esther's boss, Jay Cee, "wasn't one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter." (BJ 5) Career-driven women are perceived as almost sexless and neurotic in the novel. Women with high-achieving careers, like Jay Cee, struggle through marriage. Doreen, Esther's friend from New York, claims that Jay Cee's old husband: "[...] turns out all the lights before he gets near her or he'd puke otherwise." (BJ 5) Thus, Jay Cee stands for brainy girls, for those who are not necessarily interested in their looks and fulfilling their assigned roles. By

characterizing Jay Cee as “ugly as sin” (BJ 5), the suggestion implicit in the novel is that femininity and creativity are somehow viewed as mutually exclusive and, therefore, a woman who is ambitious and interested in cultivating her intelligence has transgressed her femininity by not paying attention to her appearance. As Betty Friedan points out, “the traditional division of women between the virtuous wife and the evil whore was replaced by a division between the good and sexual housewife and the evil career-woman.” (Friedan, 1963, p.40) These two roles appear in the novel as exclusive binaries in the case of female characters, suggesting the impossibility of harmony between the female body and the creative mind. (Séllei, 2003, p.128) Thus, having realized that femininity and creativity are two mutually exclusive characteristics, Esther envisions herself in front of a fig tree, which appears to exhibit some of the available paths she could take for her life:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story.

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 another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, 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. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, 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)

Through the metaphor of the fig tree, Sylvia Plath perfectly represents Esther's problem of choice. Paralyzed at the prospect that choosing one fig (that is, one path in life) might signify renouncing all the rest, Esther "finds herself surrounded by figs yet unable to decide upon what to consume – an indecision that results in her metaphorical starvation." (Smith, 2010, p.3) Spoiled for choice, Greenwood cannot find herself an alternative that would satisfy her. When at the *Ladies' Day* newsroom, the interns were going to be photographed with a symbolic prop to show what each of them wanted to be after graduating college, Esther could not seem to choose which object she should pick up: "When they asked me what I wanted to be I said I didn't know." (BJ 97) Jay Cee, Esther's "masculine" boss, ironically told everyone that Esther cannot seem to choose, "She wants to be everything." (BJ 97) Interestingly enough, Friedan expressed this same concern in *The Feminine Mystique*: "What if the terror a girl faces at twenty-one is the terror of freedom to decide her own life, with no one to order which path she will take?" (Friedan, 1963, p.67) Esther wants a life that she, essentially, cannot obtain. By focusing on the social and historical aspects of the novel, Linda Wagner-Martin in *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties*, highlighted that: "Esther believed firmly that there was no way, in the American society of the 1950s, that a talented woman could successfully combine a career with homemaking." (Wagner-Martin, 1992, p.38) Hence, the suggestion is that, if Esther wishes to pursue an intellectual career, she will have to do this at the expense of social acceptance, and it is this exact problem that induces Esther's mental breakdown. It is this pressure of choice, between being a wife and a female creator, that causes Esther's psychic collapse later in the novel: "Plath suffered from wanting so much in a world that did not allow women to want anything at all." (Gill, 2008, p.77) Moreover, as a woman, Esther is expected to wish for only two things in her life, marriage and motherhood, any other option is considered an expression of mental instability: "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell." (BJ 89-90)

It is not only the impossibility of choosing that forces Esther to passiveness, but also the awareness that she lives in a male-oriented society and, therefore, no matter which

path she decides to take for her life, she will still have to confront the oppression of society. Since the realm of creativity in a patriarchal society was said to belong to men, intellectual and career-driven women were somehow viewed as “defective.” (De Villiers, 2019, p.4) Elaine Showalter, in *The Female Malady*, highlights a similar point of view, suggesting that women, “within dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture and mind.” (Showalter, 1987, p.3-4) Thus, given that creativity is perceived as a male trait, women writers are “denied the subjectivity the pen represents.” (De Villiers, 2019, p.4) Moreover, these talented women also seem to struggle to ensure themselves a place in the literary community because of the usage of patriarchal language, through which their own, female voice is completely silenced. (Budick, 1987, p.873) As in *The Bell Jar*, the result is that women are denied the expressive autonomy that their male counterparts have, since the majority of women are not given a proper voice. This can be seen through various female characters, such as Hilda, a fashion intern at *Ladies’ Day*, and the UN Russian translator, who does not even have a name.

Hilda is described by Esther as a typical feminine woman, obsessed with her appearance, probably unintelligent, who must look “at her reflection in the glossed shop windows as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to exist.” (BJ 96) In the first instances of the book, Esther highlights Hilda’s “ignorance” when it comes to literary products:

She was six feet tall, with huge, slanted, green eyes and thick red lips and a vacant, Slavic expression. She made hats. She was apprenticed to the Fashion Editor, which set her apart from the more literary ones among us [...] I don’t know if Hilda could read, but she made startling hats. (BJ 26)

Both these descriptions suggest that Hilda’s identity is based on her appearance and that therefore, her existence is shaped by patriarchal definitions of femininity. In fact, the only points of view she utters in the novel are typical expressions of patriarchal ideologies.

When Esther confesses to Hilda her “obsession” with the electrocution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, two American citizens accused of being communist spies, Hilda’s opinions seem to correspond to the dominant discourse pervading Cold War America: “It’s awful such people should be alive [...] I’m so glad they’re going to die.” (BJ 96) She does not seem to voice her own opinions, rather she is essentially silenced by dominant patriarchal views that were present in 1950s America. To further prove this point, suffice it to say that Esther, whilst discussing with Hilda, feels that she was not talking to her friend, but instead to a dybbuk: “[...] when the dybbuk spoke from her mouth its voice sounded so cavernous and deep you couldn’t even tell whether it was a man or a woman.” (BJ 96) Hilda, therefore, ceases to exist as a human being, with her own opinions and ideals, and instead becomes “a mannequin” (BJ 95), “compiled out of various fragments and perspectives’ of patriarchal society.” (Séllei, 2003, p.137)

If Hilda represents the voice of patriarchal society, the unnamed Russian translator’s existence “is negated by patriarchal ideology.” (De Villiers, 2019, p.5) According to Esther’s point of view, the female UN translator is a “stern muscular Russian girl with no make-up.” (BJ 70). By characterizing her as “unfeminine,” one can assume that, because her appearance has no worth in a patriarchal-driven society, she is only perceived as a functional tool. As Esther defines her, “a little pebble of efficiency.” (BJ 71) The translator, unable to utter words of her own but just “barking out one idiom after another,” (BJ 71) represents the silencing of women. The characterization of these two secondary characters suggests, once again, that femininity and creativity are mutually exclusive. Our protagonist, therefore, must choose between the figs she has before she rots away and fails to attract a suitable mate, in the case she chooses to adhere to her feminine, prescribed role.

Unable to reconcile her available “figs” of femininity and creativity, Esther’s mental breakdown manifests itself as the inability to read. Whilst trying to read James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, Esther finds herself unable to understand what was written:

Words, dimly familiar, but twisted all awry [...] The letters grew barbs and rams' horns. I watched them separate, each from the other, and jiggle up and down in a silly way. Then they associated themselves in fantastic, untranslatable shape, like Arabic or Chinese. (BJ 120)

However, interestingly enough, Esther seems not to have lost her ability to read altogether. Whilst she is unable to read Joyce's book, the subject for her thesis, she can still read "scandal sheets, full of the local murders and suicides and beatings and robberies [...] I didn't know why I had never bought any of these papers before. They were the only things I could read." (BJ 131) Esther's reading troubles, therefore, seem to concern only texts that belong to the male canon. This detachment from the male literary world indicates Esther's awareness that to become a female writer in 1950s America, where creativity belongs to the male domain, "she would have to use the language of men and, by extension, become complicit in the ideology of a male-dominated society." (De Villiers, 2019, p.6) This can also be seen both in her refusal to learn typing and shorthand, symbols of male oppression (Budick, 1987), much to her mother's disappointment ("an English major who knew shorthand... would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter." (BJ 83)), and the fact that she also loses her writing ability: "But when I took up my pen, my hand made big, jerky letters like those of a child [...] the handwriting bothered me most of all." (BJ 125)

Together with the dreary-looking prospect of the impossibility of being a fulfilled woman writer, Esther's mental breakdown is also prompted by 1950s society's obsession with purity and the double standards it conveys. Esther feels suffocated by the sexual double standard, which seems to constantly remind girls of her age to remain virgins until marriage whilst legitimizing males' sexual experimentations. Esther, soon in the novel, realizes that men are hypocrites when she finds out that Buddy, her supposed boyfriend and future husband as it was decided by Mrs. Willard and Mrs. Greenwood, had an affair with somebody else, a much older waitress: "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one

not.” (BJ 77) Whilst Buddy is allowed to be a playboy before he marries, Esther is expected to remain pure. Every time she tries to immerse herself in a different relationship, such as the one with Constantin, she always feels “blocked” by an article written by her mother and a female lawyer, “In Defence of Chastity” (BJ 76), which states that women should avoid having sex before marriage because there was no sure way to avoid getting pregnant. Esther, therefore, cannot experiment with her sexuality freely as Buddy does because she, as a woman, is subjected to tougher expectations. Esther is angered at the article because it did not consider “how a girl felt” (BJ 77) and thinks it was extremely unfair to remain pure for someone who, instead, is not: “All I’d heard about, really, was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay all fine and clean for.” (BJ 64) Troubled by the prospect of unwanted pregnancies, Esther at the end of *The Bell Jar* concludes that she must get a diaphragm fitted to free herself from the sexual constrictions and the dread of pregnancy whilst pursuing her sexual liberty.

“A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.”

“Would you act differently if you didn’t have to worry about a baby?”

“Yes,” I said, “but...” and I told Doctor Nolan about the married woman lawyer and her Defence of Chastity.” (BJ 212)

After having been prescribed the diaphragm, Esther can finally feel like her “own woman.” (BJ 213) However liberating this experience is, Esther is terrified at the prospect of sex, as she regards it as an act of violence towards women. This can be traced in the fact that, once she loses her virginity to an older professor as an act of revenge on Buddy (“Ever since I’d learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck [...] I had been defending it for five years and I was sick of it.” BJ 218), she hemorrhages, at the point of being brought to the emergency room. According to Chung Ching-Yi, her incessant bleeding goes on to demonstrate that “the sexual act has more gratification for males than females and leads to more suffering on

the part of females than males.” (Chung, 2010, p.590) Esther seems to perfectly mirror Sylvia Plath’s obsession with sexists’ double standards. Plath too was angry at the fact that men did not have to worry about the concept of virginity and possible pregnancies. According to one of her high school friends, Eddie Cohen, Sylvia felt that “losing her virginity before marriage would damage her chances of finding an idealistic [*sic*] husband.” (Clark, 2020, p.196)

Buddy’s strongest instance of patriarchal superiority can be found in *The Bell Jar*’s last chapter when Esther, after having been released from the mental hospital, excited and worried at the prospect of a new life, is warned by Buddy about her prospects of marriage: “I wonder who you’ll marry now, Esther. Now you’ve been here.” (BJ 231) Here Buddy shows that he clearly believes that men are above women in all aspects of life and that her history of mental illness would prevent her from finding a suitable husband. This can also be seen when Buddy discredits Esther’s literary ambition, claiming that the poetry she writes is only “a piece of dust.” (BJ 52) A “staunch believer in the double standard” (Perloff, 1972, p.516), Buddy asserts his gender superiority by reducing women to simple wives: “What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security.” (BJ 67) Expectedly, Buddy views Esther’s ambition of becoming a writer negatively, assuring her that her “natural” role would be enough for her to feel she was leading a perfect life:

Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn’t want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you are married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state. (BJ 94)

This double standard, however, is not only perceivable in the treatment of the sexual theme, but it can also be traced in the professional literary world. In chapter 4, Esther is invited by Jay Cee, her editor-in-chief, to take part in a business meeting with two authors, a man and a woman. Jay Cee instructs Esther on how to treat these literary people,

claiming that she should praise the male writer all while being careful not to hurt the less-famous, female writer:

Jay Cee was going to lunch that noon with two famous writers, a man and a woman. The man had just sold six short stories to the *New Yorker* and six to Jay Cee [...] Jay Cee said she had to be very careful at this lunch, because the lady writer wrote stories too, but she never had any in the *New Yorker* and Jay Cee had only taken one from her in five years. Jay Cee had to flatter the more famous man at the same time she was careful not to hurt the less famous lady. (BJ 35-6)

The imbalance of treatment between these two writers provides an image of 1950s literary society, where male writers are much more celebrated than their female counterparts. In realizing, once again, that because of her gender she would not be taken seriously in the literary field, Esther attempts suicide six times before seeking help in a mental institution that will help her liberate herself from the constraints of a self-righteous society.

Through *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*, Alda Merini offers a sharp analysis of the unbearable pain she had to go through whilst being incarcerated, by her husband's will, in Milan's mental hospital. Alda, however, in attempting to denounce the psychological violence she experienced in the psychiatric institution, reflected upon societal attitudes and consequent discrimination towards both women and mental illness in general. It is not by chance that Alda starts her *Diario* by giving voice to Adalgisa Conti, a gifted writer who, similarly to Merini, wrote a diary whilst being hospitalized in Arezzo's mental hospital in 1914. "Fatta ricoverare in circostanze analoghe alla mia," (AV 16²) Alda uses Adalgisa's story to restore her dignity as a writer and to highlight the

² From this moment on, all quotations of Alda Merini's *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*. will be labeled as (AV page), taken from this version: Merini, A. (1997, ed.2007). *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*. Rizzoli.

bitter picture that characterized the female experience in society as the victim of rigid patriarchal standards:

D'altronde l'internamento rappresenta già di per sé una violenza enorme per la donna che, identificandosi come persona nel ruolo coperto in famiglia, sottratta a questo perde ogni punto di riferimento e ogni possibilità di essere e di riconoscersi come individuo. Il ruolo di Casalinga-moglie-madre è il solo ruolo possibile per la donna ipotizzato come naturale, come l'essenza stessa dell'essere femminile.

È necessario quindi che perché la donna possa ricoprire questo ruolo il rapporto con quell'uomo che scegliendola le ha consentito di realizzarsi.

Se non si rivela capace di rispondere alle sue aspettative, la vittima non è lei, che è anzi colpevole di inadeguatezza, ma il marito che ha socialmente riconosciuto il diritto di rifiutarla o di sostituirla. Esso condanna la donna alla perdita di ogni suo spazio privato e ad una vita collettiva, a violazioni continue di quella riservatezza e di quel pudore cui come "matta" non ha più alcun diritto e che pur tuttavia le vengono continuamente indicati come elementi indispensabili della sua normalità. (AV 17-8)

This long passage perfectly represents the never-changing societal constraints on women, who were forced to live and function solely according to their husband's will. Wives should therefore be grateful to their husbands because, by deciding to marry them, they have allowed these women to experience and fulfill their "natural" role of housewife-wife-mother. But, if a woman did not subscribe to society's fitted standards, her poor husband – who is clearly the victim of this situation – had the right to get rid of her and find somebody else who would accept their limited opportunities without complaining. Adalgisa Conti's *Manicomio 1914* was used as a literary device, a powerful tool of condemnation, aimed at reporting all kinds of social and psychological violence on women, victims of a closed-minded society that blamed them for having different dreams and unacceptable sexual desires. Dr. Viviani, Adalgisa's psychiatrist, wrote that Adalgisa considered herself a "defective" woman because she could not have children (Carocci,

2021), and therefore “was condemned” to spend the rest of her life in a mental asylum. She thought she deserved that. Alda was particularly struck by the relevance of Conti’s experience and view on the condition of women because it still resonated with her fifty years later. Given that “Il ruolo di Casalinga-moglie-madre è [...] l’essenza stessa dell’essere femminile.” (AV 17), a woman who – like Conti, Merini, and Plath – did not necessarily adhere to this standard, was condemned to a life of madness and suffering.

Madness is, according to Merini, the diagnosis society imprints on those who, like herself, wanted to follow their “not socially acceptable” aspirations and, consequently, are deemed “insane.” According to Alda, therefore, madness cannot be considered a biological disease. Rather, it can be regarded as a condition caused by one’s family and society at large, which, by denying personal freedom and liberty of choice, forces its victims to a life led in isolation. For this reason, given that women were obliged to live a life where power and order in society were held by those in charge – namely men – women were considered the privileged subjects of hysteria. (Redaelli, 2021)

“Lei pensa che le donne siano davvero portate al delirio?”

“Sì, perché la donna viene educata al delirio. La istruiscono fin da piccola al feticismo: deve amare le pentole, venerare gli oggetti della casa, tenerli puliti, accudirli. Il focolare diventa il simbolo della matriarcalità. Neppure il femminismo è riuscito a sradicare queste simbologie.

Infine, ci si sente impazzire tra i feticci. I panni addosso si fanno pesanti.” (Merini, 1995, p.141)

It is for this same reason that all her literary products were projected toward her quest for an equilibrium between her feminine and poetic being. Writing poetry whilst trying to reconcile it with the stifling environment of domesticity was what made her suffer the most, to the point of making her “la pazza della porta accanto.”

Contemporary to Alda’s first positive review, Merini encounters for the first time her parents’ opposition to her literary ambitions. Her mother: “Ostacolava le mie aspirazioni

letterarie. Era figlia di una maestra, veniva da una famiglia colta, ma non voleva neppure sentir nominare la parola ‘cultura.’ E in casa comandava lei.” (Merini, 1995, p.135)

Despite having encouraged Alda’s education from a very early age, Nemo, her father, ended up aligning with her wife’s ideals and told Alda to abandon her dreams of becoming a professional writer because “La poesia non dà il pane.” (Merini, 1995, p.131) However, it is not only her poetic vocation that was hindered by her family, but her wish also to become a nun too was something unacceptable to her mother. By deciding to retreat to a monastery, Alda was indirectly refusing to adhere to the socially advised canons of femininity. Her mother could not accept it and forced Alda, aged 22, to marry Ettore Carniti. In *La pazza della porta accanto*, Alda recalls she was forced into marrying Ettore who, at that time, she did not know.

Mio padre aveva capito il mio destino di monaca e l’aveva aiutato. Mia madre lo aveva combattuto, dicendo che una donna che vive nel mondo avrebbe sofferto molto di più di una sciocca carmelitana dietro le sbarre [...] E così mi fece fare una famiglia, quasi mi obbligò a sposarmi. A mia madre questo non l’ho mai perdonato: scaraventarmi in un mondo che mi è ostile, mentre io volevo pochi centimetri di cella. (Merini, 1995, p.86-7)

Stefano Redaelli perceived this marriage to be a conspiracy, a familial and social plot at the expense of Alda as a writer and woman altogether. (Redaelli, 2013, p.28) Indeed, Alda was self-conscious about her role of wife, admitting that “In effetti il matrimonio non mi riuscì bene. Però lo avevo preso come un grande impegno sociale.” (Merini, 1995, p.83)

Starting with the description of the night she was brought into the *Paolo Plini*, Merini delivers a feminist message through her *Diario*, showing that patriarchal oppression played a fundamental role in women’s decaying mental health.

Insomma ero una sposa e una madre felice, anche se talvolta davo segni di stanchezza e mi si intorpidiva la mente. Provai a parlare di queste cose a mio marito, ma lui non fece cenno di

comprenderle e così il mio esaurimento si aggravò [...] le cose andarono di male in peggio tanto che un giorno, esasperata dall'immenso lavoro e dalla continua povertà, diedi in escandescenze e mio marito non trovò di meglio che chiamare un'ambulanza, non prevedendo che mi avrebbero portata in manicomio. (AV 13)

Already from the first few lines, Merini perfectly depicts the bitter picture that characterized the condition of women in the Italian society of the 20th century. According to the testimony provided by her daughters after Alda's death, Merini was a victim of domestic violence: "Soffriva molto lei, non di gelosia, soffriva perché veniva picchiata quando lui era ubriaco, ma lei lo amava e si crogiolava nell'illusione che lui cambiasse." (Carniti, F. n.d.) She tried her best to be a good mother and wife, despite the violence and the abandonment she had to face because of her drunkard husband. Moreover, her "special" condition as a woman writer, and the impossibility of bringing her poetic drive and her familial role together, had numbed her once so-active mind. Notwithstanding her personal struggles, given that she perceived her role of mother and wife as a duty rather than something she actually wanted to do, she tried her best to carry out her roles.

Alda appears to highlight, as Plath did with *The Bell Jar*, the power dynamic that characterized all patriarchal institutions; and how the family, society, and mental institutions were organized around priorities of gender, through which women were inevitably inferior and, therefore, subjected to others' decisions. Moreover, she particularly stresses how her institutionalization had already been decided behind her back, showing how women were essentially bystanders in their own lives.

Ma allora le leggi erano precise e stava di fatto che ancora nel 1965 la donna era soggetta all'uomo e che l'uomo poteva prendere delle decisioni per ciò che riguardava il suo avvenire. Fui quindi internata a mia insaputa [...] (AV 14)

Merini compares her drive to the asylum to an instance of kidnapping. At that time, inmates could only be detained by will of a family member and, once hospitalized, it

would have been extremely difficult to get discharged. (Zinnari, 2021, p.431) Moreover, it is important to highlight that in 1965 women were still subjugated to their male partners, who had complete liberty and control over their bodies. Italian Family Law before 1975, the date in which husband and wife obtained equal rights in familial matters, established a hierarchical and authoritative understanding of the family. According to this outdated law, husbands and fathers had absolute power over their wives and children, restricting their lives and futures. It was in this context that the traditional, patriarchal family, characterized by the husband's supremacy, had its origins. Before 1975, the husband-father was considered the head of the household; the wife, thus, “segue la condizione civile di lui, ne assume il cognome ed è obbligata ad accompagnarlo ovunque egli crede opportuno di fissare la sua residenza.” (art.144 c.c.) It is for this sense of control and apparent ownership of Alda's body that Ettore Carniti was able to lock his poor wife into the mental institution. To further stress the agency her husband had in her incarceration, Alda highlights that, after having been taken to the mental hospital, she started perceiving her husband as an enemy, refusing to go back home with him on multiple occasions. She recalls how her husband, together with her sister, tried to convince her to go back home but she could not accept it.

Quello stesso giorno mia sorella accompagnata da mio marito venne a reclamare il mio corpo, se così si può dire. Disse che era stata una indecenza, che si trattava di uno sbaglio. Ma io ero così traumatizzata, spezzata, rotta dentro, che non volli seguirli più.
(AV 67)

She felt betrayed, she did not understand why her husband (and her whole family in general) consented to such horrible and inhumane treatment: “Ciò che mi riusciva incomprensibile è come fossi capitata in quel luogo, e che odio mai avesse potuto ispirare mio marito a chiudermi in una casa di cura.” (AV 65) The main reason why Ettore had brought Alda into a mental asylum was that he was just bothered by her, “mi sei venuta a noia,” (AV 55) especially when he found out that Alda was not a virgin when they married. When Alda was secretly dating her teacher, the biggest love of her life, Giorgio

Manganelli, she was pregnant with his son. Alda was aware that she could not go through her pregnancy, she was only sixteen and he was already married. Ettore, however, upon realizing on their wedding night that Alda was not chaste, decided to drive her back to her family:

Ma non trovandomi pura la prima notte, mi rimandò dai miei. Venne poi a cercarmi, ma quel rancore inaudito, quella mostruosa sensazione di un passato poco evidente, lo faceva piangere di gelosia e dispetto finché il nostro matrimonio divenne una cosa insopportabile. (Veroli, 2011, p.26)

Alda, just like Esther, was extremely bothered by this double standard. Later in the book, when Merini gets pregnant during one of her allowed visits back home, Ettore refuses to acknowledge that baby as his own because he could not believe Alda remained pure whilst staying in the mental hospital: “La bimba non so veramente di chi sia. Quindi portala al brefotrofo.” (AV 55)

It is important to point out that Alda, however, was not only rejected by her husband, but society at large seemed to have distanced itself from her. As a consequence, Merini comes to perceive that she is the victim of a scheming plot, through which her husband was justified by society to call a “mental” ambulance on her because she, according to her daughters, had thrown a chair at him. (Carniti, F., n.d.) “Dicono che a ricoverarmi sia stato mio marito ma in effetti è stato un abbandono familiare e anche sociale.” (AV 149)

Di fatto la società per me era morta. Dal momento che mi aveva rifiutata e insediata tra quei rifiuti sociali non poteva e non doveva più esistere; e l’amore poi e la famiglia erano concetti che consideravo superati e triti. (AV 22)

At different moments during her hospitalization, Alda was allowed to exit the world of the mental hospital, but she would only stay with her family for a while before asking to be voluntarily readmitted. This phenomenon was defined through Alda Merini’s concept of the *spedalizzazione*, which will be later analyzed when defining her in relation to her mental illness and the consequent hospitalization.

In tutto, comunque, feci ventiquattro ricoveri perché molti furono i tentativi di dimettermi e di farmi tornare nel mondo dei vivi. Di fatto, quando venivo dimessa reggevo bene per qualche giorno; poi tornavo a immelanconirmi, a non mangiare più e ad essere tormentata nel sonno, e non riuscivo a procacciarmi anche le più piccole necessità, di modo che dovevo essere nuovamente ricoverata. (AV 58-9)

According to Alessia Zinnari, Merini's multiple instances of self-hospitalization can be interpreted through a "gendered lens, as a form of self-exile and voluntary displacement," a way to escape the difficulties of domestic life as wife and mother. Doreen Massey, the author of *Space, Place, and Gender*, noted that since women were forced to choose this form of displacement both to survive societal pressures and as a form of resistance against patriarchal oppression, these types of experiences were fairly similar to women of different historical periods. (Massey qtd. in Zinnari, 2021, p.434) This can also be seen in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* when Esther, after having been hospitalized in the private mental hospital, decides to withdraw from the real world by refusing to accept outside visitors, including her mother. Esther feels that those who visited her wanted to restore the old Esther, the feminine and talented girl they once knew: "I hated these visits, because I kept feeling the visitors measuring my fat and stringy hair against what I had been and what they wanted me to be, and I knew they went away utterly confounded." (BJ 195) By declining guests, who represented her old life, one in which she did her best to accept puritanical demands on femininity (e.g. the obsolete view of purity in young girls), Esther does not seem to suffer anymore. She, together with the help of her empathetic doctors, frees herself from those societal pressures that have previously burdened her, allowing her to experience her sexuality freely. Similarly, Stefano Redaelli sees Alda's *follia* both as society's condemnation against women who did not necessarily fit patriarchal standards and as an "obligated choice," comparable to that of Titano, one of Alda's lovers after her husband's death: "Se Titano aveva scelto il barbonaggio, io avevo scelto la follia." (Merini, 1995, p.35) Alda's "madness" can therefore be interpreted

as a reaction, a way to escape from the patriarchal models of femininity offered by 1960s Italian society.

Mi accorgevo da sola che non stavo bene. Allora preparavo il mio fagottino e mi presentavo al cancello di quella sorta di ospizio. Lo facevo di nascosto da mio marito. [...] Ma io a casa mi immalinconivo, fino allo strazio più profondo. Non riuscivo più a mangiare. Forse mi sentivo respinta, poco amata da Ettore, da tutto il vicinato, da questo palazzo dei Navigli pieno di oscuri segreti. (Merini, 1995, p.140)

By liberating herself from societal pressure and refusing to adhere to patriarchal norms of femininity, Alda Merini was aware of the analogy that characterized the relationship between madness and femininity. It seemed as if there was a cause-effect relation between them, which she highlighted in her poetry: “Il marchio manicomiale della donna sono proprio i suoi genitali.” (Merini, 1994, p.45) It is precisely for the traditional role they were appointed when forced to get married, always limited in their activities and banned from exploring what was beyond the four walls of domesticity, that women were habitual victims of insanity, *educate al delirio*. (Merini, 1995, p.141) Women were forced, and still are to some extent, to limit themselves and their activities within the constraints imposed on them by others. Upset by the fact that they were not able to freely express their dissatisfaction, they would keep their emotions and frustration towards the image that they needed to fulfill to be considered “worthy” women to themselves. It is therefore inevitable that they would implode sooner or later, after having tolerated these discriminations for such a long time.

Cos'è la donna e che cos'è il manicomio nella donna? Anche se non è chiusa in un contesto stereotipo, in una ospedalizzazione, ogni donna ha il suo manicomio, cioè ha intolleranze, scontri, paure, emotività, abbandoni, rivalse. Ogni donna è sostenuta da un carisma di bellezza, che ha dentro e che a volte, nel peggiore dei casi, come nel mio, è stato duramente punito col manicomio.

Cosa si voleva punire col manicomio? La bellezza, ma non fisica, quella interiore, quella dell'intelletto. (AV 132, ed. 2007)

Madness and femininity are so closely interconnected in Alda Merini's life that she concludes that it would be better for her to refuse her femininity, her female body, to achieve freedom of thought: "Vorrei essere un uomo. Forse non mi avrebbero rinchiusa." (AV 139, ed. 2007) This can be also connected to the fact that, as Elaine Showalter stated in *A Literature of Their Own*, "The feminists' urge to break away from the yoke of biological femininity also expressed itself as a wish to be male." (Showalter, 1972, p.192) Alda, for this same reason, once in the mental hospital, confesses to Doctor F. that she was not able to "be" a woman anymore and that she did not feel closely connected to her sex: "Io non sapevo più nemmeno di essere una donna. Mi ero completamente scordata del sesso." (AV 62) Moreover, Merini is constantly reminded by those same mental patients that she does not look like a woman:

"Ma tu sei donna?" mi chiese una volta.

"Certamente," risposi io.

"Non mi sembra; guarda, io sì che sono un uomo!" (AV 48)

To further illustrate Alda's refusal of norms of proper femininity, she admits in her autobiography, *La pazza della porta accanto*, that once she went through a hysterectomy procedure, through which they removed her uterus, she immediately felt better:

"[...] Poi ho subito un intervento di isterectomia. Tolto l'utero, mi sono scomparsi all'improvviso anche i sintomi della malattia mentale. Penso che ci sia un legame tra le due cose. (Merini, 1995, p.141)

Alda often compares her experience as a woman at the *Paolo Plini* to that of women in concentration camps, where they were denied their individuality, stripped of their clothes, and had their hair completely shaved. It is for this same reason that women in the

mental institution were compared to a coven of witches, “Avevano perso ogni tratto femminile e guardandole mi venivano in mente le streghe del *Macbeth*.” (AV 32)

What is more, in her *Diario*, Alda Merini reports the struggles she and her peers had to go through whilst being pregnant in a mental institution. Alda uses the duality of this period to analyze her approach to motherhood. Whilst having defined her pregnancy in the mental asylum as redeeming, “[...] di fatto in gravidanza tutti i miei sintomi scomparivano e tornavo ad essere una persona normale,” (AV 40) Alda recalls the moment she had given birth to her daughter as “Fu quella, credo, la prima volta che impazzii davvero.” (AV 54) The incompatibility between herself and her role as mother manifests itself when Alda is told by the nurses of the mental hospital that she is unfit to breastfeed her daughter because her milk might be damaging to her little one:

“Sono forse una bestia io, che non posso dare il latte alla mia bambina?” continuavo ad urlare.

“Ma no!” mi disse il medico, “non è questo. È che tu hai sempre preso pastiglie e il tuo latte può non essere idoneo per la piccola. Può farle male.”

Comunque, il latte dovettero levarmelo e quella fu la più dolorosa operazione morale che avessi mai subito dall’entrata in quel terribile luogo. (AV 54-5)

The traumatic experience of giving birth in the mental asylum is a form of cruelty not just Alda was forced to experience during her stay. By giving voice to a roommate, *Signora B.*, Alda highlights the heartlessness with which pregnant women were treated. *Signora B.* was forced, for instance, to give birth whilst being tied to the bed. (AV 76) In short, women were regarded as monsters and not worthy of empathy. When the nurses were forced to wash these madwomen, they would do it with the utmost cruelty: they would not pay any attention to their intimacy, making old women fall on the ground: “Le più vecchie cadevano a terra per il modo maldestro con cui venivano trattate.” (AV 37)

Despite not having adhered to the feminist movement, Sylvia Plath and Alda Merini both delivered feminist messages through their writings, highlighting how patriarchal oppression played, and still plays, a fundamental role in women's mental health. After having analyzed the condition of these two women writers in relation to their gender and gift for poetry, this next section will focus on their diagnosis of schizophrenia and the consequent treatments they had to face whilst staying at their respective mental hospitals.

3.3. Schizophrenia in *The Bell Jar* and *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*.

As Elaine Showalter has noted in *The Female Malady*, from the 1920s to the 1960s, schizophrenia became “the literary metaphor through which English women defined their cultural situation.” (Showalter, 1987, p.210) It is no coincidence that, therefore, women writers of the mid-20th century began to denounce their experience of madness as the painful result of external circumstances. Both *The Bell Jar* and *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*. aimed at providing a bitter analysis of the social condition and the pressures these two protagonists, Esther and Alda, felt when trying to express their unique talent for writing. As it has been proved through the previous section, Sylvia Plath and Alda Merini's psychic breakdown could be interpreted as the result of female oppression and the mutual exclusiveness of the roles offered to them in patriarchal society. This painful condition, however, can also be traced in many other female authors of that age. Take Anne Sexton, for example. It is for this same “commonality of pain,” that Betty Friedan, set the analysis for *The Feminine Mystique* in the “loss of femininity” connected to the sudden rise in education rates amongst girls:

Most adjusted to their role and suffered or ignored the problem that has no name. It can be less painful for a woman, not to hear the strange, dissatisfied voice stirring within her [...] It is no longer possible today to blame the problem on loss of femininity: that is to say education, independence, and equality with men

have made [American] women unfeminine. (Friedan, 1963, p.21-2)

Contemporary to the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, a new psychiatric movement started to gain relevance, particularly concerned with the female condition in patriarchal society. Influenced by the development of the so-called feminine “literature of schizophrenia” (Showalter, 1987, p.219), R.D. Laing and the antipsychiatry movement began to challenge the conventional notions of madness. According to this newly founded movement, “mental illness had to be examined in terms of social context.” Laing and his followers, therefore, aimed to prove that schizophrenia did not have biological causes, rather it could have been explained as the result of trying to survive under an “unlivable situation.” (Laing qtd. Showalter, 1987, p.221) As a matter of fact, according to Alda Merini, her *folli*a was not to be confused with an organic disease, rather it had been regarded as a condition caused by her family and society, who, by denying her freedom of fulfilling her vocation, forced her to live “una vita altra, emarginata, scissa.” (Redaelli, 2010, p.739) This can also be traced in Alda’s autobiography when she highlights that everyone regarded her as a schizophrenic, but she refuses to regard herself as a mentally ill woman; rather, she was just tired of the condition of life she was forced to live under: “I medici sostenevano che fossi schizofrenica, ma non è mai stato vero. Avevo una nevrosi, ero esaurita.” (Merini, 1995, p.140) Laing too interpreted female schizophrenia as “the product of women’s repression and oppression within the family.” (Laing qtd. in Showalter, 1987, p.222) Madness hence becomes a strategy, a way to let oneself know and respond to the contradictory messages and demands about femininity women faced in patriarchal society. It is not by chance that, thus, Alda regarded her *folli*a as a choice. Although Esther Greenwood was never “officially” diagnosed with schizophrenia, many critics (e.g. Perloff, De Villiers, and Séllei) seemed to have approached their analysis of Esther’s madness from the standpoint of schizophrenia, mainly because of what R.D. Laing has said regarding this particular kind of mental illness: “the experience and behavior that gets labeled as schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live an unlivable situation.” (Laing qtd. in Perloff, 1972, p.518) Perloff highlights

how, in chapter 13, when Esther is forced by her mother to volunteer in the maternity ward of a local hospital because she thought that “the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody who was worse than you,” (BJ 155) she exhibits all symptoms relating to a schizophrenic state of being. Esther had to simply bring the patients’ flowers to their respective rooms. When she, however, noticed that some flowers were already dead by then, she decided to discard them and mix the bouquets the best she could. Despite thinking that her work would be much appreciated, Esther is met by a furious uproar of new mothers. Terrified of being attacked, she is overcome by panic and escapes the hospital: “Unbuttoning the green uniform as I ran, I stuffed it, in passing, into the washbasin with the rubbish of dead flowers. Then I took the deserted side steps down the street two at a time, without meeting another soul.” (BJ 157) According to Marjorie Perloff, “by society’s standards, Esther’s emphasis on the aesthetic of flower arrangement rather than on its economics is dismissed as schizophrenic behavior.” (Perloff, 1972, p.518)

However, to reduce Alda Merini and Sylvia Plath’s experience of madness as “schizophrenic,” is not enough as the focus in *Diario di una diversa* and *The Bell Jar* is not put on the mental illness as an organic problem, but rather it can be argued that these two books are based on the protagonists’ relationship with society and their experience of femininity at large. Alda and Esther’s difficulties seem to be closely connected to the choice of life they must inevitably make because of their gender limitations. As Elaine Showalter stated, symptoms of schizophrenia:

[...] have parallels in the social situation of women. [Moreover, some feminist critics claimed that] schizophrenia is the perfect literary metaphor for the female condition, expressive of women’s lack of confidence, dependency on external, often masculine, definitions of the self, split between the body as sexual object and the mind as subject, and vulnerability to conflicting social messages about femininity and maturity. (Showalter, 1987, p.213)

R.D. Laing and the antipsychiatry movement argued that one of the typical symptoms of schizophrenia, insecurity, was rooted in the experience of the self's alienation from the body, in the idea that one's existence is not rooted in one's body. The main reason behind this "disconnection" from one's own body can be traced in the fact that those affected by this problem seem to "feel most closely associated with the mind." (Séllei, 2003, p.128) This definition perfectly parallels Esther, Sylvia, and Alda's state of being, and that of so many other intellectual women. For this reason, this split might be regarded as a problem caused by the clash between the roles accepted for the female body and the notion of creativity which, as previously stated, belonged to the male sphere. Because of this very "disconnection" of one's mind from the body, in *The Divided Self* Laing focused on creating the notion of the "split self," according to which the schizophrenic patient experiences a "metaphorical split in the psyche, resulting in the occurrence of a 'true' and 'false' self." (De Villiers, 2019, p.7) Therefore, deployed as a coping mechanism to protect oneself from the external world, the patient's "true self" withdraws and leaves space for the creation of a "new identity," through which the schizophrenic can relate to other people, and the rest of the world in general. Whilst reading both *L'altra verità* and especially *The Bell Jar*, the reader can perceive the sense that something is taking over both Esther and Alda's bodies, which is signified by the different identities they both come up with when trying to cope with the demands of the outside world. In an effort to protect themselves, Esther and Alda devised a different personality, withdrawing their true self and letting the false one take over their body. Merini in *L'altra verità* writes: "[...] Eppure si chiamava Grazia, o forse no, si chiamava Ofelia, ognuno di noi poteva ribattezzarsi con un nome diverso. Oggi io mi chiamo Beatrice." (AV 113) Similarly, Plath highlights: "'My name's Elly Higginbottom,' I said. 'I come from Chicago.' After that I felt safer." (BJ 11) In order to establish a true, genuine self, the protagonists will have to break away from the false self created to protect themselves from the outside society, in order to establish a true, genuine self by reuniting their writing with the expectations society poses upon them as women. As previously mentioned, given that these aspects are perceived as mutually exclusive in both authors, it can be said that the

impossibility of reconciliation between the female body and the creative mind is what inevitably drove them mad. Indeed, Erika Jong states “The reason a woman has greater problems becoming an artist is because she has greater problems becoming a self.” (Jong qtd. in Budick, 1987, p.872)

The feeling of being unable to get a hold of one’s own life reflects the crisis of identity occurring to women writers in the second half of the 20th century; they were women who particularly felt estranged from the archetype of the subservient woman, who instead wanted to “dictate [their] own thrilling letters.” (BJ 83) It is in analyzing this awareness of the mutual exclusiveness of femininity and creativity that Sylvia Plath designs the metaphor of the bell jar, to portray the stifling, suffocating environment that 1950s American society weighed on gifted women.

The female’s sense of enclosure in a psychological “Bell Jar” [...] female degradation through male dominance and double sexual standards in 1950s American Society [...] reflected in the image of the Bell Jar resulting in (Plath’s) feminist revolt for the attainment of freedom. (This) social entrapment led to the physical confinement causing a psychological space that resulted in a thirst for liberty. (Baig qtd. in Batten, 2019, p.69)

Through this small definition, Baig stresses the impact that male dominance had on women at the time *The Bell Jar* was first conceived. The bell jar, an enclosed space designed to protect delicate objects, (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.) represents in the novel the silencing of women’s voices, both in their choice of profession and in their ideals of femininity. (Baig, 2014) Sylvia Plath deploys the metaphor of the bell jar to reflect on women’s sense of enclosure, on the social entrapment they experience as the *second sex*, which leads to physical and psychological confinement and, inevitably, to a thirst for liberty. However, given that women are always subjected to a male-dominated environment wherever they decide to go, Esther highlights how her “figurative” bell jar would follow her anywhere, preventing her from attaining her long-awaited liberty:

If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of a difference to me, because wherever I sat – on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok – I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. (BJ 185)

If her yearning for both mental and physical freedom cannot be fulfilled in 1950s society, the deterioration of her already unstable mental health must only follow. Sylvia Plath cleverly deploys the image of the bell jar for the first time in the book when Esther goes to the hospital to meet Buddy, as if to anticipate what was to come if she had accepted to marry him and his patriarchal ideals. Whilst accompanying Buddy to a teaching hospital, Esther talks about being taken “[...] into a hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born.” (BJ 59) The image of the bell jars containing dead fetuses holds a contradictory image as it both represents life and death. As Batten states: “The intentional symbolism of entrapped life and its subsequent death then adds to the understanding of the bell jar as a paradoxical and mirrored image – relating with it the experience that a woman goes through [...] in a patriarchal-driven society.” (Batten, 2019, p.69) Therefore, the experience of femininity in society can be regarded as one where male oppression constantly attempts to quell the female voice, preventing them from establishing themselves as something more than mothers and wives. To some extent, this concept had been expressed by Alda Merini too, by highlighting how women were the privileged subjects of madness because, having no other acceptable alternative in life, they were accustomed to folly: “[...] la donna viene educata al delirio. La istruiscono fin da piccola al feticismo: deve amare le pentole, venerare gli oggetti della casa, tenerli puliti, accudirli. [...] Infine, ci si sente impazzire tra i feticci.” (Merini, 1995, p.141) By stating that women were *educate al delirio*, Alda Merini did not deny her mental distress, but she does not consider it a proper “illness,” rather, the manifestation of her impossibility to establish herself as a gifted writer. (Redaelli, 2012, p.96)

3.4. The Experience of the Mental Hospital in *The Bell Jar* and *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*.

Alda Merini, incarcerated between 1965 and 1975, has lived through a period in which psychiatry and institutionalization saw major changes in Italy, culminating in the closing of all asylums in 1978 through *Legge 180*, devised by Franco Basaglia, an adherent of the antipsychiatry movement, coined in Italian as “Psichiatria Democratica.” (Redaelli, 2010, p.739) Before this revolutionary reform, Italian asylums’ therapeutic methods were thought to be based on custody and restraint. Zinnari, through the words of Giulia Melani, highlights that prior to Basaglia’s reform, “mental asylums did not represent in any way a service dedicated to the care of the patients, but they were instead institutions of discipline.” (Melani qtd. in Zinnari, 2021, p.430) By analyzing the treatments reserved for mental patients in asylums, therefore, it has been highlighted how they were fairly similar to those of criminals in prison. Hence, it is by no chance that Alda Merini, in describing her condition as a mental patient, highlights how “[...] il malato è un gradino più su di colui che è stato in galera.” (AV 57) In reality, being admitted to a mental hospital seemed to be much worse than being locked in prison because you have committed an atrocious crime. Once hospitalized, the poor mad patients would lose their right to vote and were therefore also deprived of their rights as citizens. Besides having categorized the asylum as something close to a prison, Alda uses a much more powerful analogy, that of the mental hospital as a concentration camp: “Altre volte immaginavo quel posto tristo come un campo di concentramento. Ma tant’era, in qualsiasi modo lo si paragonasse, era tutto meno che un posto atto a viverci,” (AV 95) and “un luogo di torture, un lager maledetto.” (AV 8) Moreover, as in prisons and concentration camps, all mental patients look the same. They were deprived of any kind of individuality from the moment they were incarcerated; they were stripped of their clothes and forced to have their hair cut: “E io, non so, ma mi sono domandata spesso come mai le malate di mente debbano avere volti così brutti e inauditi [...] le lungodegenti hanno face tutte eguali.” (AV 33) The dehumanization inside the asylum was irreversible, and Alda Merini was aware that

she would carry the social stigma of the mental patient for the rest of her life. Moreover, as a woman writer, she can be regarded as a victim of a double stigma, she was a madwoman who wanted to assert herself as a famous writer: “La gente al mio ritorno mi ha riconosciuta, soppesata, dileggiata, offesa, respinta e riaccettata. Dovevo chiedere scusa ad ogni donna di malaffare, ad ogni lavandaia, ad ogni oste di essere una poetessa.” (Merini, 1990, p.58) For all these reasons, Alda describes the outside society in her *Diario* with the utmost hatred, especially for having allowed her husband to close her into the mental institution. Through this book, Alda aimed to address this type of discrimination and the social stigma she experienced through this vile institution. Feeling betrayed by this same society that determined she was mad, Merini wrote her *Diario* to denounce the abuses she had to go through whilst incarcerated in the mental hospital, in hopes to “finally find a way to react to the injustice she has witnessed.” (Zinnari, 2021, p.432)

Il manicomio che ho vissuto fuori e che sto vivendo non è paragonabile a quell’altro supplizio che però lasciava la speranza della parola. Il vero inferno è fuori, qui a contatto degli altri, che ti giudicano, ti criticano e non ti amano.” (AV 137)

Because of the treatments that were reserved for her once she got forcefully hospitalized, Alda described the asylum as *un’istituzione falsa*, a paradoxical institution. Although regarded by society as a place where weak people were taken care of, the asylum was, in reality, a place of violence and abandonment:

Il manicomio è senz’altro una istituzione falsa, una di quelle istituzioni che, create sotto l’egida della fratellanza e della comprensione umana, altro non servono che a scaricare gli istinti sadici dell’uomo. E noi eravamo le vittime innocenti di queste istituzioni. C’erano, sì, persone che avevano bisogno di cure e di sostentamenti psicologici, ma c’era anche gente che veniva internata per far posto alla bramosia e alla sete di potere di altre persone; e di questo io mi rendevo ben conto (AV 42-3)

Through this short passage, Alda Merini powerfully denounces the asylum, and society altogether, as a place in which completely sane people were brought to, just because they were believed to be “inconvenient” to those in power. Labeled by society as “mentally unstable,” former mental patients would face serious issues in seeking employment and liberating themselves from the societal stigma once allowed to go back to their own lives. Merini, as a matter of fact, explains how it would be “impossible, even for the healthiest of individuals, to leave this institution without being transformed.” (Zinnari, 2021, p.431) Rather, she felt that it was this same institution that, through its de-humanizing treatments, jeopardized her already unstable well-being:

Quindi, sono molto perplessa nel definire la mia malattia una cosa che “venne da sé,” ma sono più propensa a dire che, semmai, venne causata, modificata e aggravata dalla inadeguata e deleteria assistenza del manicomio. (AV 118)

The victim of the mental hospital becomes a non-human entity, mainly due to the nurses’ lack of empathy, which is shown through acts of aggression and violence towards those they should instead take care of. Alda highlights that, prior to the reform movement initiated by Franco Basaglia and a group of Italian antipsychiatrists, patients were denied any kind of personal freedom, at the point that they could not even wash themselves. Nurses regarded these poor women “come delle colpevoli,” (AV 37) forcing them to accept cruel and insensitive treatment, deeming them “subhuman:”

Le nostre infermiere erano esseri privi di qualsiasi sentimento umano, almeno per quanto ci riguardava e, dato che la nostra vita all’interno dell’ospedale era già tanto difficile, ce la rendevano ancora più nera mortificandoci e dandoci a vedere ad ogni pie’ sospinto che noi eravamo “diverse” e che quindi non potevamo entrare né nei loro discorsi, né nel loro genere di vita. (AV 30-1)

Notwithstanding the pain and suffering they had to go through in the mental asylums, Alda Merini offers in her *Diario* a veiled critique of Law 180, claiming that Basaglia,

despite having tried to better the condition of psychiatric patients by suppressing the *manicomi*, forgot to provide for these poor people who were shunned by society and unable to take care of themselves with any psychiatric support: “Leggevo ieri su ‘La Repubblica’ che Basaglia, chiudendo i manicomi, per un certo senso ha fatto male. È vero: al modo come ci hanno ridotto in società, non ci riesce più di vivere, anche perché la società ci è ostile.” (AV 79) Through her reflections, Alda becomes the voice of those controversial thoughts that were spreading, at that time, around the scientific community. British historian John Foot highlighted how the introduction of the *Legge 180* was equally praised and criticized by the Italian psychiatric world:

Contemporary debates around Basaglia’s reforms and ideas tend to concentrate on two areas. The first is linked to the closure of the asylums, and the alternative structures that were set up in various countries (as well as Italy) to “replace” them. A considerable body of opinion claims that the “Basaglia Law” was a mistake, which “abandoned” patients and failed to create adequate alternative structures. (Foot, 2014b, p.249)

Although Alda regarded the mental hospital as a cruel place, a convenient place for inconvenient people, where those regarded as “societal waste” were thrown away, she soon understood that the outside world had a much more negative impact on her mental well-being. Thus, she comes to realize that the asylum is a *Terra Santa*, “perché era il paradiso promesso dove la mente malata non accusava alcun colpo, dove non soffriva più, o dove il martirio diventava tanto alto da rasentare l’estasi.” (AV 106) This phenomenon, to which she refers to as *spedalizzazione*, highlights the sense of detachment she felt from her family and the outside world at large, and how the mental hospital had, to some extent, saved her:

Dopo un po’ di tempo cominciai ad accettare quell’ambiente [the mental hospital] come buono, non mi rendevo conto che andavo incontro a quello strano fenomeno che gli psichiatri chiamano “spedalizzazione” per cui rifiuti il mondo esterno e cresci

unicamente in un mondo estraneo a te e a tutto il resto del mondo;
mi ero fatta un concetto molto dolce e cioè che io fossi un fiore e
che crescessi in un'aiola deserta. (AV 22)

Inside the mental hospital, Alda felt protected by the “real” life, free from those who “ti giudicano, ti criticano, e non ti amano.” (AV 137) Deploying, once again, the literary metaphor of the *Terra Santa*, Alda emphasizes that the cruelty she was going to experience once freed from that horrific place of torture would be much more humiliating. As a former mental patient, you will never be exempted from the discrimination that happened in the real world: “E così io continuo a girare per Milano, con questa sorta di peso ai piedi e dentro l'anima. Altro che Terra Santa! Quella era certamente una terra maledetta da Dio.” (AV 97)

Although no deep account has been made by Sylvia Plath of Esther's institutionalization, her story provides us with a sharp contrast between the diverse treatment she experienced in the mental hospitals. After Esther had been rejected from a Harvard writing course, her mental health started to decline rapidly. Disillusioned at the prospect of not becoming a talented, renowned author, Esther experiences a period of complete *inertia*, during which she finds herself unable to function as a proper human being anymore. Unable to sleep, eat, and write, Esther and her mother decided it would have been better for her to refer to her doctor, Teresa, to help her find a new sleeping pill prescription that would help her rest: “‘I can't sleep. I can't read.’ I tried to speak in a cool, calm way, but the zombie rose up in my throat and choked me off. I turned my hands palm up.” (BJ 121) Teresa, understanding that Esther's well-being was getting worse each day, suggested she contact Dr. Gordon, a local psychiatrist. When Esther decides to meet Dr. Gordon for the first time, she is furious at his approach: “Your mother tells me you are upset.” (BJ 123) Esther immediately perceives that he was not interested in understanding what was going on in her mind, “I could see right away he was conceited,” (BJ 124) and proceeds to ask her the same question over and over, avoiding the true reason why she contacted him at first:

“I remember your college well. I was up there, during the war. They had a WAC station, didn’t they? Or was it WAVES?”
I said I didn’t know.
“Yes, a WAC station, I remember now. I was a doctor for the lot, before I was sent overseas. My, they were a pretty bunch of girls.”
(BJ 126)

Dr. Gordon’s jovial attitude and disinterestedness towards Esther’s mental concern suggest that her problem was not to be taken seriously. Indeed, he seemed much more interested in recalling his own experience at Esther’s college than in trying to understand what was going on with her. “Esther’s problem not only has no name, but also does not enter the discussion at all.” (Krafft, 2013, p.298) Notwithstanding having diminished Esther’s depression, her mother comes out from Dr. Gordon’s clinic with a terrifying prospect for the poor, suicidal Esther: “Doctor Gordon doesn’t think you’ve improved at all. He thinks you should have some shock treatments at his private hospital in Walton.” (BJ 130) Once Esther reaches Dr. Gordon’s clinic, her view on the patients seems to resemble that of Alda Merini’s: “I made out men and women, and boys and girls who must be as young as I, but there was a uniformity to their faces, as if they had lain for a long time on a shelf, out of the sunlight, under siftings of pale, fine dust.” and “The figures around me weren’t people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life.” (BJ 136) Dr. Gordon’s shock therapy, left Esther completely traumatized, “numb and subdued” (BJ 140) to the point that she refused to meet him for their next therapeutic session and, instead, attempted to commit suicide. Esther is frightened at this therapeutic prospect because she is sure she would be forced into moving to progressively more terrible hospitals until her family’s money has completely run out. The prospect of being a mentally ill patient for the rest of her life haunted her; thus, she resolves to kill herself to free her own family from the torture they would have to go through because of her. Whilst pondering whether she needs to commit suicide, she imagines herself locked in a basement with other people who, like her, were lost cases:

They [her family] want me to have the best of care at first, so they would sink all their money in a private hospital like Doctor Gordon's. Finally, when the money was used up, I would be moved to a state hospital, with hundreds of people like me, in a big cage in the basement.

The more hopeless you were, the further away they hid you. (BJ 154)

After having unsuccessfully tried to kill herself by ingesting an enormous amount of sleeping pills, Esther is transferred to a city mental hospital where she gets to mingle with those who, like her, had been incarcerated in this inhumane structure. Her roommate, named by Esther Mrs. Tomolillo, talks about her experience and the reason behind her hospitalization:

"I'm here on account of my French-Canadian mother-in-law." She giggled again. "My husband knows I can't stand her, and still he said she could come and visit us, and when she came, my tongue stuck out of my head, I couldn't stop it. They ran into Emergency and they put me up here," she lowered her voice, "along with the nuts." (BJ 170)

Mrs. Tomolillo's experience draws her close to Alda Merini to further highlight how, even in a more "progressive" country compared to Italy, the female experience of madness is essentially the same. Trapped by their husbands against their will in the mental hospital, these women would spend the rest of their lives in and out of mental asylums, rejected by their own families. Esther's well-being was threatened in the city hospital, she felt that nobody was interested in treating these patients well enough to readmit them to society as "healthy" individuals but, instead, they regarded them as if they were animals: "The boy looked at me as if I were some exciting new zoo animal and he was about to burst out laughing [...] He just wanted to see what a girl who was crazy enough to kill herself would be." (BJ 167) She was worried about what they were going to do with her and felt constantly threatened by the prospect that someone would damage her even

further, as Dr. Gordon did with her in the previous mental institution. In the mental asylum, Esther sees neglectfulness and violence towards the patients. Dreading to think of staying there for more than just a day, Esther pleads her mother to free her from this horrible place:

“Oh, Esther, I wish you would co-operate. They say you don’t co-operate. They say you won’t talk to any of the doctors or make anything in Occupational Therapy...”
“I’ve got to get out of here,” I told her meaningly. “Then I’d be all right. You got me in here,” I said. “You get me out.”
[...] “All right, I’ll try to get you out – even if only to a better place. If I try to get you out,” she laid a hand on my knee, “promise you’ll be good?” (BJ 173)

Through this short excerpt, it is clear that Esther’s mother does not understand the nature of her daughter’s mental illness, thinking that it was Esther who instead was choosing to “be sick.” Although her mother seems to minimize Esther’s mental problem, she feels that she is starting to get worse because of what she experiences in this hospital. Thankfully, however, Philomena Guinea, Esther’s benefactress and famous novelist, came to rescue her before it was too late. As to highlight, once again, that the experience in the mental hospital and madness was something that many women writers had in common, Philomena Guinea too has been depicted by Esther as a woman who, at the peak of her career, “had been in an asylum as well.” (BJ 177) For this reason, noticing that Esther’s mental strain was given by the impossibility of becoming a woman writer (“Is there a boy in the case?” “No, it is Esther’s writing. She thinks she will never write again.” (BJ 177-8)), Mrs. Guinea decides to help her by moving her to a private hospital in Boston “that had grounds and golf courses and gardens, like a country club.” (BJ 178) At this private clinic, Esther is treated with dignity: she has her own room, the windows have no bars, she can freely roam through the rooms, and partake in any activity she likes. At some point, she even wonders whether women in this private and luxurious mental hospital were sick: “I couldn’t understand what these people were doing, playing

badminton and golf. They mustn't be really sick at all, to do that." (BJ 181) At this hospital, Esther seems to finally find a cure. For the first time, she meets and is treated by an empathetic female doctor, after having been solely managed by male psychiatrists. At first, Esther is doubtful, "I didn't think they had women psychiatrists," (BJ 179) but, in the end, Dr. Nolan will be the one who lifts her metaphorical bell jar. Differently from what happened in the state hospital, Esther immediately realizes that nurses were friendly, and treated patients as proper human beings, differently from what happened in the state hospital: "You're all right, it's those boobies at the state place that worry me off my feet." (BJ 200) There, women were allowed to chat, play the piano, and freely engage in matches of bridge. According to Krafft, these privileges allowed women to develop a sense of community, through which they were able to recognize that their mental illness might "stem from a larger crisis in femininity, and not simply from their own deficiencies." (Krafft, 2013, p.301) As a matter of fact, Betty Friedan similarly highlights how the key to recognizing "the problem that has no name" lay in housewives gathering to talk about their common condition. (Friedan, 1963, p.19)

Both in *The Bell Jar* and *L'altra verità*, the various mental asylums are characterized by hierarchies and privileges. Although with the help of Dr. Nolan Esther finally starts to get better, she is constantly threatened and reminded that she can either go back to the real world, which terrifies her, "From Belsize people went back to work and back to school and back to their homes" (BJ 196), or she could worsen and retreat to the dreadful city hospital:

Either I got better, or I fell, down, down, like a burning, then burnt-out star, from Belsize, to Caplan, to Wymark and finally, after Doctor Nolan and Mrs. Guinea had given me up, to the state place next door. (BJ 200)

The private mental hospital was divided into three separate sections: Wymark, Caplan, and Belsize. When Esther is first admitted, she is appointed to Caplan, a sort of middle way between being completely hopeless (Wymark) and being ready to venture into

society (Belsize). On her first day, she meets Valerie, another patient in her ward. She has just been moved from Wymark, the most restrictive ward for more serious cases, where she used to be very angry and violent. However, after having been subjected to a lobotomy, Valerie seems to be better and, therefore, she can obtain different privileges from where she first started: “Fine. I’m not angry anymore. Before, I was always angry. I was in Wymark, before, and now I’m in Caplan. I can go in town, now, or shopping or to a movie, along with a nurse.” (BJ 185) When Esther gets moved to Belsize, the nicest section of the asylum, she tells everyone she is not ready to go out to the real world yet. In this new world Esther, at first, feels intimidated by those fashionable women who look at her as if it was clear that the only place she belongs to was Wymark:

I had gone to bed right after supper, but then I heard the piano musing and pictured [the other mental patients] laughing and gossiping about me in the living room behind my back. They would be saying how awful it was to have people like me in Belsize and that I should be in Wymark instead. (BJ 198)

One of these “Belsize” women, an acquaintance from her old life, looks at her “coolly, with a slight sneer, like a dim and inferior acquaintance.” (BJ 198) Soon, however, Esther seems to grow fond of the advantages and privileges she was given in this section of the hospital.

The mental asylum’s value system that is present in *The Bell Jar* can be traced in Alda Merini’s *Paolo Plini* too. Those who were going to get better were simply allowed to go back to their real life; those who, instead, had completely lost any possibility of recovering were brought to a different hospital, a *cronicario*, where patients remained for the rest of their lives. Interestingly, Alda deploys, yet again, the imagery of Nazis’ concentration camps in describing how those who were brought to the *manicomio per cronici* were treated. Alda’s childlike “relationship” with Pierre, a former inmate, ended because he was deemed irrecoverable by those who were in charge: “[...] vidi il mio amore caricato su una specie di furgone insieme ad altre “bestie” umane. Lo mandavano in un cronicario.” (AV 26) “[...] vidi Pierre salire su di un grosso carrozzone, “deportato”

in un altro manicomio per cronici.” (AV 34) Alda Merini never experienced the cruelty of the *cronicario*, but she had been a victim of another form of institutional violence. Just as Esther Greenwood was put in isolation after she kicked the nurse’s tray of thermometers at the city hospital (“Almost immediately two attendants came and wheeled me, bed and all, down to Mrs. Mole’s old room [...]” BJ 176), Alda too was brought to the strictest cell in the asylum, a *cella di contenzione* (AV 58), once she set a trashcan on fire:

Ma mi presero subito e mi mandarono al neurodeliri, cella ancora più rigorosa dell’ospedale psichiatrico, dove c’erano pochi metri quadrati per muoversi e nessun dialogo, nemmeno col dottore. (AV 53)

Together with a similar structural hierarchy, both Esther and Alda highlighted how criminally ill patients were given, if they behaved well, authorizations to go out and experience real life again. Interestingly, the protagonists of these two books, when they are given town privileges and allowed to go back to their own lives, both decide to “deal” with their femininity in two completely opposite ways:

Col tempo cominciarono a darci dei permessi. Qualcuno di noi poteva uscire, tornare a casa propria per un giorno o due, e fu proprio durante una di queste mie visite a casa che io rimasi incinta. (AV 40)

Ever since the shock treatment had ended, after a brief series of five and I had town privileges [...] “You’d like a fitting,” he said cheerfully. 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 [...]” (BJ 207-13)

Whilst Alda, once allowed to go back home, tries to fix the relationship with her husband and cope with societal notions of femininity by getting pregnant, Esther does the exact

opposite. Troubled by the double standards and terrified by the prospect of being forced to have a baby someday, she notes, “A man doesn’t have to worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line. [...] If I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go mad” (BJ 212-3), she decides to use her privilege to go out to get a prescription for a fitting of a diaphragm. By doing so, Esther is finally able to experience her sexuality freely, without worrying about getting pregnant.

3.5. Treatments and Psychiatrists in *The Bell Jar* and *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa*.

As previously mentioned, through *Sanity, Madness, and the Family* (1964), R.D. Laing and the antipsychiatry movement concluded that schizophrenia was not to be interpreted as an organic disease, rather it can be regarded as “a strategy, a form of communication in response to the contradictory messages and demands about femininity women faced in patriarchal society,” (Laing qtd. in Showalter, 1987, p.222) By denying the organic cause of schizophrenia, but rather considering just its social aspects and origins, R.D. Laing declared that this particular form of mental instability was not to be treated with psychosurgery, drugs, and shock, but rather through the interaction with the outside world, especially through the familial context. As a consequence, antipsychiatry rejects Insulin Therapy, Lobotomy, and ECT as valid treatments. (Séllei, 2003, p.130) Even though this new trend of psychiatry started questioning whether operating on the body for a mental disease would be the right cure, both Sylvia and Alda experienced the torture of these supposed “magical” physical therapies.

Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT), commonly electroshock, was developed as a treatment for schizophrenic patients in 1938 by Italian researcher Ugo Cerletti. This treatment consisted in placing electrodes in the patient’s temples, through which the psychiatrist would give electric charges to the brain so as to induce a generalized seizure. (Solano, 2009)

Both Esther and Alda experienced electroshock numerous times whilst in the mental asylum, Alda even recalled having been subjected to this cruel treatment between 46 and 57 times. (Zinnari, 2021, p.427) In her *Diario*, she described it as:

Ci facevano una premorfina, e poi ci davano del curaro, perché gli arti non prendessero ad agitarsi in modo sproporzionato durante la scarica elettrica. L'attesa era angosciosa. Molte piangevano. Qualcuna orinava per terra. Una volta arrivai a prendere la caposala per la gola, a nome di tutte le mie compagne. Il risultato fu che fui sottoposta all'elettroshock per prima, e senza anestesia preliminare, di modo che sentii ogni cosa. E ancora ne conservo l'atroce ricordo. (AV 87-8)

Women were haunted by the prospect of being subjected to this kind of inhumane treatment, to the point that Esther, after having experienced it for the first time at Doctor Gordon's private clinic, wonders whether she had done something wrong to deserve such horrible punishment: "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done." (BJ 138) Electroshock in *The Bell Jar* seems to be closely associated with electrocution. (Séllei, 2003) Going back to the first page of the novel, Esther seems to be weirdly attracted by Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's execution:

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick [...] It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. (BJ 1)

According to Jo Gill, it is not by chance that Plath put the Rosenberg's execution at the beginning of the book. Not only is Ethel's full name Esther Ethel, thus identical to our protagonist's name, but also these two women both seem to "suffer for their nonconformity to the feminine ideals which dominated Cold War America." (Gill, 2008, p.79) Ethel's punishment, therefore, serves Esther as a reminder that, if you deviate from

1950s American feminine ideals, you are liable to punishment. Left “numb and subdued” (BJ 140) by the first electroconvulsive therapy, Esther resolves that she will never experience that awful torture again. The ghost of electroshock lingers above the protagonists’ heads for the entirety of the books as it was mainly used as a threat by doctors in the mental hospital: “[...] ci allineavano su delle pancacce in uno stanzone orrendo che preludeva alla stanza degli elettroshock: così ben presente potevamo avere la punizione che ci sarebbe toccata non appena avessimo sgarrato.” (AV 18) However inhumanly cruel this therapy was, both Esther and Alda admit that, if performed well, ECT would bring positive effects on the patient:

Le mie resistenze erano notevoli, Perciò il dottor G. ritenne opportuno farmi fare due o tre elettroshock, anche perché nel frattempo ero caduta in un grave stato confusionale.

Di fatto, dopo la shockterapia la mia mente divenne più elastica e cominciai a raccontare con un respiro più adeguato e coerente. (AV 29)

All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air.

“It was like I told you it would be, wasn’t it?” said Doctor Nolan, as we walked back to Belsize together through the crunch of brown leaves. (BJ 206)

Esther, however, did not only endure this kind of treatment. Another frequently used therapy for treating schizophrenia was Insulin Therapy. Patients who were diagnosed with schizophrenia were injected with insulin shots to lower the blood sugar levels and induce hypoglycemic shocks, which produced convulsions, or worse, coma. Moreover, once this moment had passed, the patient would be brought back to responsiveness via an injection of glucose directly into their body. (Showalter, 1985, p.205) Before resolving to use electroshock therapy, Dr. Nolan, Esther’s psychiatrist, decided it would have been better for her to try this form of therapy first, in an attempt to avoid traumatizing her patient again: “Three times each day the nurses injected me, and about an hour after each

injection they gave me a cup of sugary fruit juice and stood by, watching me drink it.” (BJ 184) The main problem connected to Insulin treatment was that it might have taken days for the Insulin to produce an actual reaction, and in the meantime, women would have gained twenty to sixty pounds after having completed their prescribed cycle of medication:

“Lucky you,” Valerie said. “You’re on insulin.”

“Nothing happens.”

“Oh, it will. I’ve had it. Tell me when you get a reaction.”

But I never seemed to get any reaction. Just grew fatter and fatter. Already I filled the new, too-big clothes my mother had bought, and when I peered down at my plump stomach and my broad hips I thought it was a good thing Mrs. Guinea hadn’t seen me like this, because I looked just as if I were going to have a baby. (BJ 184)

Although Alda never suffered the pain of Insulin Therapy, she constantly recalls in her diary how they would inject anything into her, without even caring if what they were prescribing was damaging her instead of doing her good: “Quando invece mi fecero la cura del Dobren, (dieci iniezioni per giorno) ero ridotta in uno stato tragico.” (AV 99) At some point, she even highlights how older women would die because their bodies could not handle any more treatments with psychiatric drugs: “Molte vecchiette vennero fatte morire a forza di sedative, e io bagnavo loro le labbra e capivo che non potevano parlare. La loro sofferenza doveva essere atroce.” (AV 63)

Neither Alda nor Esther was subjected to the cruelest form of therapy for schizophrenic patients, but the monster of lobotomy lingered constantly in their minds because of those close to them. Lobotomy was first conceived by Portuguese neurosurgeon Antonio Egas Moniz, who interestingly used as test subjects societal misfits, such as schizophrenics, alcoholics, homosexuals, and political dissidents (the connection between Esther and Ethel is made, once again, evident) and it involved drilling a hole in one’s brain and disconnecting the thalamus from the frontal lobe to supposedly modify one’s behavior and actions. (Séliei, 2003, p.147-8 & Showalter, 1985, p.207) As previously mentioned,

although neither of the protagonists was subjected to lobotomy, they are both accompanied by it throughout their stay. Lobotomy becomes a potential threat in the books and it is presented in two different forms: Esther constantly sees Valerie, a lobotomized patient, bragging about her scars; and at the center of the garden of the *Paolo Plini* there was the section where lobotomies happen, as if to constantly remind the patients of what they could experience if they did not behave well. What was particularly humiliating about lobotomy was the social stigma it bared: an irreparable scar is left behind, which is visible in Valerie's head.

Valerie pushed aside her black bang and indicated two pale marks, one on either side of her forehead, as if at some time she had started to sprout horns, but cut them off.

"Do you know what these scars are?" Valerie persisted.

"No. What are they?"

"I've had a lobotomy."

I looked at Valerie in awe, appreciating for the first time her perpetual marble calm. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. I'm not angry anymore. Before, I was always angry. I was in Wymark, before, and now I'm in Caplan. I can go to town, now, or shopping or go to a movie, along with a nurse."

"What will you do when you get out?"

"Oh, I'm not leaving," Valerie laughed. "I like it here." (BJ 185)

Nel centro del giardino c'era anche un'altra appendice dell'ospedale: il ricovero delle cavie, dove si facevano continue ricerche sul cervello umano. Io mi sono addentrata in quel posto poche volte, quanto basta per provarne un orrore incredibile. Bestie lobotomizzata, castrate e, dappertutto, un senso di innaturale forza malvagia, ridotta al massimo della sua violenza. Certe bestie, sotto i veleni delle medicine, avevano perso del tutto la loro identità. (AV 28)

Notwithstanding Alda and Esther's admission that a well-performed ECT might save lives, what has truly brought them to redemption was their close relationship with their psychiatrists. Dr. Gabrici and Dr. Nolan, despite their different cultural backgrounds and

approaches to therapies, were both successfully able to recognize what was truly affecting their talented patients and found ways to liberate them from the pressures they were subjected to as women writers in a patriarchal society.

After having been mismanaged by a series of doctors who were disinterested in treating their patients right, those who preferred punishing their patients for things they were not guilty of, (“Allora il dottor N., che mi aveva sempre vista di malocchio, ordinò che mi si facessero una serie di elettroshock. E io dovetti sottostare, malgrado non ne avessi nessuna necessità.” AV 87) Alda meets her savior, Dr. Enzo Gabrici, halfway through her first stay at *Paolo Plini*. Merini describes Dr. Gabrici as an empathetic doctor, willing to cure his patients: “Intanto proseguiva la mia indagine psicologica col dottor G. che aveva una enorme pazienza e una grande volontà di guarirmi.” (AV 39) For the first time during her stay, Alda was treated like a proper human being, she finally found a doctor who did not need to resort to electroshock and dehumanizing treatments to bring out her trauma:

Ma molto mi aiutò il dottor G. che con la sua terapia della non violenza dava all’ammalato la sensazione di poter essere ancora vivo, o di potere almeno accedere a quella specie di autenticità del vivere cui, di fatto, il malato solitamente aspira. (AV 69)

Enzo Gabrici can easily be regarded as Alda’s savior, (Redaelli, 2012) and her gratitude towards her doctor will remain a constant throughout her literary career. In understanding that painful treatments such as medications and electroshock did not have any effect on Alda, Dr. Gabrici foresees that the only cure that would bring her back to her former life is by utilizing the power of her words. Alda Merini recounts her initial shock when Dr. Gabrici first proposed she write as the prescribed treatment for her gradual reintegration into society:

Un giorno, senza che io gli avessi detto mai nulla del mio scrivere, mi aperse il suo studio e mi fece una sorpresa.
“Vedi” disse, “quella cosa là? È una macchina per scrivere. È per te quando avrai voglia di dire le cose tue.”

Io rimasi imbarazzata e confusa. Quando avevo scritto il mio nome e chi ero, lo guardai sbalordita. Ma lui, con fare molto paterno, incalzò: “Vai, vai, scrivi.”

E gradatamente, giorno per giorno, ricominciarono a fiorirmi i versi nella memoria, finché ripresi in pieno la mia attività poetica.
(AV 64-5)

According to Gabrici, “la creazione attraverso l’arte poetica è stata il suo balsamo,” and thanks to her “formazione di artista [...] è riuscita vittoriosa dalle violenze di false creature scientifiche.” (Merini, 2008, p.7-11) Indeed, Giorgio Manganelli highlighted in his preface to *L’altra verità*, how it was thanks to the power of her words that Alda was never overwhelmed by the dehumanizing powers of the mental asylum: “Grazie alla parola, chi ha scritto queste pagine non è mai stata sopraffatta, [...] la vocazione salvifica della parola fa sì che il deforme sia, insieme, se stesso e la più mite, indifesa e inattaccabile perfezione della forma.” (AV 11) As reported by Stefano Ferrari, who highlighted the therapeutic benefits of literature in psychoanalysis, the power of writing in a psychiatric journey laid its foundations on its “intrinseca capacità, diciamo, auto-terapeutica, in quanto essa funziona sostanzialmente come una modalità del lavoro del lutto [...] permettono una presa di distanza e una elaborazione rispetto al vissuto traumatico.” (Ferrari qtd. in Redaelli, 2017, p.31) By analyzing her condition and giving voice to those who have suffered with her the pain of hospitalization, Alda frees herself from the pain she had to go through after having been brutally distanced by those close to her. By finding in Dr. Gabrici a familial guide, a person who was interested in saving her power for writing instead of punishing her because of her “unfeminine” ambitions, Alda is finally able to redefine herself as an empowered subject, finally completing her healing process. In the asylum, Alda discovers pain, fear, death and, once discharged from this monstrous institution, she finally manages to transform this traumatic experience into one of resistance, a social commentary against the awful oppression she had to go through. (Zinnari, 2021)

D'altra parte il *Diario* è liberamente tratto dalla cartella clinica del dottore Enzo Gabrici, che ancora raccoglie le mie poesie scritte in manicomio. Mi tenne con sé visto che i miei parenti mi avevano mandato al diavolo e mi rieducò alla letteratura, l'unica fonte di vita alla quale potevo riaggrapparmi per non morire. (AV 150)

Her artistic gift had been for so long oppressed by her daily domestic problems that the only way to save herself from the monsters of depression was to restore her writing. It is for this same reason that it can be said that Alda was able to save herself by successfully restoring her writing, after a silence that lasted more than twenty years. Notwithstanding the duality of her madness interpreted both as a choice and a societal condemnation, (Redaelli, 2010) Alda was capable, through her writing, of reconstructing and merging her multi-faceted identity, as both woman and writer. Furthermore, it is thanks to her writing that she was able to give voice to those who were oppressed, those who were forgotten by their own families, who still did not have a voice of their own:

I fatti sono simbolici – e così i protagonisti, ma l'autrice ancora vive e vorrebbe che questo crimine cadesse dalle carni di chi come lei ha patito e continua a patire il più efferato degli Inferni. (AV 133)

As Dr. Gabrici did with Alda Merini, Dr. Nolan in *The Bell Jar* aided Esther Greenwood in her quest to find her identity after all the sufferings she had gone through during that eventful summer. Dr. Nolan's talents in her field and empathy towards her patients are particularly evident when confronted with Dr. Gordon, especially in their way of performing electroshock on Esther. While Dr. Gordon's electroshock can be associated with extreme violence, which leaves Esther "numb and subdued" (BJ 140) Dr. Nolan's approach is much more empathetic, as she assures Esther that ECT should not be painful:

I told Doctor Nolan about the machine, and the blue flashes, and the jolting and the noise. While I was telling her she went very still.

“That was a mistake,” she said then. “It’s not supposed to be like that.”

I stared at her.

“If it’s done properly,” Doctor Nolan said, “it’s like going to sleep.” (BJ 182)

As a matter of fact, when Dr. Nolan administers her version of the shock treatment, Esther sleeps peacefully, without feeling any pain: “I woke out of a deep, drenched sleep, and the first thing I saw was Dr. Nolan’s face swimming in front of me and saying ‘Esther, Esther.’” (BJ 206) The comparison between the usage of the same device is uncanny, as it powerfully highlights that, despite the treatment performed being essentially the same, if performed by a male doctor is regarded as something brutal, if instead it is handled by a female expert, it is soft, almost maternal.

Marjorie Perloff credits Dr. Nolan as “the only wholly admirable woman in the novel.” (Perloff, 1972, p.521) Dr. Nolan is also the only woman in the novel whom Esther never wished to imitate. Therefore, rather than functioning as a “model” in Esther’s quest for acceptable female roles she could imitate, Dr. Nolan serves as an instrument through which Esther learns to be not some other woman, but only herself. (Perloff, 1972) Dr. Nolan listens when Esther tells her that something is wrong with her, understands what her patient needs to get better, aids Esther in liberating herself from the normative, feminine role, and helps her in establishing her own, new “persona:”

“What I hate is the thought of being under a man’s thumb” I had told Dr. Nolan. “A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.”

“Would you act differently if you didn’t have to worry about a baby?”

“Yes,” I said, “but...” and I told Doctor Nolan about the married woman lawyer and her Defence of Chastity.

Doctor Nolan waited until I was finished. Then she burst out laughing. “Propaganda!” she said, and scribbled the name and address of this doctor on a prescription pad. (BJ 212)

When Dr. Nolan finally understands that the root cause of Esther’s anxiousness lay in the difficulties she experienced in coming to terms with her “female” self and sexuality, Dr. Nolan decides to book Esther an appointment for the fitting of a diaphragm, through which Esther appears to finally liberate herself from her sexual and psychological pressure. Esther had always been used to thinking of virginity and sex in terms of an obsession with purity and shamefulness, as she had been instructed by 1950s puritanical society. When she realizes that neither Dr. Nolan nor the gynecologist who fits her diaphragm is interested in what she wants to do with her sexuality, she finally frees herself from outdated views and double standards that concerned only women: “I was my own woman.” (BJ 213) By being an acute observer of Esther’s troubles, Dr. Nolan also frees her from those burdensome visits, especially those of her mother, which were troubling Esther’s mental recovery:

“You’re not to have any more visitors for a while.”
I stared at Doctor Nolan in surprise. “Why that’s wonderful.”
“I thought you’d be pleased.” She smiled. (BJ 194)

Dr. Nolan saw how Esther’s rehabilitation was negatively impacted by these visits, mainly because those who visited her wanted to restore the old, gifted, and perfect Esther. She instead, through the help of her “feminist” psychiatrist, had to work hard in order to deconstruct her “patriarchal” thoughts and forge a new, liberated identity. Indeed, it is through the help of Dr. Nolan’s therapies and meaningful conversations that Esther’s *bell jar* finally lifts: “All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to circulating air.” (BJ 206)

Although it is impossible to fully judge the achievement that Dr. Nolan’s treatments had on Esther, it is undeniable that she had a positive impact on her patient’s mental health.

Despite Esther's admission of being terrified at the prospect that the *bell jar* will fall upon her once again, "How did I know that someday – at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere – the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (BJ 230), by reading the book retrospectively, we learn that Esther is still alive, recounting her story, and having a baby who is playing next to her: "I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses for the baby to play with." (BJ 3) It is also true, however, that in the end of the novel, the *bell jar* simply lifts, it does not disappear. "Relapses of depression" (Tsank, 2010, p.174) are very much a possibility, as Sylvia Plath's life and death have shown.

CONCLUSION.

The hardest thing in the world to do – and it is especially hard when one is young, female, and highly gifted – is simply to be oneself. (Perloff, 1972, p.521)

At the beginning of the 20th century, those belonging to the newly established group of the *New Women* started to break free from the limited roles offered within their familial context and attempted to express their creative nature. Contemporary to the rise of this new category of ambitious women, a new wave of female mental disorders (e.g. Hysteria and Anorexia nervosa) started to gain prominence. According to Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, the cause behind this pandemic of nervous disorder had its root in education: “[...] more and more women had education, which naturally made them unhappy in their roles of housewives.” (Friedan, 1975, p.18) Women finally gained access to higher education, but the impossibility to make use of what they learnt made them “feel stifled in their homes. They find their routine lives out of joint with their training. Like shut-ins, they feel left out.” (Friedan, 1975, p.18)

Alda Merini and Sylvia Plath, troubled at the prospect of being unable to survive just by performing their prescribed female duties, have essentially emphasized through their publications how madness was inevitably the price they had to pay for the exercise of creativity in a patriarchal society. This thesis therefore aimed at analyzing the condition of two of the most celebrated 20th-century women writers, Sylvia Plath and Alda Merini, and the relationship between their experience in society, who confined them to their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers instead of letting them express their natural gift, and their consequent “madness.”

In the introductory chapter it has been highlighted how, notwithstanding the impossibility to assign a single meaning to the concept of madness because of its multifaceted and social nature, it has essentially retained a female connotation. The coexistence of the notions of creativity and femininity reached its peak in the 20th century, when neurotic

female authors started to express themselves beyond their assigned feminine roles, by establishing themselves as powerful writers. Alda Merini and Sylvia Plath, although different by cultural and social background, have shared a similar path of life: they were both intelligent, had a clear gift for writing poetry, and fought to establish themselves in the typically male, literary environment. In offering a sharp analysis of the historical events that surrounded their existence, they were able to denounce the patriarchal oppression that women were forced to bear in society, highlighting how their mental breakdowns were essentially prompted by the understanding of the mutual exclusiveness of their roles as women and writers. For these women, madness and hospitalization can be interpreted both as the failed attempt at trying to accept their femininity and the roles reserved to them, as well as attempting to reject them by trying new ways of life, which contrasted with their “natural” roles. Thus, both insanity and experiences of confinement are symbols of the feminine experience, as punishment for being female and for desiring not to be. (Chesler, 2018) As Alda Merini puts it, women were forced to deal with a *destino d’alterità*, whatever their choice of life was. (Redaelli, 2013, p.29) In the end, as Jane Ussher has stated in *The Madness of Women*, “Madness is a spectre that haunts all women. No woman is immune from psychiatric diagnosis; no woman is immune from the distress (or the ascription of deviance) that can lead to diagnosis.” (Ussher, 2011, p.3) As Sylvia Plath has expressed through the metaphor of the *bell jar*, women in the 20th century felt entrapped either in their experience of society or in the mental asylums. Esther Greenwood too, the protagonist of Plath’s novel, is aware that even women who were not considered out of their mind and were therefore allowed to live outside of the mental hospital, were living under a stifling *bell jar*: “What was there about us in Belsize [Esther’s asylum] and the girls playing Bridge and gossiping in the college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort.” (BJ 227) To further emphasize how experiences of madness are fairly similar to a large number of 20th century gifted girls, Ellen West (an anorexic and intelligent young woman) has too highlighted: “I feel myself excluded from real life. I am quite isolated. I sit in a glass ball [...] I am twenty-one years old and am supposed to be silent and grin like a puppet. I am no puppet.” (West qtd. in Binswanger, 1958, p.243-56)

Although they never aligned with the feminist movement, both Alda Merini and Sylvia Plath powerfully deliver feminist messages through their writings, as they have shown how the intellectual oppression they faced as young and talented girls in 1950s American and Italian society, played a fundamental role in the deterioration of their mental health. Alda and Sylvia could not survive just by fulfilling their duty as good mothers, wives, and daughters, they had to express their creative natures. In the end, the only way for them to allow themselves to express their needs was to escape these roles by “going crazy.”

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