

Mental Illness in the American Novel: A Study
of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Otessa
Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

Yolanda Rama Cousillas

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Curso 2022-2023

Titora: Margarita Estévez Saá



FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

CUBRIR ESTE FORMULARIO ELECTRONICAMENTE

Formulario de delimitación do título e resumo

UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA
FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA
10 NOV.
ENTRADA N°

Traballo de Fin de Grao curso 2022/2023

APELIDOS E NOME:	Rama Cousillas , Yolanda
GRAO EN:	Lingua e Literatura Inglesa
(NO CASO DE MODERNAS) MENCIÓN EN:	
TITOR/A:	Margarita Estévez Saá
LIÑA TEMÁTICA ASIGNADA:	Literatura en lingua inglesa

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

Título: Mental Illness in the American Novel: A Study of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar and Otessa Moshfegh's My Year of Rest and Relaxation.

Resumo:

Our contemporary society is beginning to take seriously the mental problems and illnesses that affect too many people. Therefore, madness, depression, and anxiety, among others, are being considered openly by the public opinion, even by politicians.

Literature has a long tradition in the representation of these topics although in the past, sometimes it dealt with mental disorders in an indirect way, as was the case, for instance, with women's anxieties, fears or postnatal depressions and the use of the trope of the ghost that was used by writers to refer to these states and conditions.

The purpose of this research is to study two seminal fictions that have dealt with mental illnesses: Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar (1963) and Otessa Moshfegh's My Year of Rest and Relaxation (2018). The analysis will cover two main objectives. The first one is to identify how these novels feature mental disorder and illustrate the circumstances that led the protagonists to suffer from it. In this sense, we shall take into account the fact that they are young women so that a gender perspective will be applied. The second main objective is to assess the social and cultural projection of these two works, that have become classics in the representation in literature of the topic of mental illness.

SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

Santiago de Compostela, 10 de Novembro de 2022

<p>Sinatura do/a interesado/a Yolanda Rama Cousillas 79342139M</p>	<p>Visto e prace (sinatura do/a titor/a)</p> <p>ESTEVEZ SAA <small>Firmado digitalmente por</small> MARGARITA <small>ESTEVEZ SAA MARGARITA</small> 34960718M <small>34960718M</small> <small>Fecha: 2022.11.10</small> <small>11:11:59 +01'00'</small></p>	<p>Aprobado pola Comisión do Traballo de Fin de Grao coa data</p> <p>25 NOV. 2022</p> <p>Selo da Facultade de Filoloxía</p>
--	--	--



Table of contents

I.	Abstract	5
I.	Introduction.....	6
II.	Crazy women through the centuries: An overview	7
III.	An analysis of the literary sources	14
	1.The Bell Jar	14
	2. My Year of Rest and Relaxation	21
IV.	The impact of <i>The Bell Jar</i> and <i>My Year of Rest and Relaxation</i> in current society	26
	1. A brief history of femcels	27
	2. The roots of the femcel aesthetic.....	29
	3. #sick: The femcel community on Tumblr	29
	3.1. Figure A	30
	3.2. Figure B	31
	3.3. Figure C	32
	3.4. Figure D	33
	3.5. Figure E	34
V.	Conclusion.....	35
VI.	Bibliography	36

I. Abstract

Our contemporary society is beginning to take seriously the mental problems and illnesses that affect too many people. Therefore, madness, depression, and anxiety, among others, are being considered openly by the public opinion, even by politicians.

Literature has a long tradition in the representation of these topics although in the past, sometimes it dealt with mental disorders in an indirect way, as was the case, for instance, with women's anxieties, fears or postnatal depressions and the use of the trope of the ghost that was used by writers to refer to these states and conditions.

The purpose of this research is to study two seminal fictions that have dealt with mental illnesses: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Otessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018).

The analysis will cover two main objectives. The first one is to identify how these novels feature mental disorder and illustrate the circumstances that led the protagonists to suffer from it. In this sense, we shall take into account the fact that they are young women so that a gender perspective will be applied. The second main objective is to assess the social and cultural projection of these two works, that have become classics in the representation in literature of the topic of mental illness.

Keywords: madness, entrapment, patriarchy, capitalism, rebirth

I. Introduction

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have brought us many steps forward in the fight for gender equality. One of these has been the increasing concern with mental health, both by society, professionals and the media. Recent developments in the field of psychology and psychiatry have allowed us to provide a name to many afflictions of women that were previously disregarded, as well as appropriate management of said afflictions. Nonetheless, it is quite obvious that throughout history, the male-dominated medical sciences have paid little-to-no attention to the grievances of the opposite gender. Even nowadays we often see lack of research on female-related mental health and the severe repercussions this has for patients.

In the last few years, a gargantuan number of media featuring the mental distress of women seems to have been released and gained great amounts of success. It appears that the public has developed a taste for delving into the uncomfortable and ugly parts of femininity and, despite the rebranding the concept has undergone, this is not a new phenomenon. In fact, through the centuries many works of specifically literary fiction have attempted to capture the oppressive environment that is patriarchal society, as well as its effects on women's minds. From Lady MacBeth, to Miss Havisham, to Charlotte Perkins' anonymous narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), the history of English literature is plagued with depictions of insane women. Gilbert and Gubar, in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979)¹, explain how they discerned a "distinctive female literary tradition" in the works of authors like Austen, Dickinson, the Brontës and Evans (a.k.a. George Eliot). This tradition, they say, has a common theme of entrapment, both figurative and literal, where the authors and the characters they wrote existed with the "common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art and society."

In this dissertation I will explore this topic through the works of two iconic authors whose writings have left an everlasting print in current culture: Sylvia Plath and Otessa Moshfegh.

Plath's work is still undeniably influential. The Pulitzer-winning author is known worldwide and has inspired endless manifestations of art and academic research. She was one of the first female writers to speak in first person about her tribulations with mental health, and she is considered as a pioneer of the subgenre of confessional poetry.

Moshfegh's work, despite being very recent, has been critically and publicly acclaimed for its unique depiction of feminine depression. However, the reasons for her novel being chosen as a topic of this dissertation are somewhat unique. Since being published, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) has garnered a virtual following of young women who hail it as the sacred scriptures of their movement, identifying with its protagonist and idolizing her self-destructing behaviour. The femcels, a subculture of pink-tinted and lace-rimmed suicidal tendencies, has grown dramatically in the last few years, and I believe it important to give visibility to the kind of complexes we as a society are instilling into our youth.

For said purpose, this work will be divided in three main sections.

The first section will analyse the historical conception of female mental illness², using Great Britain and the United States as areas of study. I will give an overview of the topic, from the

¹ Gilbert &, Gubar (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.

² The terms "mental disorder" and "mental illness" will be used interchangeably throughout this discussion as per indication of the American Psychological Association. (<https://dictionary.apa.org/mental-disorder>)

emergence of psychiatry in the late eighteenth century, continuing through the establishing of it as a medical specialty in the nineteenth century, and proceeding into the invention of psychoanalysis and its application in the early twentieth century. Finally, I will discuss the Drug Revolution of the late twentieth century and its impact on contemporary society.

Building on this, in the second section I will provide an analysis of *TBJ* and *MYORAR*, and consider the social conditions by which the characters' psyche is affected. In addition, I will frame both of these works within the context of second and third wave feminism respectively, as we see how each period of feminist activity is represented in each novel.

Lastly, the third section will seek to examine both the beneficial and pernicious effects of the normalization of mental illness in the age of the Internet. I will investigate the way in which both of the literary works here analysed are used by youth for the purpose of romanticizing eating disorders, depression and suicide, but are also a means of expressing negative feelings in a socially acceptable way.

Before venturing further, however, I believe a disclaimer is in order. The works here analysed present the experience of two white, educated, heterosexual, middle and upper-middle class female characters. They hence offer a limited perspective on the matter of female mental health that might greatly differ from those of low-class, queer, disabled or coloured women. It is my opinion that feminism must be intersectional in order to exist at all, and that the voices of all types of women must be given attention to ensure the accomplishment of social justice. With this purpose I recommend three literary masterpieces that provided me with a diverse viewpoint of the female experience: Elsa Morante's *The History* (1974), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Jul Maroh's *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2010).

II. Crazy women through the centuries: An overview

What is insanity? Poets, revolutionaries, messiahs, and housewives have been labelled as mad throughout history. Michel Foucault, in his book *Madness and Civilization* (1961), considers that "madness" is a construct, separate from the physiological condition of mental illness, and heavily determined by many centuries' worth of socio-political, historical, religious and economic connotations and prejudices. What he fails to notice in his critique, as Elaine Showalter recounts in *The Female Malady* (1987), is the important role of sex and gender in the perception of madness.

Because insanity seems to be, by all accounts, a feminine monopoly. Society has long perceived volubility as a quality inherent to women, the opposite extreme to male logic and reason. Both punished and expected, sensual and repulsive:

Madness is a female malady because it is experienced by more women than men (...) By the middle of the nineteenth century, records showed that women had become the majority of patients in public lunatic asylums. In the twentieth century too, we know that women are the majority of clients for private and public psychiatric hospitals, outpatient mental health services, and psychotherapy; in 1967 a major study found "more mental illness among women than men from every data source" (Showalter 1987, p. 3)

The late eighteenth century saw an ideological shift named the First Psychiatric Revolution. When *exposés* about the brutality suffered by female inmates at madhouses began cropping up, an uproar was caused. In this way, the image of insanity underwent a sex change: the savage madman in need of violent taming gave way to the desirable madwoman, a pitiable character requiring paternalistic guidance and care. This romanticization of female mental illness acquired

a representative in the figure of Shakespeare's Ophelia, whose love melancholy resulted in suicide.

This newfound sympathy for the insane eventually gave way, during the reign of Queen Victoria, to a series of legislative reforms (Madhouse Act of 1828, Lunatics Act of 1845), as well as the appearance of a new kind of facility specially ideated for the care of the mentally unwell: the asylum. Indeed, Britain became not only the centre of lunacy reform, but also the international haven of insanity:

At the beginning of Victoria's reign, England, pre-eminent in art, in letters, in technology, and in trade, also led the world in madness (...) After all, madness was a disease of the highly civilized and industrialized (...) attributing the worrisome increase in insanity to the competition, financial speculation, and ambition characteristic of the age. (Showalter 1987, p. 24)

It was during this time that Romantic ideals of insanity, involving artistic genius and grandiloquent expression, disappeared. Instead, the Victorian asylums were conceived in a domestic manner and structured around everyday chores and activities. In the asylum "family", the superintendent and his wife acted as parental figures, while the patients were all seen as children. Regardless of this, asylums were still heavily segregated by class and sex.

However, as stated above, women made up the majority of patients in all psychiatric facilities except for "asylums for the criminally insane, military hospitals and idiot schools" (Showalter 1987, p. 52). This was believed to be caused by a natural proclivity to insanity, linking female biological milestones such as pregnancy or menopause to a weakening of the mind. Menarche was thought to be a specially vulnerable moment for the mental health of women, a period when little girls "became inexplicably "irreligious, selfish, slanderous, false, malicious, devoid of affection, self-willed and quarrelsome." (Showalter 1987, p. 56) This perspective completely ignores the fact that the first menstruation signified a radical change of lifestyle for girls who had previously not been made to act much different from brothers, male cousins and friends of the opposite gender. Their days stripped of the typical fun and games of children, little girls became suddenly aware of the restrictive roles society expected them to fulfil. Indeed, woman-authored literary sources of the time, such as diaries and novels, point to social causes rather than biological ones as the root for mental breakdowns and depression.

Furthermore, sexuality was a major point of discussion regarding women's madness and its treatment. Nymphomania was often pointed out as a symptom of hysteria, and Dr. Isaac Baker Brown of the Obstetrical Society of London even became convinced that masturbation was the cause of madness in women. He thus developed a horrifying procedure called clitoridectomy, or the surgical removal of the clitoris, as a cure for female insanity:

Brown carried out his sexual surgery in his private clinic in London for seven years, between 1859 and 1866 (...) He operated on patients as young as ten, on idiots, epileptics, paralytics, even on women with eye problems. He operated five times on women whose madness consisted of their wish to take advantage of the new Divorce act of 1857. (Showalter 1987, p. 76)

The second half of nineteenth century psychiatry was heavily influenced by the advent of Darwinian evolutionary theories. Biological determinism commanded the understanding of madness at the time, with a particular focus on the concepts of atavism and degeneration. A cure for mental illness, previously thought possible, was discarded by Darwinians in favour of segregation. The long-term solution to madness, they thought, resided in eugenics. Darwinism came to be used as a way to justify the latent classism and racism of British society at the time, shaping psychiatric practice. The fact that a bigger incidence of madness appeared in lower-class people was consequence, and at the same time cause, of their inferiority as humans.

Proletarians, immigrants and sexual deviants, however, found themselves low on the insanity pyramid with the appearance of a much too strong competitor: the New Woman. “New Woman” is a term coined by writer Sarah Grand in her 1894 essay *The New Aspect of the Woman Question*³, to designate a woman which “awaking from (her) long apathy” challenged traditional gender roles of servitude to men. The epidemic of mental disorders that plagued the end of the nineteenth century, came to be considered a product of women’s excessive aspirations to education and individual freedoms. Darwinian theories, as shown in *The Descent of Man* (1871), had been markedly insistent on the superiority of the male gender:

Woman seems to differ from man in mental disposition, chiefly in her greater tenderness and less selfishness (...) It is generally admitted that with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man, but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilisation. The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man’s attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman — whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. (Darwin 1871, pp. 503-504)

These assumptions, therefore, were helpful in substantiating already established patriarchal ideals, such as the gender divide of labour, making them not only an ideological matter but a scientific one. Because women had a supposed predisposition to taking on maternal and caretaking roles, mental breakdowns were expected when they tried to break out of their “natural” positions. Not only that, but it was believed that “once it appeared, mental disorder might be passed on to the next female generation” (Showalter 1987, p. 123), thus answering the questions about the prevalence of female patients in asylums.

This social conflict was a perfect environment for nervous disorders to thrive, with three particular ones becoming singularly proficient among the female population: Anorexia, hysteria and neurasthenia. The most emblematic one of them is, without a doubt, hysteria, an illness which, even in the etymology of the word itself (derived⁴ from the ancient Greek *ὑστέρα*, meaning “womb”), we can see pertains to the feminine. Thought to be caused by sexual dissatisfaction⁵, the symptomatology of hysteria was vague, including any and all “abnormal” behaviour exhibited by women: faintness, nervousness, insomnia, fluid retention, heaviness in the abdomen, muscle spasms, shortness of breath, irritability, loss of appetite for food or sex, or a tendency to cause trouble for those around her. Systemic oppression was, again, disregarded as a possible root of the issue. Furthermore, hysteria could involve the symptom of anorexia nervosa. First categorized as a nervous disorder in 1873, anorexia was found to be most common among young women in their late teenage years. Whatever the illness, treatment was merciless:

Physicians agreed on the benefits of “observant neglect” in which indifference to the patient’s expectations of sympathy established the physician’s lofty authority. Some went beyond mere indifference to intimidation, blackmail, and threats. The treatments suggested for hysterical fits included “the sudden production of some painful impression”: pouring water on the head,

³ Grand, S. "The new aspect of the woman question." *The North American Review* 158.448 (1894): 270-276.

⁴ Liddell and Scott (1889). “ὑστέρα” in *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford. Clarendon Press.

⁵ Maines, R. (1999). “The Technology of Orgasm: Hysteria, the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction”. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 23.

compressing the supraorbital nerve, stopping the patient's breathing, slapping the face and neck with towels, and exercising pressure "on some tender area." (Showalter 1987, p. 138)

The American counterpart to hysteria, called neurasthenia, possessed similar characteristics to the latter. However, unlike the unreasonable and wild hysteric, the neurasthenic was considered pleasant and ladylike, ill with a disease endemic to the refined middle class of the United States. The neurasthenic woman was considered a victim of overexertion, misguidedly trying to pursue academic studies or careers usually reserved to men. Neurasthenic patients would often undergo the rest cure, where they would spend several weeks bedbound and overfed, with no intellectual stimuli whatsoever. This complete isolation would often have severe pernicious repercussions on the psyche of patients. The most famous account of a patient undergoing the rest cure is that of Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), where the narrator, suffering from post-partum depression, is confined to a room (a nursery, symbol of infantilization) by her husband and forbidden to write. Eventually, the narrator will come to obsess over the wallpaper and imagine that there is a woman trapped behind it, trying to break through. By the end of the story her madness will overtake her as she rips the paper apart, her sanity completely depleted. Gilman fictionalised her own experience with the rest cure in order to critique the therapy. After sending the story to her former physician, Silas Weir Mitchell, he altered his methods in treating neurasthenia.

Management of hysteria was revolutionized in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. At the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, the first neurology clinic in Europe was established by Jean-Martin Charcot⁶. Charcot made efforts to prove, via hypnosis and physical examination, that hysterical patients were not malingerers, but rather suffered from a genuine form of psychological illness. Furthermore, the presence of hysterical symptoms was found in men as well as women, although the latter remained the majority of patients. Nonetheless, sufferers of the illness were not actually listened to, but hypnotized and publicly displayed as a curiosity during Charcot's lectures. In addition, photographs of hysterical women during their fits were taken and published in the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1880), accompanied by suggestive titles like "*Supplication amoureuse*", "*Extase*" or "*Erotisme*".

The first direct account of hysteria emerged with Josef Breuer's treatment of Bertha Pappenheim, an Austrian feminist activist better known for her pseudonym of Anna O. Serving as the original subject of the cathartic method, Pappenheim and Breuer developed what they called "talk therapy", and would later be used by Freud to develop Psychoanalysis. In *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Freud and Breuer dealt with several case studies of intelligent and creative women, whose illness, they suggested, sprung from forbiddance to nurture their intellectual capabilities. However, as Freud became more committed to the development of his psychoanalytic method, he reverted to earlier beliefs on the sexual, rather than societal, origins of hysteria. The most famous case of his malpractice is that of Dora, a rebellious and smart woman whose complaints were ignored by Freud in favour of his own assumptions about her supposed unconscious desires. Nonetheless, psychoanalysis was a step forward in the treatment of mentally ill women with respect to Darwinian psychiatry:

In the Freudian model, masculinity and femininity were not simply biological imperatives that naturally shaped male and female personalities, but rather cultural constructs. In principle, although not always in practice, psychoanalysis was not moralistic; it did not judge the hysteric as weak or bad, but saw hysterical symptoms as the product of unconscious conflicts beyond the person's control. Finally, psychoanalysis was attentive to the process of therapy (...) The patient became an active, although not and equal, partner in the cure. (Showalter 1897, pp. 161-162)

⁶ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Jean-Martin Charcot". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Martin-Charcot>. Accessed 12 June 2023.

The English, however, received psychoanalysis with hostility and scoff, believing it to be not only erroneous, but dangerous. Darwinian psychiatry continued to be the default method for mental illness treatment for years. The hunger strikes of the Suffragettes would have them imprisoned and treated as hysterical by psychiatrists, with brutal abuse inflicted upon them. It was not until the end of the First World War, with the epidemic of “shell-shock” among soldiers, that medics came to the conclusion that neurosis was caused by environmental factors. Although it had been previously stated that men could suffer from hysteric symptoms, such an epidemic of male mental illness was not remembered in recent history.

As with women, symptoms in men varied in severity. Neurasthenic higher-ranking officials would receive psychoanalytic therapy. Soldiers, on the other hand, would be labelled insubordinate, and would often be at the end of punitive treatments. Nonetheless, in both of these situations the goal was to keep the men in the battlefield for as long as possible, and thus immediacy was sought after with no regard to the longevity of the “cure” given. In fact, military men’s mental health would become worse after the war had ended:

Psychiatrists did not anticipate (...) the startling influx of neurasthenic ex-servicemen- about 114600 in all- who applied for pensions for shell-shock related disorders between 1919 and 1929, or predict that the insecurities and pathologies about roles generated by the extraordinary conditions of war would not end with the Armistice, but would continue to work themselves out in peacetime, in households and offices as well as veterans’ hospitals. (Showalter 1897, p. 190)

Although women had seized the industrial jobs men had left behind to fight the war, they quickly went back to their original owners when the conflict ended. The achievement of the female vote in 1914 suffocated the revolutionary flames of feminism, and conservative ideology regarding gender roles was reinvigorated. Female sexuality was once again discussed only in relation to men, with Freud presenting his new theories about penis envy. Women, Freud said, were bound to suffer anxiety when realizing their lack of a penis and would follow one of three possible outcomes: fear of sexuality, rivalry with men or homosexuality, or repression of their sexual desires in favour of motherhood.

After the war, hysteria gave way to schizophrenia as the quintessential female malady of the time. Despite the prevalence of the disorder being more or less equal between the sexes, it still carries gender connotations. Schizophrenia treatments had mostly women patients “both statistically and representationally” (Showalter 1897, p. 205), with the most popular accounts of schizophrenia having feminine protagonists. Furthermore, both the modernists and the surrealists used the schizophrenic patient as a source of inspiration for their literary creation.

Three main treatments for schizophrenia were used from the 1930s to the 1950s: insulin shock, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and lobotomy. As Showalter explains:

The medical rationale for the shock treatments which were invented in the 1930s originated in the belief that the grand-mal convulsions of epilepsy were biologically antagonistic to schizophrenia, and that one of disorder could be prevented or cured by inducing the symptoms of the other. (Showalter 1897, p. 205)

The first of them consisted in the administration of insulin in order to trigger a coma or seizures by hypoglycemic shock. After 20 to 60 minutes, they would be revived, and the same process would be repeated 30 to 90 times. This treatment had several side-effects, including weight gain and memory loss, and was deeply humiliating to subjects, whose precarious physical state would force them to forfeit all agency over themselves.

The second was the most popular treatment through the 1940s and 1950s. It follows the same principle of provoking convulsions on the patient, but applies electricity directly to the anterior temporal lobe area of the scalp. This part of the brain is responsible for semantic memory,

which encompasses “knowledge of objects, people, words, and facts.”⁷ Therefore, ideal patients for the treatment would be those who were not considered to depend on their intelligence to make a living (housewives, for instance).

The third and most extreme of the treatments was lobotomy, during which the patient’s brain was entered via the eye “with an icepicklike instrument, severing the nerves connecting the cortex with the thalamus” (Showalter 1897, p. 208). The target was to reduce the symptoms of mental illness, although at the expense of intellectual capabilities. Like with ECT, the main target of these operations were women, as it was believed it would facilitate to them taking on the housewife role. The surgeries were brief, so much so that the American doctor Walter Freeman was able to perform dozens of them in a single afternoon. Effects of the surgeries, however, were unpredictable and often devastating to the patient, with complications including “intracranial hemorrhage, epilepsy, alterations in affect and personality, brain abscess, dementia, and death”⁸.

In 1964, Laing and Sterson’s *Sanity, Madness, and the Family* made waves. The book, which presented case studies of 11 schizophrenic women and their families, suggested that the disorder could only be understood within the context of each patient’s individual environment. Their symptoms, thus, should be considered as a consequence of living in difficult situations, and not just in the biological sense. This started a movement that would come to be called antipsychiatry, and would provide ammunition to feminists who identified the general living circumstances of women with the schizophrenic’s plight:

For women, antipsychiatry seemed to offer important new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between madness and femininity. Labelling theory provided a way of looking at female insanity as the violation of sex-role expectations. Laingian theory interpreted female schizophrenia as a product of women’s repression and oppression within the family. Madness itself became intelligible as a strategy, a form of communication in response to the contradictory messages and demands about femininity women faced in patriarchal society. Finally, schizophrenia could be seen as a form of protest against the female role. (Showalter 1897, p. 222)

The heyday of antipsychiatry, however, remained confined to the 1960’s. Laingian ideas fell out of use during the 1970s, as many found them to idealize mental illness by calling it a method for personal development (or even a form of clairvoyant power)⁹. In addition, Laing defended that no formal qualification should be required to practise psychiatry, as medical training negatively influenced the therapist’s perception of the patient’s experience. Moreover, Laing believed that a cure for schizophrenia would happen spontaneously when the patient felt freed from social constraints.

The next revolution in psychiatry would appear in the form of psychopharmacology. In 1952, the first antipsychotic, named chlorpromazine, was discovered¹⁰. A few years later, in 1955, the development of an anxiolytic called meprobamate (Miltown) was announced, and would become one of the major tranquilizers in the industry until the arrival, in 1963, of diazepam. Marketed as Valium, the benzodiazepine substituted barbiturates as the most used anxiety treatment¹¹. Valium could not be overdosed on, and thus soon underwent carefree

⁷ Bonner and Price. "Where is the anterior temporal lobe and what does it do?". *Journal of Neuroscience* 33.10 (2013): 4213-4215.

⁸ Caruso and Sheehan. "Psychosurgery, ethics, and media: a history of Walter Freeman and the lobotomy". *Neurosurgical Focus FOC* 43.3 (2017): E6.

⁹ Berlim, Fleck, and Shorter. "Notes on antipsychiatry." *European archives of psychiatry and clinical neuroscience* 253 (2003): 61-67.

¹⁰ Healey, D. (1997). *The antidepressant era*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.43.

¹¹ Tone, A. *The age of anxiety: A history of America's turbulent affair with tranquilizers*. Basic Books, 2008.

overprescription. The target audience for the medicine was apparent: middle-class suburban housewives.

Sociologist Hugh Parry confirmed the prevalence of tranquilizer use among suburban women in one of the first user studies in the United States (...) Women were twice as likely to use tranquilizers as men. Most users were white and educated; fully two-thirds had graduated from high-school or attended college (Tone 2008, p. 179)

The street name for Valium was “Mother’s little helper”, a moniker taken from the title of a song by the Rolling Stones released in 1966. Said song told the story of a stay-at-home-wife, whose addiction to tranquilizers to cope with her unsatisfying life eventually drives her to overdose and die. The band intended to point out the hypocrisy of the older generations, who heavily criticised the counter-culture movement of the youth and its experimentation with drugs such as LSD and marihuana¹², despite heavily relying on drugs themselves. On that same year, Jacqueline Sussan’s *Valley of the Dolls* would also explore the widespread substance abuse of the time.

Drug use in America during the 1960s and 1970s had become enmeshed left-winged political ideology and “assaults on materialism, consumerism, and the political leadership that had dragged the country into Vietnam” (Tone 2008, p. 180). The conservative sectors of the population were aghast with the realization that the housewives, symbols of traditional family units and gender roles, had fallen victim to the horrors of addiction. Paternalistic uproar ensued. The public rightfully blamed pharmaceutical companies and physicians for pushing drugs onto unsuspecting civilians, downplaying the potential risks in order to make a profit. However, the question of what made women such suitable victims to chemical dependency was never discussed. The Federal Drug Administration’s tardiness to recognize the dangers of Valium was swept under the rug. What Betty Friedan calls “the problem that has no name”¹³, would be left unsolved for many years.

If I am right, the problem that has no name stirring in the minds of so many American women today is not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity. It is far more important than anyone recognizes. (...) We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says : “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.” (Friedan 1963, p. 32)

The bad publicity that followed this generalized public uproar led to a sharp drop in sales of Valium during the 1970s. Still, the popularity of tranquilizers in America would not dissolve: the 1980s would be marked by the use of Xanax, followed by Prozac in the 1990s. This points at the high incidence of anxiety disorders among the population of the United States, presumably due to an increasingly fast pace of life and social alienation endorsed by capitalism. In 2006, the number of patients looking for anxiety treatment ascended to 16.2 million (Tone 2008, p. 229). To make matters worse, it has been shown that rates of anxiety comorbidity with depression are strikingly high¹⁴.

In the present day, mental illness seems to be still gendered. A particular research by Girgus and Yang¹⁵ found that depressive symptoms in childhood remained fairly consistent between males and females. However, starting around age 13 and throughout mid-to-late adolescence” girls are approximately twice as likely to be diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder, and report

¹²Egan, S. (2006). “The Albums: Aftermath”. *The rough guide to the Rolling Stones*. London; New York : Rough Guides. 162-165.

¹³ Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. WW Norton & Company.

¹⁴ Gorman, J. M. "Comorbid depression and anxiety spectrum disorders." *Depression and anxiety* 4.4 (1996): 160-168.

¹⁵ Girgus & Yang (2015).” Gender and depression”. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 4, 53-60.

approximately twice as many depressive symptoms as boys”. It hardly seems like a coincidence that this increase starts to occur during the age of puberty, as it previously was known to happen with hysteria and schizophrenia.

In conclusion, we can ascertain that womanhood has consistently been an unsavoury ordeal. Through centuries of history and scientific developments, society remains a hostile environment for girls to grow up in. We can also confidently state that the prevalence of mental disorders in women is often a response to this hostility, a symptom of the injustices and abuse we must endure on a day-to-day basis. Despite the improvements in the treatment of mental disorders, contemporary psychiatric and psychological practice must still overcome a number of problems regarding methodology, medicalization and research bias.

III. An analysis of the literary sources

1. The Bell Jar

This semi-autobiographical novel, written during the 50s and published in 1963, serves as Sylvia Plath’s most famed and revered prose work. Its protagonist and Plath’s alter-ego, Esther Greenwood, is a young woman with a bright mind living in pre-Cold-War-America. Through a first-person narration filled with rich imagery, we follow Esther’s descent into a deep depression, her several suicide attempts and her questioning her role in society as a woman.

The narration develops a feminine coming-of-age story or *Bildungsroman*¹⁶, focusing on the moral growth of the protagonist. The narration is stream-of-consciousness style, much like other stories of the time like Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and is meant to entrap and confuse the reader, much like the protagonist feels she is. The metaphor that the book is named after, the bell jar, is used by Esther to signify the tight societal confines under which she finds herself jailed. Indeed, the suburban home inhabited by the nuclear family is perceived as prison-like, which echoes the concerns of second-wave feminists who questioned the unequal power dynamics in traditional heterosexual relationships¹⁷.

The protagonist is a Boston native, the eldest child of two. Her mother is a widowed shorthand teacher, her husband, a university professor, having died when Esther was 9 years old. The protagonist appears to be lower-middle class, but is very well educated due to her efforts in obtaining scholarships. This in itself is exceptional for the time. As Friedan explains in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), “the proportion of women attending college dropped from 47 per cent in 1920 to 35 per cent in 1958”. Too much education was seen as unfeminine, and a possible deterrent to potential husbands.

The novel starts during the summer of 1953, when she finds herself on an internship at a fashion magazine in New York after having won a writing contest held by said magazine. She describes it as her first time out of New England, a big chance to advance her career and meet influential people, but she isn’t enjoying it. On the contrary, she feels out of place and hates the city. New York, even in its immensity, is stiflingly isolating. To make matters worse, the news coverage on the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg- accused of being Soviet spies trading information about nuclear weapons- seems to follow her wherever she goes. It could be argued that Esther’s crisis of the self is reflected in the Rosenberg’s betrayal of patriotism, as she

¹⁶ Joannou, M. (2019). “The female bildungsroman in the twentieth century”. *A History of the Bildungsroman*, 200-216.

¹⁷ Holmes, M. (2000, March). “Second-wave feminism and the politics of relationships”. In *Women's studies international forum* (Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 235-246). Pergamon.

herself is questioning all-American ideals of family and gender. Esther wonders about what it must feel like to be electrocuted, and thinks “it must be the worst thing in the world” (9), which foreshadows her future undergoing of electroshock therapy.

I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I’d been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp in my closet, and how all the little successes I’d totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue. (9)

We can see here how Esther has lost faith in her previous values. Clothes, prizes and academic validation don’t seem to bring her fulfilment anymore. Esther mentions wanting “change” (79), and at one point agrees to someone else’s characterization of her as “neurotic” (87) because of her wide range of interests and inability to make choices. This applies also to her own self as she does not have a strong sense of identity¹⁸. This will drive her to look for fragments of her own personality in other characters and even invent alter-egos, like Elly Higginbottom or Ee Gee or Elaine, all of them being alter egos of Plath herself. The protagonist’s desire to both assimilate into patriarchal definitions of womanhood and break free from them is reflected in the multiple personalities of Esther.

At the very beginning of the novel this trait of the protagonist becomes obvious because of her relationship with the other girls at the internship. One of them is Doreen, a rich, southern, African American girl whose personality is witty and cynical. Esther sees in her the parts of herself that are socially unacceptable and she dares not show outwardly, like her mean and judgemental nature. She also represents Esther’s desire for sexual liberation. The protagonist admires Doreen’s carefree and rebellious behaviour, but she finds herself lacking the potential to become fully like her and so limits herself to the position of follower. It could be said Esther lives vicariously through her friend.

Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones (...) Being with Doreen made me forget my worries. (14)

Contraposed with Doreen is another girl at the internship: Betsy. The Kansas native is a blond, peppy, and innocent sorority girl whose aspiration in life is to become a farmer’s wife. She is sweet and friendly to Esther but avoids Doreen, who mockingly calls her Pollyanna Cowgirl in secret. Betsy represents the 1950s ideal of womanhood that the protagonist has been socialized to desire. Esther considers it is Betsy who she resembles at heart, although it could be argued that this is wishful thinking.

The protagonist’s indecisiveness is represented by the Fig Tree metaphor that appears throughout the novel. Esther reads a story about a Jewish man and a Catholic nun who often meet under a nearby fig tree to pick up the ripe figs. This happens until one day, while watching an egg hatch in a bird’s nest, their hands touch. After this incident, the nun never comes back to see the Jewish man. Esther imagines this fig tree to be her life, with a fig at the end of each branch representing a different path she could take in life. One fig is a husband and children, one a career as a poet, another a job as an editor, the next a position as a college professor... The woman believes that choosing one means losing all the rest, and thus does nothing, just watching as the figs grow black and fall at her feet. She is bound by “chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices” (Friedan 1963, p. 31)

Esther sees herself as “inadequate” (73), at one point even listing all of the things she cannot do (cook, write shorthand, dance) which are, incidentally, abilities often associated with traditional

¹⁸ Axelrod, S. G. (2010). Alienation and Renewal in *The Bell Jar*. *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies*, 3, 134-143.

femininity. She feels most herself when she takes a hot bath, as she feels about them “the way those religious people feel about holy water” (25). Later on, the metaphor of purity and rebirth is brought up again when the narrator gets food poisoning and vomits, afterward feeling “purged and holy and ready for a new life” (48) although she does not really know what that life would be.

Esther projects her own sense of inadequacy onto others. She specially enjoys judging men’s appearances, unkindly commenting to herself about their perceived flaws. Esther seems to be particularly peeved by short men, as they highlight her tallness, a trait traditionally associated with masculinity:

I’m five feet ten in my stocking feet, and when I am with little men I stoop over a bit and slouch my hips, one up and one down, so I’ll look shorter, and I feel gawky and morbid as somebody in a sideshow. (16)

However, the man Esther looks down on the most is Buddy Willard, not so much physically as morally. In flashbacks, we learn that Buddy is a medical student whom Esther pined after for many years, idealizing him, before he finally showed an interest in her. Here we see her longing for the idealized conception of love she has been socialised to believe exists. Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (1949)¹⁹, explains this desire:

The adolescent girl at first wishes to identify with males; once she renounces this, she then seeks to participate in their virility by being loved by one of them; it is not the individuality of one man or another that seduces her; she is in love with man in general. (Beauvoir 1949, p. 774)

Buddy and Esther go steady until he admits to not being a virgin. Esther’s mother had always told her to remain a virgin until marriage, once even mailing her an article called *In Defence of Chastity*, essentially a fear-mongering vindication of abstinence. When Buddy tells her about his summer fling with a waitress called Gladys, Esther feels a deep disgust toward him that she tries to pass as moral. However, it is inferred that she simply detests the idea of being at a disadvantage, saying he would “still be one person ahead” (74) of her:

It might be nice to be pure and then to marry a pure man, but what if he suddenly confessed he wasn’t pure after we were married, the way Buddy Willard had? 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. (77)

After this revelation, Esther will come to see her own virginity “like a millstone around [her] neck” (201), showing the way she was brought up to see her sexuality as a prison, as well as her rightful anger that men are not brought up with the same expectations.

Esther decides that she will break up with Buddy. but news arrive that he has become ill with tuberculosis and is being sent to recover at a sanatorium in the Adirondacks, so this will have to wait. His mother, Mrs. Willard, will offer Esther a summer job there “so Buddy wouldn’t be lonely” (24), which she promptly turns down in favour of the magazine internship. This decision comes much to both Willards’ surprise, as the protagonist rejects the caretaking role that she would be expected to take on. Instead, Buddy’s tuberculosis is a relief to Esther, who appreciates her boyfriend’s sickness to be a “punishment” on him for “feeling so superior to people” (69). This points out Esther’s bubbling resentment toward Buddy, who, as an aspiring doctor, always looked down on her dream to become a poet and once told her that once she had children she would not want to write anymore:

Now, lying on my back in bed, I imagined Buddy saying, “Do you know what a poem is, Esther?”

¹⁹ Galster, I. (Ed.). (2004). *Le deuxième sexe de Simone de Beauvoir*. Presses Paris Sorbonne.

“No, what?” I would say.

“A piece of dust.”

Then just as he was smiling and starting to look proud, I would say, “So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you’re curing. They’re dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together.” (55)

Esther’s love for poetry is here directly juxtaposed to the mathematical sciences, represented by Buddy. Budick²⁰ sustains that “there is a tension between what Plath views as vital and life-sustaining structures that express themselves in a feminine discourse, and life-denying forces that speak their own distinctive, male, language”. For instance, Esther dislikes the eighteenth century because of “all those smug men writing tight little couplets and being so dead keen on reason” (113). This dislike of the “male language” is most clear when the narrator describes some of her previous tribulations taking a physics and chemistry class in college:

Physics made me sick the whole time I learned it. What I couldn’t stand was this shrinking everything into letters and numbers. (...) on the blackboard, there were these hideous, cramped, scorpion-lettered formulas (...) All the perfectly good words like gold and silver and cobalt and aluminium were shortened to ugly abbreviations with different decimal numbers after them. (37)

This male-female dichotomy does not appear limited to linguistics, but is also explored in the societal sense. Both genders’ approach to love and marriage is an essential topic of the novel and heavily conditions the narrator’s personal growth. Esther was raised in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, a society that perceived romantic relationships with strong pragmatism. As per Mrs. Willard’s words, a man seeks “a mate” and a woman “infinite security” (68). This connotation of the word “mate” aims at conveying a sense of partnership, an equal relationship between husband and wife. It could almost be considered euphemistic in its usage, as the reality of the marital relationship was far from fair. The transcendental concept of love appears in the book reduced to a transactional affair, by which the woman becomes a servant to her husband in exchange for financial stability that she cannot otherwise obtain:

Once when I visited Buddy I found Mrs Willard braiding a rug (...) She’d spent weeks on that rug, (...) but after Mrs Willard was through, instead of hanging the rug on the wall the way I would have done, she put it down in place of her kitchen mat, and in a few days it was soiled and dull and indistinguishable from any mat you could buy for under a dollar in the Five and Ten. And 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. (80)

The 1950s housewife archetype is very much present (and romanticised) in contemporary mainstream media, often represented in pin-up style drawings of a beautiful woman with a manicured style sporting an apron, looking very happy and at home inside a retro-looking kitchen²¹. Esther does not seem to share this iconized perception, as she proclaims how much she hates “the idea of serving men in any way” (72) and rejects Buddy when he proposes marriage to her. As Lisa Healy points out, Marxist ideology believes that the monogamous nuclear family is vital in the maintenance of capitalism²². The marriage contract is similar to the one signed between the capitalist and the labourer, representative of the man and the woman respectively. The wife

²⁰ Budick, E. M. (1987). The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. *College English*, 49(8), 872-885.

²¹ See Reference Image A

²² Healy, L. (2009). Capitalism and the Transforming Family Unit: A Marxist Analysis. *Ed: Cliona Barnes, Amanda Haynes, Patricia Neville, Martin Power, Limerick Student Journal of Sociology, SOCHEOLAS*, 2(1), 18-35.

will become exploited in order to provide heirs that will ensure the concentration of wealth in future generations.

At one point, when accompanying Buddy to witness a woman giving birth, he jokes women should not be allowed in birthing rooms, as they would never want to have children if they were. In this joke we get to experience, once again, the man's paternalistic and condescending mindset, and we are reminded of his commitment to "trying to explain things" (65) to Esther. The narrator's first impression of the birthing room is not a good one, and she describes the gurney to look like an "awful torture table" (63). The soon-to-be mother, named Mrs. Tomolillo, is said, in a particularly gruesome manner, to have "an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs" (63), and her wails sound inhuman to Esther. Buddy later tells the protagonist how the woman was under the effects of a special drug that would make her forget she ever suffered at all. She thinks this is the kind of drug a man would be likely to invent, as it doesn't stop the pain from happening, but merely conceals the reality of it to the mother:

Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again. (63)

The woman appears separated from the childbirth process, like she is from the psychiatric treatment. Therefore, while Esther empathises with the pain of the woman giving birth, Buddy perceives the situation from an industrial point of view: the mother is a labourer, her body is the means of production, owned by her father before marriage and by her husband after it, and the baby is the product, which is also owned by the husband. The worker's wellbeing is overlooked as long as she keeps producing.

Due to all these reasons, Esther will, toward the end of the novel, take control of her reproductive system by getting a diaphragm. Not only will this be disregarding all of the abstinence indoctrination she had previously suffered in her life, but also the law, as this kind of birth control was illegal in Massachusetts at the time. The fight for reproductive rights was as much a concern to second-wave feminists as it is for us third-wave ones in 2023. The commercialization of the pill in 1960²³ and the *Roe v. Wade* case in 1973²⁴ paved the way for women's entrance in the workforce and subsequent financial and social emancipation. The gurney, used by Plath as a symbol of oppression during childbirth and ECT, becomes one of liberation when it is used to obtain birth control:

I climbed in the examination table, thinking: "I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because what they did, they would do anyway regardless..." (196)

The idea of women as objectified docile bodies is reprised by Marco, the "woman-hater" (98). Marco is a man Esther meets on her last night in New York, when going to a country club with Doreen. Since their very first interaction, the man is forceful and violent. He coerces Esther to dance with him, although she does not know the steps of the tango. This does not bother him, he will "do the dancing" (98), to which Esther comments to herself that "It doesn't take two to dance, it only takes one" (99). The tango dance is here clearly used as a metaphor for sex and sexual assault, which Marco later tries to inflict upon the protagonist. As he throws her on the dirt, him on top of her, he repeatedly calls not only her, but all women, "sluts" (100) and proclaims that

²³ Goldin & Katz (2002). "The power of the pill: Oral contraceptives and women's career and marriage decisions". *Journal of political Economy*, 110(4), 730-770.

²⁴ Lee, N. H. (2014). *The Search for an Abortinist: The Classic Study of How American Women Coped with Unwanted Pregnancy before Roe v. Wade*. Open Road Media.

“Yes or no, it is all the same” (101). During the struggle, Esther punches Marco’s nose, which he wipes the blood off of in order to paint the woman’s cheek before she leaves. This is symbolic of the long-lasting trauma he has just inflicted upon her, marking her physically as well as mentally.

After this event takes place, Esther returns to the hotel while precariously holding up pieces of her torn-up dress in prolonged humiliation. She changes into a robe and gathers all the clothes she had previously bought for her stay in New York, and proceeds to toss them all off the roof of the building “like a loved one’s ashes” (102). This metaphor perfectly illustrates how the narrator’s stay in New York marks the death of a part of her, the one that strived to embody societal conventions of femininity. In a sense, this is Esther letting go of her innocence.

The next morning, Esther gets on a train back home, her cheeks still stained with Marco’s blood that she refuses to wash off. From the train window she watches the suburbs with resignation. This resignation devolves into despair when her mother, who had gone to pick her up at the station, informs her that she was not selected to attend the summer writing course she had been hoping for. We can appreciate how Esther subconsciously compares her mother to the suburbs, both representing restriction:

The motherly breath of the suburbs enfolded me. It smelt of lawn sprinklers and station-wagons and tennis rackets and dogs and babies. A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything, like death.

My mother was waiting by the glove-grey Chevrolet. (...) The grey, padded car roof closed over my head like the roof of a prison van, and the white, shining, identical clapboard houses with their interstices of well-groomed green proceeded past, one bar after another in a large but escape-proof cage. (104-105)

During the next few days, Esther goes on a downward spiral. She considers and subsequently discards all the possible courses of action during her summer at home. These ruminations take over her mind and render her unable to relax, leading her to start taking sleeping pills. These don’t work, much to the surprise of Teresa, her family doctor, who gives her a referral to a psychiatrist named Doctor Gordon.

Doctor Gordon represents the oppressive male medical establishment. He is a narcissistic, arrogant young man whom Esther quickly comes to hate. The fire of her hatred is only fuelled further when the doctor asks her to tell him what she “thinks is wrong” (118), implying that her suffering is imaginary. As seen earlier, before the mid-1960s treatment of mental illness was hardly considerate of the patient’s opinion, viewing the issue to be a biological rather than an environmental one. On their second session, Doctor Gordon brings up the topic of Esther getting electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) due to her not improving. This blatant malpractice inflicts severe, long-lasting trauma upon the protagonist. She decides to stop seeing the psychiatrist and stops looking for help altogether, much to her mother’s relief. Marjorie Perloff²⁵ points out how a parallel is drawn between her and Mr. Willard who thought that “all sickness was sickness of the will” (85) :

“I’m through with that Doctor Gordon” (...) “You can call him up and tell him I’m not coming next week.”

My mother smiled. “I knew my baby wasn’t like that.”

I looked at her. “Like what?”

²⁵. Perloff, M. G, & Plath, S. (1972). " A Ritual for Being Born Twice": Sylvia Plath's' The Bell Jar'. *Contemporary Literature*, 13(4), 507-522.

“Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital.” She paused. “I knew you’d decide to be all right again.” (131)

The protagonist’s own mother is a topic of discussion regarding Esther’s condition. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, it is pointed out that in female literary tradition there is a common topic of motherlessness, literal or metaphorical. In *TBJ*, Esther is motherless in the sense that she hates her mother (180). One could think this hatred comes from her fear of becoming her. Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976) discusses this fear, called matrophobia, saying:

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers’; and in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (Rich 1976, p. 236)

We first see our narrator actively perform suicidal ideation shortly before undergoing ECT, showing its terrible effects on her psyche. She starts considering death in practical terms, such as what the ideal number of stories would be to jump off in order to not survive the fall, or the technique Japanese people would use to carry out the Hara-kiri, and how she couldn’t do it because she “hated the sight of blood” (125). Her hatred of blood could be seen as further rejection of traditional femininity, with blood being associated to childbirth. The ECT gives her the final push she needs to start trying to commit suicide. She tries slitting her wrists in the bathtub, hanging herself and drowning, but all these attempts are unsuccessful.

The closest she comes to death is after hiding herself in a gap in her cellar and overdosing on pills, but she is found and given medical care before it is too late. This, says Perloff, is akin to returning to the womb for Esther, a literal rebirth. However, she does not die, and the self that has come out of the cellar is “hopelessly disembodied” (Perloff 1972, p.511). In the hospital, her hair is shaved off, and she notices that her face is filled with gnarly bruises. Her outward appearance now matches her inner conflict.

She is moved to the city hospital, where she meets with Mrs. Tomolillo, the woman she had seen giving birth. We do not know if this is really her or if Esther made it up, due to the fact that her psyche is very fragile at this point. Her time at the city hospital ward ends when Philomena Guinea, whose scholarship Esther held at university, hears about her predicament and decides to fund her stay at a much better private hospital. Esther is very much aware of what would have happened to her if it weren’t for Mrs. Guinea’s help. Plath heavily criticizes the state of medical care in 1950’s U.S. several times throughout the novel.

I thought of how my mother and brother and friends would visit me, day after day, hoping I would be better. Then their visits would slacken off, and they would give up hope (...) They would be poor, too. They would 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. (144)

At the hospital, our protagonist meets her new psychiatrist: Doctor Nolan. The psychiatrist is described as a “slim young woman” (166) with stylish clothes. Esther’s first thought about her is that she didn’t know “they had women psychiatrists” (166). Esther even comes to see her as a mother figure (187). The meeting between these two characters symbolizes the beginning of Esther’s recovery. By seeing Dr. Nolan, she is for the first time confronted by a feminine, maternal and intelligent career woman, a link between the two worlds the protagonist always thought to be so wide apart.

At this time, Esther also meets with an old acquaintance of hers called Joan Gilling. Joan is a physics major from Esther's hometown who had previously inspired jealousy on the narrator due to her briefly dating Buddy Willard. Joan tells Esther about her struggles with depression and how she had not been able to find good psychiatric help. After reading about Esther on the paper, she decided to attempt suicide. When seeing the scars on her wrist, the narrator decides that she and Joan may have something in common after all. Despite her apparent dislike of Joan, Esther finds herself identifying with the woman much like she had previously done with Doreen or Betsy, saying that "her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of [her] own" (193). The protagonist's relationship with Joan is equally as ambivalent as her relationship with her own self. It is inferred that both the women may have had an attraction to one another, an attraction that Esther put a stop to due to fear and internalized homophobia:

I don't see what women see in other women," I'd told Doctor Nolan in my interview that noon. "What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?"

Doctor Nolan paused. Then she said, "Tenderness."

That shut me up.

"I like you," Joan was saying. "I like you better than Buddy."

(...)

"That's tough, Joan," I said, picking up my book. "Because I don't like you. You make me puke, if you want to know." (193-194)

Nonetheless, after her rejection of Joan's feelings, Esther continues to harbour a deep care for her. She says that she feels as if they "shared a world of [their] own" (199). She feels dejected when her friend announces that she will stop living in the asylum and seeks her help when she has a haemorrhage after her encounter with Irwin. When Joan relapses and hangs herself, Esther is left deeply shaken. At the funeral, the narrator wonders "what [she] thought [she] was burying".

Joan's suicide seems to be the final push toward Esther's recovery. The last few pages of the novel show us what are presumably her last moments at the asylum. She is no more stable at the end of the novel than she was at the start: she still does not know what she wants to do with her life, she is not married nor does she have a boyfriend, and she is not even sure that the state of mental calm she finds herself in currently will last: "How did I know that someday (...) the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (213). But the bell jar never truly ascended. The systemic oppression Esther undergoes due to her gender will never entirely disappear. The difference in her circumstances at the end of the novel with respect to the ones at the beginning, is simply that she comes to deal with the fact of her social inequality. She has not escaped her prison, she has simply learned to live within it.

2. My Year of Rest and Relaxation

Since its release in 2018, the novel by Otessa Moshfegh has been of a polarizing and controversial nature. Set in New York in the years 2000 to 2001, it tells the story of a 26-year-old woman who, despite seemingly having every single advantage point in life, becomes cripplingly depressed and decides to "hibernate" for a year, hoping her sedative-induced slumber will serve as a kind of rebirth:

I was growing less and less attached to life. If I kept going, I thought, I'd disappear completely, then reappear in some new form. This was my hope. This was the dream. (84)

Because ultimately, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a book about the endless cycle of consumerism and the way capitalism brings about alienation. The characters exist in a reified state, considering themselves and others as another product to be bought and sold. The fact that the protagonist and narrator of the story is an anonymous character becomes a metaphor for modern existence. She is just another nameless entity in New York, again the quintessential capitalistic city. A cog in the nine-million-inhabitant industrial machine.

The prose oscillates between a deeply cynical, nihilistic world view and a ridiculous satire meant to shock the reader. The story, as the title suggests, happens in roughly the span of a year. The protagonist tells the story after said year has gone by, but the narration starts *in medias res*, when she has already started taking sleeping pills and spends her days mindlessly watching movies:

I didn't do much in my waking hours besides watch movies (...) TV aroused too much in me (...) Things were happening in New York City - they always are - but none of it affected me. This was the beauty of sleep. (4)

If *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a novel about alienation, sleep is the catalytic agent the action (or inaction) relies on to achieve this finality. As a child, the protagonist felt closest to her mother when they slept in the same bed and, as an adult, she continues to seek comfort in unconsciousness. Irregular sleep patterns are heavily linked to depression²⁶, but she does not seem to identify a correlation. Instead, she describes herself as a "somnophile". It could be argued, as Greenberg²⁷ does, that this philia is most ironic when placed in New York, the city that never sleeps. Rest in the epicentre of capitalism seems almost mutinous, an attack on the very foundation of American society. Time is money, as the saying goes. But the protagonist's waste of time is in itself a privilege provided by the wealth she possesses. The inheritance she receives after both of her parent's deaths ensures she knows she will want for nothing while she rests. And yet, she is haunted by what she lacks. Material things, once her basic needs are provided for, do not make her any happier. Her unproductiveness is "productive" (51) in relation to her mental needs, not her physical ones:

Oh, sleep. Nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness. (46)

The opposite situation is represented by Reva, the narrator's best friend. She is totally absorbed in consumerist culture. She has lost her sense of self and her health in a never-ending quest to climb the social ladder and scape her New Jersey small town roots. Reva is a tragic character. Outwardly she appears cheerful and positive, but she actually shows many self-destructive coping mechanisms. She is a high-functioning alcoholic who maintains a toxic affair with her married boss. She readily consumes self-help books with titles like *Get the Most Out of Your Day*, *Ladies*, *How to Attract the Man of Your Dreams Using Self-hypnosis* and *The Art of Happiness*, and chastises the narrator for her passivity.

But the truth is Reva admires her peer's status and beauty, which she simultaneously resents her for. Her catchphrase of "No fair" perfectly illustrates the envy that she has been socialised to feel as her primary propelling force in life. Their friendship is based first on the narrator's sense of superiority and control over Reva, and on the latter's desire to experience wealth vicariously through the former. The fact the protagonist is a white, Anglo-Saxon protestant and Reva is Jewish further highlights their class disparities:

²⁶ Nutt, Wilson, & Paterson (2022). "Sleep disorders as core symptoms of depression". *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience*.

²⁷ Greenberg, J. (2020). "Losing Track of Time". *Daedalus*, 150(1), 188-203.

I don't know what it was about Reva. I couldn't get rid of her. She worshipped me, but she also hated me. She saw my struggle with misery as a cruel parody of her own misfortunes. (14)

Moreover, Reva is continuously conditioned by her bulimia, a commentary on late 1990s and early 2000s diet culture. She is described as a "gym rat" (7) who is always on some new "insane" (82) diet. Both of these women have a problematic relationship with beauty standards. Reva understands that attractiveness constitutes social capital, and that will only last so long as she is young. She strives to conform to what is deemed stylish and fashionable because she knows that society equates beauty with wealth, and therefore privilege. She buys knock-off designer items, steals make-up testers from stores and seeks to marry rich.

The narrator, on the contrary, was born having all that Reva wants. She describes herself to be someone who "looked like a model, had money [she] hadn't earned, wore real designer clothing, [and] had majored in art history, so [she] was 'cultured'" (13). But her attractiveness is instead seen by her as a burden, a trait that keeps her "trapped in a world that values beauty above all else" (35). Indeed, she describes the way in which her image had been an obstacle in her life, keeping her from forming meaningful relations with others. What was supposed to be a blessing becoming instead a curse, making her an object in the eyes of the opposite gender and an enemy in those of the same one. This includes her own mother, who often demeaned her daughter's appearance and achievements, likely by envy of the latter's beauty and youth. Ironically, they are said to look alike, with the narrator deeming her mother to have gotten away with much wrongdoing for being beautiful.

One might think that she begrudges this similarity as their relationship wasn't a good one, again pointing to the literary *topos* of matrophobia. The mother did not love her daughter, an unwanted child she became pregnant with at 19. She is said to have belonged to a family of wealthy Southern Baptists that would not allow her to have an abortion. This led her to devolve into a bitter bedroom alcoholic whom the narrator remembers as calloused and supercilious. She blamed her husband for ruining her life and her body and, after he dies of cancer, she commits suicide. However, even braindead, with her organs shutting down and the roots of her hair grown for the first time, the narrator gives her mother what she was taught to be the ultimate compliment: "still pretty".

My mother's body stayed alive for exactly three days. Even with a tube down her throat, a machine taped to her face to keep her breathing, she was still pretty. Still prim. (151)

Misogyny is defined by Margaret Piggott as the "fear, hatred and devaluing of women and the feminine"²⁸. When it becomes internalised through exposure to sexist and misogynist culture, women and girls might come to enforce those same ideals onto themselves and others, often doing so subconsciously. This circumstance plays a great part in female interpersonal relationships²⁹, frequently making them hostile and confrontational. While analysing the source text, we observe instances of the narrator curating her image differently when trying to appeal to other women, downplaying her looks in order to appear as non-threatening as possible:

I wore (...) flats -in case I was taller than Natasha, which I was by half an inch-(...) I knew not to wear a dress or look too prim or feminine. That would only elicit patronizing contempt. (36)

At a point she recalls arriving late to a Feminist Theories and Art Practices class, in which the professor would chastise her for how expensive her shoes (one of many impulsive purchases made to distract herself from the death of her parents) were. At this time, a classmate would

²⁸ Piggot, M., (2004). "Double jeopardy: Lesbians and the legacy of multiple stigmatized identities". *Unpublished thesis, Psychology Strand at Swinburne University of Technology, Australia.*

²⁹ Szymanski, Gupta, Carr, & Stewart (2009). "Internalized misogyny as a moderator of the link between sexist events and women's psychological distress". *Sex roles, 61*, 101-109.

describe her as being “broken by the male gaze” (189), a term coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*³⁰. The male gaze encapsulates the deep-seated drive in cinema to satisfy men’s “scopophilia”, which is the sexual pleasure in looking. In this way, women’s bodies are witnessed in fragments instead of as a whole, therefore becoming an object. Consequently, the internalized male gaze translates into a woman looking at herself the way the male gaze would. Margaret Atwood perfectly summarized this concept in *The Robber Bride* (1993): “You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur” (pp. 721-722). One could be of the opinion that the protagonist is indeed a victim of the male gaze. Although she resents the fixation of others on her looks, she is also unable to stop seeing herself through their lens. At multiple points in the novel, the protagonist will look at her progressively decaying figure and assess herself, ultimately concluding that she is still pretty, still worthy.

Martha Nussbaum speaks of what she calls Adaptive Preferences³¹, essentially harmful preferences one develops in order to adapt to one’s oppressive environment. The idea is that if a woman weren’t conditioned by the patriarchy to, for instance, wear makeup or heels, she wouldn’t spontaneously decide to do it. But what does it mean to make a decision freely? Choices do not exist in a vacuum and no individual is untainted by social pressure. It is impossible to predict the behaviour of an asocial subject, as humans are inherently gregarious animals. Even if the narrator and Reva’s choices were made under the patriarchy, this does not mean that they are less valid, and thus should not be dismissed as mindless. In this way, the protagonist’s relationship with beauty standards is nuanced and complex. This reflects the current state of affairs on the subject of beauty, wherein women are simultaneously rewarded and punished for trying to conform. And indeed, the narrator did at first try to fit in with the Upper East Side lifestyle of indulging in consumerism, partying and sleeping around. This did not bring her the happiness nor the love she desired, the closest thing she found being her relationship with a man she had met during freshman year of college: Trevor.

The protagonist’s 41-year-old recurring boyfriend personifies the crisis of traditional masculine roles. He desperately clings to archaic ideals of men as providers, protectors and leaders, basing his worth on his sexual prowess and his financial status. He is a stereotypical Yuppie working as a portfolio manager in the Twin Towers and, most essentially, he is a consumer. He readily consumes expensive goods and services, but also women, whom he commodifies and discards quickly. Trevor specially enjoys younger women because they are malleable and inexperienced, and satiate his need for dominance, whereas older ones refuse to bend to his will. He is described to try to date his age but fail, presumably due to his immaturity and emotional unavailability. Despite all his bravado, his masculinity is fragile as demonstrated by his bad reaction to a joke questioning his aggressive heterosexuality (32). He holds a toxic and fickle relationship with the protagonist, conditioned by his desire to feed his ego. She likes to put him in opposition with what she calls “hipster nerds”, namely a “lower value” type of man in the hierarchy of masculine archetypes. This type of men she perceives to be pretentious, cowardly and insecure, traits that could also arguably be assigned to Trevor, but she is attracted to the latter’s self-assured persona:

They thought that they wanted to be adored, to be influential, celebrated for their genius, that they deserved to be worshipped. But they could barely look at themselves in the mirror (...) At least Trevor had the sincere arrogance to back up his bravado. He didn’t cower in the face of his own ambition, like

³⁰ Mulvey, L. (2013). “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”. In *Feminism and film theory* (p 57-68). Routledge.

³¹ Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach* (Vol. 3). Cambridge university press.

those hipsters. And he knew how to manipulate me- I had to respect him for that at least, however much I hated him for it. (33-34)

One could think that the protagonist seeks a parental figure in Trevor as he is older and emotionally distant the way her father was. Like her mother, Trevor enjoys demeaning the protagonist. Her unloving relationships, be it romantic, friendly or familial, are what drive the narrator to what she calls “self-preservational hibernation” (7). She decides to use sleep as a means of escaping perception.

The major enabler of the protagonist’s self-destructive journey is Doctor Tuttle. The Doctor is an eccentric character of misty morality. She is dubiously qualified to give psychological counselling and seems more likely to be running some sort of illegal drug operation. Tuttle satirizes the American medical system and Big Pharma, a business looking to maximise profits at all costs, including human life. She doesn’t seem to either notice or care that the protagonist is blatantly lying about her symptoms to get drugs, and instead brags about knowing “how to play into [insurance companies’] little games” (22). The protagonist eventually grows attached to her because she feeds into her delusions, and might even see her as the mother figure she never had:

Doctor Tuttle was (...) a whore to feed me lullabies (...) What if she lost her license? What if she dropped dead? What would I do without her? (...) I loved Doctor Tuttle, I guessed. (157)

Doctor Tuttle prescribes astronomically high dosages of tranquilizers to the narrator, the names of which we constantly see: Ambien, Valium, Klonopin, Miltown... At points in the novel, Moshfegh mixes names of made-up drugs- Silencior, Valdignore, Maxiphenphen- with the real ones. The reader will not know what these drugs are, but will simply accept them as part of the chemical arsenal of the narrator. In my opinion, this is supposed to mirror the attitude of the protagonist toward drugs: she doesn’t really know what she is putting in her body, but she does it anyway. One might think this a critique of America’s pill-popping culture, presented as an intergenerational issue with anecdotes about both of her parents’ normalization of substances. She distinctly recalls her father taking over-the-counter medication every night, while her mother abused alcohol and pills. The latter even admitted at one point to having crushed Valium into her daughter’s bottle to stop her crying as a baby.

It is Doctor Tuttle who will eventually introduce her to Infermiterol, a potent and volatile sedative. Infermiterol supposes the final split between the protagonist’s body and mind in an echo of Esther’s mimicry in *The Bell Jar*. The moment she takes it, her unconscious self seems to rebel against her awake self’s resolutions and the narrator begins having incredibly intense sleep-walking episodes. The protagonist’s asleep self represents her body, the human greed that demands feeding. While unconscious, she compulsively indulges in society. She talks and flirts. She buys clothes and fast-food. She goes partying and meets people and wakes up in strange places. At first she is deeply shaken by the missing days and decides to quit Infermiterol. She tries different combinations of drugs she had previously consumed in order to put her back to sleep, but to no avail. After consuming the much more potent sedative, other pills have no effect on her anymore.

Once she realizes she needs the Infermiterol to sleep and her unconscious self becomes too much of a nuisance to handle by herself, the narrator will enlist the help of artist Ping-Xi. The man, whom she first came into contact with working at the Ducat gallery, has a taste for the eccentric. His pieces include splatter paintings made from his own ejaculate and taxidermized dogs with laser eyes. However, what others seem to view as ground-breaking, our narrator appears to see as “canned counter-culture crap”, a manufactured product targeted toward pretentious people with a surplus of money. Ping-Xi represents the capitalistic commodification of the transcendental, in this case art.

The art world had turned out to be like the stock market, a reflection of political trends and the persuasion of capitalism, fueled by greed and gossip and cocaine. I might as well have worked on Wall Street. (182-183)

She will allow Ping-Xi to utilize her sleeping body for his art in exchange for his assistance in her quest to sleep all the time. After getting rid of most of her possessions in an act that resembles Esther throwing her clothes to the wind in *The Bell Jar*, she locks herself in her apartment. The trope of the home as a prison and the man as the jailer is here subverted by Moshfegh. The protagonist's flat is not trapping her against her will, but in accordance to it. She uses the home as a vessel to contain her transformation, like a cocoon from which she will eventually emerge completely reborn.

Over the next 120 days, Ping-Xi makes sure she stays locked in, brings her food and other necessities, and leaves. She wakes only for an hour every three days and communicates with her guard through post-it notes. Meanwhile, her unconscious body gets posed and filmed as payment. Ironically, her efforts to escape perception have led her to extreme exposure. Her body becomes a literal object, much like the ones exposed at Ducat.

When June 1st comes, marking the end of her isolation, the protagonist walks out of her apartment with the eyes of a child, renewed and void of all cynicism. Her body and mind seem to have fused once again. What could by any standard be considered a cathartic finale to the narrator's quest is subsequently juxtaposed with the date looming upon us since the start of the novel: 9/11 shatters her apparent success. The narration closes when on her newly-bought VCR, the protagonist watches over and over the images of a woman jumping from the 78th floor of the North Tower. The movies she watched at the start of the novel are now replaced by a gruesome depiction of desperation. Tone notes that media coverage of the 9/11 attacks, both graphic and unrelenting, resulted in increased anxiety among not only New Yorkers, but the general population of the U.S.

In a detached manner, the protagonist imagines that woman to be Reva, who died in the attack. She tries to soothe herself by looking at the tragedy as art, something she is comfortingly familiar with, something to consume from a distance. She describes the woman as "beautiful" and her plummeting fall as "a dive into a summer lake" (289).

As Dirschauer³² notes, this echoes the still lives she had previously seen during a visit to the museum. The anonymous protagonist of the video is perpetually falling, always on the verge of death, much like our narrator was during her self-inflicted rest cure. We are led to wonder if the television screen serves as a sort of macabre mirror for the main character to reflect in. The narrator seems to have gone back to her old ways, equipped with new trauma to replace the previous. Despite all her work in cleansing herself, the narrator becomes tainted again as soon as she re-enters the world. Separation of the individual and the political is proven impossible.

IV. The impact of *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* in current society

The newest generations – commonly known as Millennials and Gen Z – are the most connected in the history of humanity. With the meteoric rise of the internet and social media we are now able to chronicle every second of every day, every thought, every action. With every piece of

³² Dirschauer, M. (2022). "Sleep as Action? World Alienation, Distance, and Loneliness in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*". *AmLit-American Literatures*, 2(1).

knowledge at our fingertips and every possibility within our reach, one would think we would have become overall happier. But as shown by the data above, the number of patients suffering from anxiety and depression has skyrocketed in the last few decades.

Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic has reportedly resulted in a decline of the general population's mental health, with the ensuing quarantine exacerbating symptoms of pre-existing mental disorders. This time in isolation, added to the interpersonal alienation we have come to associate with late-stage capitalism, seems to have been fatal to a specific demographic: adolescents and young adults. Human beings are social by nature and, in their formative years, interaction with peers is indispensable to achieve a normal development. When lacking in-person rapport, the logical course of action in order to meet these needs was, for most, immersion in the virtual world. Many of them would then take to TikTok, making the short-form social media app gain massive popularity³³. The *BookTok* community, a sort of online book club, reawakened interest in literature among the youth. A book in particular, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, would spark the birth of a new subculture that concerns us here today: the femcels.

1. A brief history of femcels

To understand femcel ideology we must first look to a different group within the virtual sphere: the incels. The word "incel" stands for "involuntarily celibate", in other words an individual who is unable (due to factors such as nonadherence to standards of attractiveness or mental health problems) to engage in sexual intercourse and/or romantic relations despite having the desire to.

The term incel was first used by a Canadian woman named Alanna³⁴, who in 1997 founded the website Alanna's Involuntary Celibacy Project. This was initially a support group for individuals of any sex and gender to talk about their problems with intimacy and loneliness. The founder left the movement in the year 2000, but the ideology has since grown much larger than her.

In 2023, the people who identify as incels are almost solely cisgender men. Their ideology³⁵ - generally in the far right and leaning into fascist rhetoric - sustains that society is inherently oppressive toward the average male while disproportionately favouring women. Incel discourse views women as less-than-human entities, whom they call "femoids" (female humanoids) or "foids", for short. These are ranked by attractiveness on a scale from 1 to 10, with "Stacies" being the highest on the scale, followed by average-looking "Beckies" and low-attractiveness "Gertrudes". Regardless of their position on the decile scale, all women are considered promiscuous and hypergamous, only willing to engage in intercourse with the most attractive men or "Chads".

Diatribes against feminism are extremely common in incel forums, social echo-chambers that foster violence and hatred. This violence is by no means limited to the virtual sphere, with incel terrorist attacks having become increasingly common over the last decade. The most notorious

³³ Feldkamp, Jana "The rise of TikTok: the evolution of a social media platform during COVID-19." *Digital Responses to Covid-19: Digital Innovation, Transformation, and Entrepreneurship During Pandemic Outbreaks* (2021): 73-85.

³⁴ Taylor, J. (2018). "The woman who founded the 'incel' movement". BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45284455>

³⁵ The lingo and philosophical views discussed in this section are extracted from the Incel Wiki, an online encyclopaedia produced by incels: https://incels.wiki/w/Main_Page

one may have been the one perpetrated by Elliot Rodger³⁶. In the year 2014, Rodger went on a murder spree in Isla Vista, California, killing 6 and injuring another 14 before committing suicide. Mere hours prior to this, he had published a 141-page manifesto, titled *My Twisted World*, which would come to be known as the fundamental incel theoretical text. Rodger was hailed as a martyr of the incel movement and inspired several other massacres later on, like Alek Minassian's, which ended the life of 10 people in Toronto. The term "going ER" is commonly used by members of the community referring to their desire to emulate Rodger in his murderous actions.

Inceldom is extremely exclusionary, even among its members. The status of "truecel" is heavily gatekept, declaring that only those with no standards can be considered incel. Incels consider that women cannot be involuntarily celibate, as they act as sexual selectors. Therefore "femcels", female involuntary celibates, are banned from communities and mocked. In response to this exclusion, femcels started creating their own communities. While incels blame women and feminism for their lack of intimate relationships, femcels are more prone to blaming society and beauty standards.

However, the term "femcel" has undergone a shift³⁷ since its rise to the mainstream through sites like TikTok, specially during the pandemic. Whereas it previously designated the feminine counterpart of incels, through an ironizing process it has come to encompass a group of women who embrace personality traits associated with traditional femcels. These traits might include cynicism, manipulateness, narcissism, selfishness and a general unlikability. Another difference between traditional and nouveau femcels relies on their approach to sex and romance. While the former group chases these relationships, the latter rejects them completely. This subculture, mostly comprised of young, heterosexual women and girls of a middle-class background, often utilizes previous trauma caused by patriarchal society to endorse a misandrist worldview. In it, people congregate to talk about shared experiences of depression, anxiety, eating disorders and self-harm, among others. In the process, these experiences often become romanticised and aestheticized. Pain and anger, feelings we previously discussed to be deemed taboo in women, are seen as not only acceptable but glamorous. I find this to be the reason for the popularity of this subculture, as it makes these difficult emotions more palatable and easier to express while also forming a sense of sorority with others who feel the same way.

Despite it being necessary for girls and women to have an emotional outlet for their trauma, the act of caging all their resentment into a community of other people who feel exactly the same way is a perilous one. As mentioned above, femcels have a misandrist point of view that often extends to other political aspects in very negative ways. Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) belong to a branch of Radical Feminism that is gender-critical, that is, partial to biological essentialism and the abolition of gender³⁸. Transphobia and the viewing of male-to-female transgender people as dangerous fetishizers of womanhood is frighteningly prominent among femcels.

³⁶ (2018, April 26) "Elliot Rodger: How misogynist killer became 'incel hero' ". BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189>

³⁷ Jones, A. (2022, March 10) "The rise of femcels — meet the women who refuse to have sex". London Evening Standard. <https://www.standard.co.uk/insider/what-are-femcels-female-involuntary-celibates-b987250.html>

³⁸ Gutzwa, Justin A (2021). "Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs)". In *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education*. pp. 695–698

2. The roots of the femcel aesthetic

The femcel aesthetic embraces a sickly sort of femininity that history is no stranger to. Frailty as a female beauty standard has existed for centuries, re-emerging cyclically. The Victorian era saw women attempting to look as if they were suffering from tuberculosis³⁹. Pale skin, rosy cheeks, hazy eyes and a fragile constitution were highly sought-after symptoms of consumption. In recent times, the 1990's bore witness to the birth of the fashion style known as "Heroin Chic"⁴⁰, a response to the 1980's fitness craze. Heroin Chic mimicked the physical appearance and visual ambience of heroin addicts, as young models sitting on dirty bathroom floors made it to the covers of fashion magazines. In a similar way, during the early 2010's, the social media platform Tumblr hosted the "Tumblr girl". The Tumblr girl plays videogames and reads, listens to independent music and is not concerned with clothes and boys because "she is not like other girls". This movement emerged as counter-culture to the 2000's media representation of women as unintelligent and vapid ("bimbos"). The most notorious example of this was the tabloid coverage received by celebrities such as Paris Hilton and Britney Spears⁴¹.

Femcels echo their ancestors in their rebelliousness, having come to the spotlight as a means of rejecting the fitness and "self-care" culture of the second half of the 2010's. Their aesthetic, however, differs with its predecessor in the way it embraces hyperfemininity in lieu of androgyny. Young women no longer seek respect by assimilating with men, but instead opt to differentiate themselves completely. Lace, ruffles and the colour pink flood the screen when the femcel hashtag is browsed, right alongside images of extremely thin girls with mascara running down their face or covered in blood. This serves to further accentuate the sharp dichotomy between a soft, traditionally feminine look, and the extremely nihilistic ideology the subculture maintains. In this way, femcels seize an aesthetic that has conventionally been considered pure and innocent in order to corrupt it. Metaphorically, it is conveyed that living in patriarchal society has similarly taken their naivety and turned it into something twisted, violent and grotesque.

However, the aesthetic of femcels does not only rely on fashion. On the contrary, this subculture is widely known for the media they decide to consume. These young women possess a carefully delineated set of music, TV shows, films and books that their basic collective identity is defined by. Musician Lana del Rey writes the anthems of the femcel movement, while movies such as *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), *Black Swan* (2010) and *Gone Girl* (2014) provide character role-models for its followers. However, it is most interesting how this group ascribes such a great deal of importance to literature, as most other subcultures on the Internet prefer to focus on other, more visual types of media. In fact, it could be confidently stated that femcels' chosen literary works are treated less like novels and more like central religious texts.

3. #sick: The femcel community on Tumblr

Tumblr is a microblogging social media website founded by David Karp in 2007⁴². Since its beginning, the site's popularity has resided in the ease it provides for the proliferation of different fandoms and subcultures. The left-wing ideology Tumblr endorses has also served so as to attract a very solid userbase of marginalized youths, such as LGBTQAI+ and people of

³⁹ Day, C.A. (2017). "Dying to Be Beautiful: The Consumptive Chic". In *Consumptive Chic: A History of Beauty, Fashion, and Disease* (pp. 81–100). London: Bloomsbury Academic

⁴⁰ Harold, C. L. (1999). "Tracking heroin chic: The abject body reconfigures the rational argument". *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 36(2), 65-76.v

⁴¹ Robbins, K. (2009). "Theorizing it: Paris Hilton, the celebute, and the It Girl lifestyle".

⁴² Shffrif, D. (2008, January 15). "Would You Take a Tumblr With This Man?". Observer. <https://observer.com/2008/01/would-you-take-a-tumblr-with-this-man/>

colour⁴³. Allison McCracken points out how “democratizing” the platform is, as it has “no demonstrable or algorithmic hierarchy among its users” due to the fact that follower count is not visible. This makes it difficult for advertisers to take control of the platform away from the users, which also facilitates the independence of every separate subculture that resides there. While this freedom is highly valued and protected by the userbase, it has also been the target of numerous controversies throughout the years. Tumblr has been known to foster communities revolving around self-harm and mental illness⁴⁴, which were extremely popular during the second half of the 2010s and still remain today. The femcel subculture is no stranger to this, as many of the posts made under their hashtag directly represent behaviour caused by eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety and depression amongst other mental health conditions. Very often, as mentioned above, this is done by romanticizing the symptoms via the use of specific media expressions. The books analysed in the first part of this thesis are of extremely common use for this purpose, as they have achieved a quasi-biblical status among members. In the following pages, I will provide examples of posts made under the hashtags #myyearofrestandrelaxation and #thebelljar that will subsequently be dissected in order to detect the primary topics members of the community are preoccupied with.

3.1. Figure A



<https://www.tumblr.com/resourcesavaliabile/699905943052369920?source=share>

In this post, we can appreciate a rudimentarily made collage that begs the question “What do I carry in my pockets?” over a pink background. Under the text, we see a series of seemingly random images: a picture of musician Lana del Rey, a box of cigarettes, a rosary, a vinyl, a fawn, a lipstick tube, a ghost representing “men’s souls”, stars that symbolize magic, a

⁴³ McCracken, A. (2017). “Tumblr youth subcultures and media engagement”. *Cinema Journal*, 57(1), 151-161.

⁴⁴ Kliegman, J. (2017, April 24). “The New Era of Suicide Prevention”. *The Ringer*. <https://www.theringer.com/2017/4/24/16038130/social-media-suicide-prevention-policies-5490c2c224e0>

ceremonial knife, a tablet of the fictional drug Infermiterol and an oven for the user to “stick her head into”.

The humour of the post is meant to rest on two main factors. First and most obviously, irony. The juxtaposition of stereotypically feminine interests- such as make-up and cute animals- with the macabre -a knife waiting to rip a chest open as sacrifice to a deity- creates an oxymoron that the viewer has difficulty not laughing at. Even in the use of the rosary we can see how religious imagery is popular among femcels in the same form that the colour pink is: as a macabre performance of traditional femininity. Considering the role women have had throughout history inside the Catholic Church, the perversion of the sign of the cross is usually accomplished by associating it to the sexual. Purity is conflated with lust in a way that serves their disenchantment.

The utilization of Sylvia Plath’s suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning, as both a joke and a behaviour one could consider imitating, is highly representative of Millennial and Gen Z humour. This brings us to the second comedic factor: relatability. “Absurdist humour” says Kim Koltun⁴⁵, “provides [millennials] with a much-needed trivialization of all the stressful factors in their lives. Instead of trying endlessly to find meaning in it all, [it]encourages disenchanting youth to respond to that which they cannot change with irony, laughter, and a sense of absurdity.” Therefore, the meaninglessness of existence makes tragedy humorous. This can be related to the prose in *MYORAR* which, as previously stated, weaponizes nihilistic views as comedic devices.

3.2. Figure B



<https://www.tumblr.com/hamoodmood/698298866547785728/my-year-of-rest-and-relaxation-aesthetic?source=share>

⁴⁵ Koltun, K. (2018). “Rick, Morty, and absurdism: The millennial allure of dark humor”. In *The Forum: Journal of History* (Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 12).

This image, another collage, is described as “My year of rest and relaxation aesthetic”, In it we see various bleak pictures of great amounts of prescription pills, snuffed out cigarettes, several empty cups of coffee and thin, blonde, young women, either sleeping or staring blankly into nothingness. This type of composition is commonly known in internet spaces as a “moodboard”, that is, a compilation of images that is meant to evoke a certain association within the viewer. This association could be anything from a character, to a colour, to a season or a fashion style. In this context, the aesthetically pleasing depiction of the protagonist’s depressive episode in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* clearly serves the romanticization of the struggle and transmits a sense of longing for the same experience. The fictional depression illustrated in this post has little to do with the usual symptoms, but that is the entire point. Girls in this virtual community project themselves onto the protagonist as a coping mechanism. Furthermore, their idealization creates a more palatable version of mental illness. There is a quote from *MYORAR* that is often cited in these spaces: “I did crave attention, but I refused to humiliate myself by asking for it.” (65) This perfectly sums up the intention behind the very existence of the femcel subculture, a cry for help contained in aesthetically pleasing images that are readily digested by outsiders. In their own way, these girls are making themselves into twenty-first century Ophelias.

3.3. Figure C



<https://www.tumblr.com/lovekatxox/701093982317494272/female-red-flag-book-recommendations?source=share>

This post is a picture of a pile of books with the caption “If she tells you these are her favourite books on the first date, run.” The books in question are *American Psycho* (1991) by B.T. Ellis, *Lolita* (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov and *Valley of the Dolls* (1966) by Jacqueline Susann, along with the ones this work is based on. What all these books have in common, apart from their relevance in the femcel community, are their psychologically troubled protagonists finding themselves in a downward spiral. Other common themes include obsession, substance abuse and an oppressive society that conditions their actions. Femcels have chosen these books as their own due to the fact that this experience is relatable to them. They feel as if they are going crazy, but instead of feeling ashamed of it, it is carried like a badge of honour. The poster,

despite her indication to “run” from whoever is reading these works, appears to feel a sense of pride about her taste in literature. She seems to enjoy the thought of inspiring fear in her would-be date, thus subverting the usual power dynamics in heterosexual relationships.

3.4. Figure D



<https://www.tumblr.com/hamoodmood/700639118568390656?source=share>

One of the main critiques toward the femcel community is the endorsement of eating disorders by sectors of its membership. On Tumblr, hashtags often overlap with each other, and the femcel one is not an exception, with several existing ramifications of it (#coquette, #female hysteria, #girl interrupted syndrome). Indeed, shared user demographics frequently lead to convergence with pro-eating disorder communities, therefore easily exposing already fragile young women to dangerous environments.

In this case we can see another collage of images, one of which shows a shelf stacked with diet Coke that the user labelled “water”. This refers back to a trend in pro-anorexia groups (also known as “proana”) wherein people will fast for as long as possible, drinking only diet soda for its sweet flavour and null caloric value, thus satisfying their cravings without weight gain. Black coffee, also seen in the images, is used for the same finality. Furthermore, we can also recognize the faces of several models, particularly Lily-Rose Depp and Kate Moss, who are known “thinspiration” icons. “Thinspiration”, shortened to “thinspo”, is a common format in eating disorder forums that features media encouraging the viewer to adopt unhealthy mechanisms in order to resemble the thin ideal. This may be done with reference pictures, but can also consist of text or music. Moss’ infamous quote of “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels” is a staple of

pro-eating disorder culture. This commendation of very thin body types smoothly intertwines with *MYORAR*, both via the main character, who is said to look “like a skeleton” (143), and Reva, who is a bulimic and idolizes Kate Moss (251). A picture of a casquet, with pink cursive letters that read the title of Moshfegh’s book, is conveniently placed next to the images above mentioned, further emphasizing the macabre, corpse-like beauty these girls idolize.

Lastly, the collage of images presents us with the figure of musician Lizzy Grant, mostly known by the name Lana del Rey. Grant is a controversial artist who has previously undergone criticism due to the lyrics of her songs⁴⁶. Common topics in her music include abusive relationships (“he hit me and it felt like a kiss”, *Ultraviolence*), mental illness (“everyone knows that I’m a mess/ I’m crazy”, *Cruel World*) and drug addiction (“You got that medicine I need / Dope, shoot it up, straight to the heart, please.”, *Gods and Monsters*). Grant’s music is usually meant as a cautionary tale, with the artist having recovered from the substance abuse she experienced in her adolescence. However, femcels are known to use her lyrics to romanticize their own circumstances, much like they do with Moshfegh’s and Plath’s works. Feelings of alienation from others and lack of meaning in life are expressed in Grant’s songs, and thus attract “girls who cry on their birthdays and lose a little bit of themselves during the summer months”, as the poster says.

3.5. Figure E



<https://www.tumblr.com/littlegirlbosslambii/715551901782097920?source=share>

“LOST: My sense of self” decries the sign in this image. In a collage of images much like the ones shown above, a femcel states that she has lost herself in “the void of the internet”. Cigarettes, *MYORAR* and vintage clothes constitute her identity – or her persona– inside the digital capitalism of social media. She is a brand, she says, not a person. She has become the

⁴⁶ Martinez, Saren V. "Hope Is a Dangerous Thing: An Analysis of the Emotional Trauma Expressed in Lana Del Rey's Lyrics." (2021).

products she owns or wishes to own. The supposed safe haven of her community has too been contaminated by overconsumption and fetishism, not liberating her but instead trapping her in an infinite cycle of *becoming*, Becoming prettier, happier, richer, more popular. She is, like Esther Greenwood and the Narrator, unable to scape the establishment that keeps her confined. Progress inside the system is unachievable. Every door leads to the same place.

V. Conclusion

To sum up, we can conclude that the thesis of madness as a construct, determined in relation to a specific culture's conventions, is correct. In addition, it is factual that madness has historically been mostly attributed to women. The symptoms of many mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, are often consequence of fundamental societal inequalities, but have hitherto been medicalized and considered mostly from a biological perspective. Consequently, woman-authored texts centred around the topic of mental illness share several similar characteristics, and comprise a distinct female literary tradition, as suggested by Gilbert and Gubar. Entrapment, alienation, motherlessness, division of the self, rebirth and commodification of the feminine body are ideas that, although separated by more than half a century, appear in both *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Both main characters' stories are set in New York, which is represented as the centre of capitalist culture, and told in first person. In both novels, the protagonist finds herself reified, constricted by the conventions that society has conditioned her to perform, and choses to split from them. Both stories describe this process of separation as isolating and mentally strenuous, leading the protagonist on a downward spiral. In her weakest moment, the narrator will encounter the medical institution and be harmed by it, furthering her distress. By the end of both works, our heroine will appear to be reborn, cured from all her afflictions, only to find out that nothing has really changed and the conditions of her imprisonment have simply shifted slightly. The conclusions to both of these stories signify how the individual is conditioned by the collective. Personal maladies are brought about by environmental factors, and thus cannot be independently cured without changing the *status quo*. To be reborn into the same world that killed you in the first place is an exercise in futility.

The femcel community, like madness, is a product of its culture. They have chosen these novels as their representatives because members relate to the struggles of the protagonists. They too feel their self to be divided, they too wish to break free from their chains but do not know how to exist without them. The Internet they inhabit both liberates and confines them, enabling them to express their ideas with others with their same experiences, but also making them increasingly exposed to the dangers of overconsumption. The protagonists of *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* provide a looking glass through which the femcels can look at themselves and cope with their unpleasant circumstances. But these novels also feed their pessimism and desperation. They try to escape societal alienation but end up alienating themselves in a different way, like the protagonists in the books. Their adoption of specific media and products, although perhaps different from the mainstream, is not a change from what capitalism demands. Defining themselves according to the rules of the establishment that oppresses them cannot elevate them, but only make them sink further.

Individualism is only possible to a certain extent, and to have created a culture based on such extreme separation between one human and another has not brought us anything but calamities. The excesses of late-stage capitalism are self-destructive, annihilating our planet and ourselves for immediate reward. Reform is not only necessary, but also pressing, lest there is nothing left to reform.

VI. Bibliography

- (2018, April 26) "Elliot Rodger: How misogynist killer became 'incel hero' ". BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189>
- Axelrod, S. G. (2010). "Alienation and Renewal in *The Bell Jar*". *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies*, 3, 134-143.
- Berlim, Fleck, and Shorter. "Notes on antipsychiatry." *European archives of psychiatry and clinical neuroscience* 253 (2003): 61-67.
- Bonner and Price. "Where is the anterior temporal lobe and what does it do?". *Journal of Neuroscience* 33.10 (2013): 4213-4215.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Jean-Martin Charcot". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Martin-Charcot>. Accessed 12 June 2023.
- Budick, E. M. (1987). "The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*". *College English*, 49(8), 872-885.
- Caruso and Sheehan. "Psychosurgery, ethics, and media: a history of Walter Freeman and the lobotomy". *Neurosurgical Focus FOC* 43.3 (2017): E6.
- Day, C.A. (2017). "Dying to Be Beautiful: The Consumptive Chic". In *Consumptive Chic: A History of Beauty, Fashion, and Disease* (pp. 81–100). London: Bloomsbury Academic
- Dirschauer, M. (2022). "Sleep as Action? World Alienation, Distance, and Loneliness in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*". *AmLit-American Literatures*, 2(1).
- Egan, S. (2006). "The Albums: Aftermath". *The rough guide to the Rolling Stones*. London; New York: Rough Guides. 162-165.
- Feldkamp, Jana "The rise of TikTok: the evolution of a social media platform during COVID-19." *Digital Responses to Covid-19: Digital Innovation, Transformation, and Entrepreneurship During Pandemic Outbreaks* (2021): 73-85.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*. Vintage.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. WW Norton & Company.
- Galster, I. (Ed.). (2004). *Le deuxième sexe de Simone de Beauvoir*. Presses Paris Sorbonne.
- Girgus & Yang (2015). "Gender and depression". *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 4, 53-60.
- Goldin & Katz (2002). "The power of the pill: Oral contraceptives and women's career and marriage decisions". *Journal of political Economy*, 110(4), 730-770.
- Gorman, J. M. "Comorbid depression and anxiety spectrum disorders." *Depression and anxiety* 4.4 (1996): 160-168.

- Grand, S. "The new aspect of the woman question." *The North American Review* 158.448 (1894): 270-276.
- Greenberg, J. (2020). "Losing Track of Time". *Daedalus*, 150(1), 188-203.
- Gutzwa, Justin A (2021). "Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs)". In *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education*. pp. 695–698
- Harold, C. L. (1999). "Tracking heroin chic: The abject body reconfigures the rational argument". *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 36(2), 65-76.v
- Healey, D. (1997). *The antidepressant era*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.43.
- Healy, L. (2009). "Capitalism and the Transforming Family Unit: A Marxist Analysis". Ed: Cliona Barnes, Amanda Haynes, Patricia Neville, Martin Power, Limerick Student Journal of Sociology, *SOCHEOLAS*, 2(1), 18-35.
- Holmes, M. (2000, March). "Second-wave feminism and the politics of relationships". In *Women's studies international forum* (Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 235-246). Pergamon.
- Joannou, M. (2019). "The female bildungsroman in the twentieth century". *A History of the Bildungsroman*, 200-216.
- Jones, A. (2022, March 10) "The rise of femcels — meet the women who refuse to have sex". -London Evening Standard. <https://www.standard.co.uk/insider/what-are-femcels-female-involuntary-celibates-b987250.html>
- Kliegman, J. (2017, April 24). "The New Era of Suicide Prevention". The Ringer. <https://www.theringer.com/2017/4/24/16038130/social-media-suicide-prevention-policies-5490c2c224e0>
- Koltun, K. (2018). "Rick, Morty, and absurdism: The millennial allure of dark humor". In *The Forum: Journal of History* (Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 12).
- Lee, N. H. (2014). *The Search for an Abortionist: The Classic Study of How American Women Coped with Unwanted Pregnancy before Roe v. Wade*. Open Road Media.
- Liddell and Scott (1889). "ὄστέρᾱ" in *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford. Clarendon Press.
- Maines, R. (1999). "The Technology of Orgasm: Hysteria, the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction". Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 23.
- Martinez , Saren V. "Hope Is a Dangerous Thing: An Analysis of the Emotional Trauma Expressed in Lana Del Rey's Lyrics." (2021).
- McCracken, A. (2017). "Tumblr youth subcultures and media engagement". *Cinema Journal*, 57(1), 151-161.
- Moshfegh, O. (2018). *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Penguin Books.
- Mulvey, L. (2013). "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema". In *Feminism and film theory* (p 57-68). Routledge.

- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach* (Vol. 3). Cambridge university press.
- Nutt, Wilson, & Paterson (2022).” Sleep disorders as core symptoms of depression”. *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience*.
- Plath, S. (1972). *The Bell Jar (1963)*. Faber & Faber.
- Perloff, M. G, & Plath, S. (1972). " A Ritual for Being Born Twice": Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar'. *Contemporary Literature*, 13(4), 507-522.
- Piggot, M., (2004). “Double jeopardy: Lesbians and the legacy of multiple stigmatized identities”. *Unpublished thesis, Psychology Strand at Swinburne University of Technology, Australia*.
- Robbins, K. (2009).” Theorizing it: Paris Hilton, the celebutante, and the It Girl lifestyle”.
- Shffrif, D. (2008, January 15). “Would You Take a Tumblr With This Man?”. *Observer*. <https://observer.com/2008/01/would-you-take-a-tumblr-with-this-man/>
- Showalter, E. (1985). *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Szymanski, Gupta, Carr, & Stewart (2009). “Internalized misogyny as a moderator of the link between sexist events and women’s psychological distress”. *Sex roles*, 61, 101-109.
- Taylor, J. (2018). “The woman who founded the 'incel' movement”. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45284455->
- Tone, A. (2008) *The age of anxiety: A history of America's turbulent affair with tranquilizers*. Basic Books.