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ESTHER GREENWOOD’S COLONIZATION SEEN THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE BILDUNGSROMAN

Abstract: Early and mid-20th century is a period in literature which deals with the phenomenon called a “new woman”. The goal of this paper is to analyze Sylvia Plath’s novel, *The Bell Jar* – the psychological growth/maturation of the novel’s heroine – Esther Greenwood. To observe all the obstacles she faces on her developmental trajectory. To show her sufferance and nonconformity, to the feminine ideals set by male expectations in post-war America. Moreover, to depict the mere process of colonization of her soul, her body by her mother and the country she lives in by imposing full or partial control over her. Therefore, colonialism in Esther’s case, metaphorically speaking, mainly takes the form of lack of privilege in organizing the day to day events of her creative life.

The novel *The Bell Jar* consists of the plot narrated in the first person singular overloaded with and organized around a countless number of accidents. The theory of the Bildungsroman/the female Bildungsroman can help us to map those events, especially in her childhood and early adolescence, which caused traumas that have shaped her life.

The rebellious nature she possesses cannot possibly be associated with “madness” of any kind but the fact that she is an educated, young lady who sees the world with different eyes. The width of her education doesn’t allow her to use the kaleidoscope in observing the everyday life. For this hypothesis we have used the methodologies of theoretical and cultural analysis of the main as well as all the others characters who have directly or indirectly influenced her coming of age.

Key words: *trauma, melancholia, marriage, ambition, Bildungsroman, childhood, post-war America, sufferance.*

INTRODUCTION

Bildungsroman is a literary genre which, according to most critics marked the literature of the nineteenth century. It originated in Germany, but very quickly Bildungsroman, as a genre, had become popular. The countries with different literary traditions received it under their “literary umbrella”. Not only did it become popular but the great literary works, the so called “grand narratives” were produced featuring the characteristics of Bildungsroman.

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The question of how to define this genre has arisen due to the issue of an adequate translation of the German word “Bildung/s”. It can mean both a process of psychological/educational development, as well as the individual's condition at the end of such a process. When speaking of the “development/al” process, this does definitely not refer to formal education. Although there are many different definitions of the literary genre known as Bildungsroman Baldick's definition seems to have been widely accepted: “Bildungsroman is a kind of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity” (Baldick, 1990: 24).

The most important characteristics of the literary genre of Bildungsroman is that the genre has been changing and adapting to given cultural and sociological conditions. Therefore social changes directly affected the Bildungsroman. This implies that the genre during the twentieth century was not just about describing the development/maturation of the main character, but also concerned his critical observation of the world in which he lived.

Furthermore, under the influence of the formation of feminist movements around the world, a female Bildungsroman emerges. The main protagonist of the novel is no longer a young man but a young woman.

However, Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic, points out the impossibility of the female Bildungsroman. He claims, relying on Freud's and Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis, that to become/ be a woman means to comply with predetermined cultural rules and that her sole purpose is to help men to reach their full potential. For men she is only an object of worship, or his otherness (Žižek, 1995).

During 1983, a book with the title *The Voyage In* was published by a group of authors. It contains a number of essays that deal with women's Bildungsroman. “this new genre, the female Bildungsroman, was made possible only when Bildung became a reality for women, in general, and for the fictional heroine, in particular” (Labovitz, 1986: 6–7). In that sense, Rita Felski says, that the literature of the nineteenth century could only offer two options for the female protagonist of the novel, all of which are negative: “To lead a very unhappy married life or to live alone isolated from the world/community [...] that most often ends in self-destruction” (Felski, 1989: 125).

ESTHER'S CHILDHOOD YEARS

Esther Greenwood is the main protagonist and the person who narrates the story. She is a slim, attractive, kind and highly educated person. She lives with her family in the suburbs of Boston. She compensates it with writing and with her affection for poetry. She is very ambitious and full of enthusiasm concerning her writing.

We don't know much about her early childhood. We can just conclude it from her attitude towards the members of her close family and their obvious influence on her life.

Taking in consideration the influence of Esther's parents her childhood could be divided into two periods: the life up to the point when she was nine years old – the period her father was alive, and the period of childhood after her father's death.

Her father, Mr Greenwood was German. He came from “some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia” (Plath, 2005: 30). He was a Lutheran. As a man who is interested in science he was not so much obsessed with religion. He worked as a professor at a university.

He knew all about insects and specialized in them. He was everything for her. Mr Greenwood was a very dominant figure in her life: he was Esther's role model. With him she felt safe and protected. She was also aware that the love she felt for him had the very same intensity of love he felt for her. “I had always been my father's favorite” (Plath, 2005: 159).

The loss of her father also represents the primal scene of the novel – the central trauma. “It is generally interpreted by the child as an act of violence on the part of the father” (Laplanche-Pontalis, 1971: 335). In the years to come she tries to overcome it, and get away from it but for a long period of time she fails. The main reason behind this was that the primal scene works like a repressed memory – the more one wants to get rid of it the more it gets stuck in one's memory. Mark Epstein in his book *The Trauma of Everyday Life* explains the common reaction of children who lose their connection with their parents stressing that “these self-feelings such as falling forever, going to pieces become the anxious and unstable foundations of the emerging self” (Epstein, 2014: 136).

On the other hand, her mother – Mrs Greenwood, was the iconic American woman of the 50s. She has committed her life to her family. As a wife of a university professor, she has neglected her education. All her life she has been compelled to follow the pattern which has been socially approved.

Mrs Greenwood is also a very religious woman. Not long after her loss she decides to convert to Unitarianism. It consequently means that she re/accepts her old faith and rejects all that is sacred for her late husband. She draws the line between her previous-life, life in marriage, and the life to come. This is not surprising if we bear in mind that a Unitarian rejects the Trinitarian belief but supports, among others, the ideas of inherent worth and the dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations – in other words all she lacked in her marriage.

Furthermore, Mrs Greenwood's decision not to allow her children, especially Esther, to go to the father's funeral has had a very negative impact on Esther. The avoidance of the mourning for her father soon comes at a price.

The shock of the loss lasts for almost a decade. Esther cannot accept the fact that her father is not a part of her everyday life. “When loss is converted into absence, one faces the endless melancholy, impossible mourning...in which any process of working through is foreclosed or prematurely aborted” (LaCapra, 2013: 46). Furthermore, he points out that the absence of the beloved person causes the

anxiety that: “May never be entirely eliminated or overcome but must be lived with in various ways” (LaCapra, 2013: 57).

The lack of mourning gives rise to melancholy. Although in most cases mourning and melancholia go hand in hand, Freud draws the line between them. He points out that mourning helps the mourner to get over the loss of a person while melancholia represents the state of hopelessness. In Esther’s case, the fact that she has never gone through the process of mourning throws her into deep melancholy.

This is a moment in the female Bildungsroman known as indeterminacy – the moment when a heroine starts to withdraw from the outside world and starts to focus on her internal world. “In creating himself or herself as an object the protagonist must undergo a process of alienation in order to achieve self-consciousness” (Weis, 1993: 98). From this moment on she does not exhibit her “self” to the male gaze. Moreover, she deals with/uses silence as a tool to articulate her vulnerability. “The silenced voice simultaneously expresses and refrains from expressing the narrator’s trauma” (Bolaki, 2011: 58).

Although she is not a suicidal person during these ten long years in time of crises she gives it a try. When it comes to it, she finds that her body seems determined to live. The bragging of her heart reminds her of it: “I am, I am, I am” (Plath, 2005: 233).

Esther’s strained relationship with her mother reinforces her depression. She does not see her like her role model, does not respect her and the gap between them is quite big. Despite her mother’s wish that Esther should follow the American pattern of “family life”, Esther refuses to do so. Esther would like to make metaphors while her mother insists on living in and by metonymies: Esther wants unity with the universe, while her mother tries to displace the organic with the social.

At the time, she reads a lot about the Rosenbergs execution – the people who had worked against the state, and becomes almost obsessed with it. She finds the parallel between their and her “case”. She is preoccupied with them because, as an intelligent young girl, she sees how the state – the United States of America (n Dream) treats those who do not fit in/ dream with the current. “When the subject can no longer realize himself or herself in society, that is when Moretti’s ‘comfort of civilization’ starts to become uncomfortable” (Bolaki, 2011: 88).

When she finally finds her father’s grave, after ten years, in a way she finds her serenity/peace. “I could not understand why I was crying so hard. Then I have remembered that I have never cried for my father’s death” (Plath, 2005: 161).

All these changes/everyday traumas, repetitions of the primal scene in Esther’s childhood have negatively influenced her psychological growth. Two different cultures, her father’s and that of her mother’s, different religions and different approaches to everyday life have shaped Esther to become a cultural hybrid. On the other hand, despite her mother’s relative invisibility, she has a very dominant role in Esther’s life. Chastity and faith were the bedrock of the mother’s

moral game. She uses latent methods to pervade her mind. In so doing she helps Esther to become more confused and indecisive.

ESTHER'S EDUCATION/CAREER

Esther Greenwood is one of the best students at the college. “A girl with fifteen years of straight A's (Plath, 2005: 80). She writes long essays and wins the prizes for them. She is intelligent, persistent and hardworking – a real model student.

The pressure to do well weighs on her. She is aware that doing well in school is not just a matter of personal ambition, but a matter of survival. “What I always thought I had in mind was getting some big scholarship to graduate school or a grant to study all over Europe” (Plath, 2005: 30).

In spite of her academic ambition, Esther feels isolated from society and discouraged about everything she does. She is also on the edge of a darkness that makes her world increasingly unreal. The early symptoms of depression are aggravated by the pressure she feels to conform to social expectations. What a young woman should be/become – is just the question that worries her.

Esther's environment reassures her that she cannot have it both: marriage and career, be a good poet and at the same time a good and dedicated wife/mother. She spends days thinking about it. Marrying someone consequently means ceasing to achieve her most important goal – becoming a writer.

Her indecisiveness or the lack of courage to confess it, first of all, to herself and then to the entire world starts to make her feel quite down. “I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them” (Plath, 2005: 73).

As a result of her hard and dedicated work she gets the opportunity to travel to New York. Once again, Esther's life turns upside-down. For the first time she leaves her home and lives a life she has never lived before. The journey of the main character from the province to the big city represents one of the most important moments in his/her life. Bolaki stresses that there is a big difference between the male and female journey: “the female journey seems predetermined and with a fixed destination” (Bolaki, 2011: 41).

The girls come from the different parts of America hoping “to live the American dream – the rise from rags to riches” (Bloom, 2009: 23). During the day they are obliged to work/write for Jay Cee (the magazine's editor), but during the evening they are socially very active – they are partying every single night.

Esther sees the trip to New York as an opportunity to develop professionally, but for the majority of the girls this is just a good chance to find a husband or/and to have some fun. “The journey away from home often becomes a journey up a social

hierarchy” (Bolaki, 2011: 40). Although she feels rather uncomfortable among them, as they are very rich, she also finds them quite boring.

In spite of her great inexperience, and the fact that she cannot feel comfortable outside the academic circles, she sees that the things with which they deal in New York are fake. The friendship among girls is fake. The make-up kit which they get as a present, the clothing and many other things serve first of all to make these girls look different from who and what they really are. The glitter and the beauty that surrounds them are also fake. Everything is a surface, a display of a cliché or/and a stereotype.

ESTHER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HER GIRLFRIENDS

Esther Greenwood has a very distinguished relationship with the female/male characters in the novel. Jo Gill in her book *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, writes that the novel's characters can be observed through the figure of the double. She also stresses that the novel “uses successive images of doubling in myriad ways” (Gill, 2008: 79). There is a moment/a period in Esther's life when she breaks all the personal attachment due to mental crisis.

The emblem of the fig tree might be seen a scene that resolves the main quandary of her life. On the one hand it is the most important, and on the other hand, it is the most traumatic moment in her life. “Metaphor of the fig tree [...] in *The Bell Jar* represents Esther's paralysis when faced with a multitude of unreachable and indistinguishable opportunities” (Gill, 2008: 76). According to Moretti, when “the language no longer works well” (Moretti, 2000: 238), when we/the language don't have the adequate explanation for some acts/deeds, is the sign that the trauma has occurred. Her indecisiveness, the fact that she cannot answer/ choose a model of adult femininity emblemized through the figs on the fig tree, proves that.

Gill also points out that the female characters are either “rejected” or “left behind” in order to help Esther to survive. However, there are two persons in the novel, a female and a male one, for whom she has feelings, and won't be sacrificed to ensure Esther survival. The female person helps her healing, and the male one channels Esther's purgation and, consequently, her coming-of-age.

To start with the rejected ones, means to talk about her mother and Mrs Guinea. The aversion she feels towards her mother has already been explained, evident from the beginning of the novel. On the other hand, Mrs Guinea is a famous wealthy novelist and a kind of mentor who provides Esther with a scholarship to attend the college. Later she also pays for a treatment at a private mental hospital for her. Mrs Guinea likes Esther's writings and thinks that she could have a bright future. She feels great compassion for her but Esther finally rejects all that.

Jay Cee and Doreen are the two personalities Esther meets in New York. In the beginning she likes them both and finds something very interesting about them.

Jay Cee, the main editor of the magazine, is the person whom she respects a lot. She is an accomplished person in the world of journalism which Esther recognizes and appreciates very much. At some moment Esther admits that Cee's intelligence is what makes her so special.

Doreen, one of the other eleven girls, is the emblem of freedom for Esther. She is a rebel against social conventions. Doreen spends every night with a different guy; she is not obsessed with success and she knows how to enjoy the moment. Moreover, Doreen is all what Esther is not, or better say, Doreen is all what Esther unconsciously wants to be. "Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones" (Plath, 2005: 7).

Joan Gilling is another patient at the mental hospital where Esther has been treated. She is a year older than Esther. They have a lot in common. For example: Buddy Willard had dated her before he started dating Esther, they attend the same collage.

Before Joan commits suicide, she confesses her affection for Esther. "I like you, I like you better than Buddy" (Plath, 2005: 210). Joan's acts confuse her deeply. The other thing that worries Esther even more is that she does not know whether Joan is her alter ego or not. Could she have been just a product of her imagination?

Dr Nolan is the only female character in the novel about whom Esther talks positively. She listens to Esther, and does her best to help her. She is the person who succeeds in gaining her trust. Unlike Dr Gordon who solely evokes anxiety, Dr Nolan knows how to treat Esther, she has empathy for her. On the other hand, Esther claims that she loves her. The fact that she can again establish a loving relationship, after her father's death, is an important sign in her healing. Probably, that is the reason why Dr Nolan is the only female person who is neither rejected nor left behind.

In psychoanalysis this is called "transference" of love. In Freudian psychology it "is an unconscious defense mechanism whereby the mind substitutes either a new aim or a new object for goals felt in their original form to be dangerous or unacceptable" (Berne, 1976: 399). Esther opens her heart to Dr Nolan and explains that she hates her mother. As a consequence Dr Nolan forbids her to meet her mother and spend her spare time with her. She reveals that her mother's moral principles, her obsession with virginity, the insistence on social conventions have directly caused Esther's neurosis.

All the ladies mentioned above, help Esther overcome neurosis and raise the bell jar above her head. Although the full recovery of trauma/s is not possible, due to the fact that "it becomes the condition..." (Butler & Bolaki, 2011: 39). However, there are definitely ways to minimize its negative influence. The female characters help her regain self-confidence and develop her personality. Each of them represents either what she wants to become or how she wants to act. In some way they are versions of her unconscious. Could a single person bear all the characteristics Esther admires in each of them, respectively, that person would be her mentor.

ESTHER'S SEXUALITY AND LOVE

During the after-war period in the USA women were conscious of the gender constraints society had framed them by concerning many things, above all, sexual freedom. According to Labovitz the theme of sexuality is an essential step in female development. However, at the time, family was the required horizon/framework of existence for ladies. A young woman was supposed to have only one goal – to become a good, servile wife and later on a dedicated mother.

Esther Greenwood is just one of the many girls who comes from the family in which the social standards have been recognized. The sexual restrictions are regularly forced upon her either by the environment she lives in or by her mother.

Nevertheless, Esther does embark upon her journey towards a parental independence using her sexuality as a means “there is a strong link between female ‘wondering’ and promiscuity” (Bolaki, 2011: 57). The emblem of her buying new shoes in New York, with the money she had earned, explains a lot. Moreover, she used to introduce herself as Elly Higginbottom while partying in New York. The burden her mother/society put on her back was unbearable for her. In so doing, she feels free – a new person.

Buddy Willard is her first boyfriend. He is a year older than Esther. He is a medical student with a very promising future. Their backgrounds are very similar. Both of them have had a father who worked at the university and a mother whose only job was to take care of the family. Esther meets him in a church, so they both have been connected with religion. This fairytale does not last long. In spite of their great commitment to the Sunday masses/church, we learn that they both have become seduced by the pleasure of premarital sex.

According to Mrs Greenwood, Buddy is a perfect match for Esther. Seen through the eyes of the American society of the 50s, he may represent the ideal American male subject. He is handsome, ambitious and responsible, devoted to church, excels at school and loves and respects his parents. According to the social standards, he is a “perfect match” – a prince charming. At that time in America every single girl might have wanted him for a husband, but Esther.

The emblematic episode of skiing, during one winter when Esther for the last time tried to dislodge the idea of not marrying Buddy, stands for many things. Their relationship is depicted via the trajectory of her gliding, up to the moment when the line “grew blurred” (Plath, 2005: 90). The fact that she doesn't know how to ski, shows that she is not the one who has the control while skiing/while in relationship with Buddy.

It also shows her wish to improve the things between them and accepts the challenge. Esther falls and breaks her leg at two places. Unaware of it, and, above all, having being unhappy about her unsuccessful attempt, she insists on “trying”/gliding one more time.

However, the process of shedding lasts for a long period of time. It is seen as “a significant act whereby the heroines rid themselves of excess baggage as they proceed in their life’s journey” (Labovitz, 1986: 253). Besides, breaking with Buddy at the very same time for Esther means the liberation of social/sexual limitations. She proves that she as an artist is not ready to sell her freedom/her body for a man’s social capital. Moreover, it helps her breaking with her mother and running away from her prejudices.

The men she meets after Buddy bring a new dimension in her life. The relationship with the other guys becomes more open. It doesn’t necessarily mean that she becomes intimate with them but she doesn’t hesitate to talk openly about things that she is not familiar with.

Eric and Constantin are the two guys whom she sees as the possible lovers although their attitude towards sex is pretty weird. They are handsome and quite communicative ones. Eric, for example, is a young man/acquaintance, with whom Esther has the most open conversation about sex. He is a guy who has lost his virginity with a prostitute and due to it he divides women into two categories: virgins and whores. Yet, he goes that far in his discussion/s that he says that sex is a dirty thing and reduces women to animals.

On the other hand, Constantin is a UN simultaneous interpreter. What she first notices about him is that “Constantin seemed mature and considerate in every way” (Plath, 2005: 76). This is something that she has been longing to find almost all her life – especially after her father’s death. “The trouble” for Esther starts the moment she realizes that he makes her feel happy the way her father did. Everything he does reminds her of her late father. Thus, Constantin represents a father figure.

Dr Gordon and Marco, on the other hand, are the two good-looking men in her life who threaten her with the death. After a few moments spent with them, she discovers their narcissistic as well as violent nature. She dislikes them very much and fortunately enough succeeds to escape their “terror”.

Meeting Irwin represents the turning point in Esther’s life. He is a math professor at Harvard. He is the first young man in her life who is not good-looking but very intelligent. He is charming and seductive. The fact that she meets him for the first time in front of the Widener Library is quite significant.

Not long after their meeting, she decides and encourages him to be her first, real lover. The emblem of hemorrhage “might be read as a ritualized purgation [...] Only by purging her body can Esther be made whole, or ‘fixed’” (Gill, 2008: 84). In other words, the fact that she finally finds a man for whom she has feelings means that her strange and very painful “journey” of coming-of-age comes to an end.

So, to talk about Esther’s sexuality and understand her nature is possible only through analyzing the men who play a very important role in her life. From their relationships it is possible to learn a lot about her attitude towards love, passion, morality, religion, virginity, family. Unlike young ladies who “develop her personal

attitudes, the young men provoke Esther's gender and rejection. Young men emblemize death while young ladies save Esther from death" (Zselyi <http://www.academia.edu/9336882/>).

CONCLUSION

The novel *The Bell Jar* is another autobiographical/confessional story which deals with post-war America and its social ideals. It provides us with the confession of the young girl while tracing her "conflict" with the environment and social rules. The heroine of the novel, Esther Greenwood, is a bright nineteen years old girl who due to her academic achievements gets the chance to live the American dream. In her early adolescence she reveals a gap between what society says she should experience and what she does experience, and this gap intensifies her anxiety.

Esther Greenwood, like the typical female Bildungsroman, takes as its beginning the protagonist's childhood years. Throughout the novel, Esther searches for her identity through painful experiences and maturing processes. Typically, the people, either males or females, whom she meets on her "journey" of self-exploration, have very important roles in her life. The controlling and quite persuasive Mrs Greenwood and absent/dead Mr Greenwood have an equally destructive effect on Esther. The novel is thus quintessential of the female Bildungsroman genre in its portrayal of the protagonist's urge to shed herself from her mother's and consequently, later on, her boyfriend's negative influence on her spiritual and psychological growth.

The women help her make her attitude towards the outside world – and overcome all the obstacles on her "journey", whereas the men or better say their acts, help her clarify in her mind what she really wants to become.

One of the biggest traumas which Esther faces in her early childhood is the death of her father. Esther also feels that she was not born to live/follow the American pattern, the life her mother and other women live, so she gets in conflict with society. She constantly repeats that she was not born to live under a "man's thumb" and she cannot imagine herself to serve a man – except her father. Esther Greenwood moreover follows the common female Bildungsroman pattern in its emphasis on issues related to sexuality. She doesn't know much about sex, but she is keen to learn /find out.

Finally, after the time in New York, she goes back and starts her healing. The bell jar placed upon her will be lifted with Dr Nolan's help in a private hospital. After many years, Esther finally accepts someone's help. She opens her heart to Dr Nolan, and together they find the way through. Esther again loves somebody, feels for somebody and sees her own reflection in the mirror.

In the end, the fact that Ester gives birth to a child, what we learn at the beginning of the novel, means that this story has a happy ending. This, however, does not take anything away from the heroi(ne)sm of her battle contra society. On the contrary, Esther's story does not follow up/depict maturity in the traditional way of fictional heroines, by marrying and starting a family, but by finding the strength to reject the conventional model of womanhood in America.

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КОЛОНИЗАЦИЈА ЕСТЕР ГРИНВУД ВИЂЕНА КРОЗ ПРИЗМУ BILDUNGSROMANA

Резиме

Прва половина двадесетог века представља период када се књижевност бави феноменом познатијим као „нова жена”. Циљ овог рада јесте да се анализира роман *Стаклено звоно* Силвије Плат, односно психолошко сазревање Естер Гринвуд, главне јунакиње романа, као и да се опишу проблеми који су утицали на њен психолошки профил.

У роману *Стаклено звоно* приповеда се у првом лицу једнине, а радња обилује немилим догађајима који описују положај жене педесетих година XX века на тлу Америке. Посредством теорије *Bildungsromana*/женског *Bildungsromana* указује се на догађаје из детињства и ране адолесценције који су директно или индиректно утицали на стварање стигми и формирање личности главне јунакиње.

Бунтовна природа коју Естер поседује не може и не сме бити повезана ни са чим другим већ са чињеницом да је она једна млада образована особа која свет посматра другим очима. Притом, ширина њеног образовања не допушта употребу каледиоскопа у посматрањау свакодневног живота. Да би се доказала ова хипотеза, коришћена је методологија теоријске и културолошке анализе, како главног тако и ликова који су на директан или индиректан начин утицали на њен психо-физички развој – сазревање.

Кључне речи: *траума, меланхолија, брак, амбиција, Bildungsroman, детињство, Америка, патња.*