

THE BELL JAR: TOWARDS A FADING IN MIND AND COLOR*

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“To Ruth Stoner, who taught me literature in full color”

The aim of this paper is to show, by means of colors, a gradual evolution in the protagonists mental illness in Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*. The novel also portrays Plath’s personal vision of the world when she was already suffering a strong depression and it offers her authentic familiarity with the radical medical treatments she underwent. Strong colors first, and then soft and neutral ones in the second half of the novel paint a crucial period in a teenager’s life, full of first experiences in sex and gender discrimination.

Key words: *color, symbolism, mind, psychiatry, electrotherapy, gender*

El propósito de este artículo es mostrar, a través de los colores, la evolución que tiene lugar en la enfermedad mental de la protagonista de la novela de Sylvia Plath *The Bell Jar*. La novela presenta la visión que tenía Plath del mundo cuando ya había empezado a sufrir una fuerte depresión, y ofrece una auténtica familiaridad con los tratamientos médicos tan radicales a los que estaba sometida. Colores fuertes al principio, y después tonos más suaves y neutros en la segunda mitad de la obra, dan color a un período crucial en la vida de una adolescente, lleno de primeras experiencias sexuales y de discriminación de género.

Palabras Clave: *Color, simbolismo, mente, psiquiatría, electroterapia, género*

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a story about breakdowns and suicide attempts in which the use of colors, together with other strategies, gives unity and consistency to the process of depression that the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, undergoes. As Susan Bassnett describes it, it is "a novel about a woman who learns how to live with herself and how to come to terms with the world" (1987: 122). The main character describes her surroundings, her world, through first-hand experiences and an accurate depiction of the colors she perceives. Every new experience constitutes so strong a challenge for her that the climax is reached when it is no longer real experiences that give meaning to colors, but rather the opposite: her feelings are veiled by the most neutral colors. Colors as symbols are both Esther's and Plath's means of communication with their surrounding world at those moments when language fails to do so. I will attempt to explain these roles and their grading throughout the novel by means of the tradition of color in literature, the effect of psychiatric treatments and the interpretation of Plath's writings by feminist theories. *The Bell Jar* is commonly held to be an instance of feminine and feminist practice in the twentieth century because it is a novel about, as Bassnett has effectively expressed it, "the loss of beauty, about the corrupting influence of life in modern cities, ... about loneliness and sex-role conflicts" (1987: 37), and—as I will show later on—there is evidence in both the content and form of the novel that maintains the woman as the protagonist in all these fields: the story is about a woman and it is told from her point of view.

Sylvia Plath can be seen as the female version of the Doomed Poet, which has traditionally been a man, while at the same time she is an example of what Bassnett calls the "Frustrated Female" and the "Deprived Woman" (1987: 1). Her story is a hopeless search for her place in society, something of what Esther is also dispossessed. As a confessional poet writing from the personal and the subjective, Plath allowed her personal experiences to completely shape her writing. The writing of the novel had begun in 1960 in England. By early 1961 she suffered a miscarriage when she had already written a good part of it. I agree with Bassnett that biographical experiences play chief roles in her work and that "[T]he spell in hospital must have woken old memories. The images of whiteness, of the self wrapped in mummy-like bandages ... and the dead babies appear as a recurring motif

throughout the novel” (1987: 20). In fact, critics such as Jacqueline Rose use the term “Extremist art” to refer to Plath’s style and in my opinion, the application of colors to her fiction is simply a continuation of this extremist technique, the colors standing for extreme aspects, either good or bad: death, intense cleanliness, innocence, strong hypocrisy, mortal illness, etc. But in opposition to artists like Virginia Woolf, Rose states that the label *extremist* does not apply to Plath as an artist of the irrational (1991: 22, 25). I share the same opinion because Sylvia Plath, through the protagonist, tries to give a rational explanation of the effects of a mental disorder from the patient’s perspective. Plath creates contradictory feelings, scenes, and characters in her writings (e.g. “[W]ith Doreen, Esther feels morally superior; with Betsy, she feels corrupt and worldly” [Wagner-Martin 1999: 35]) and consequently some critics find an impossibility of consistency in some of her works¹. However, the use of colors in *The Bell Jar* follows a regular and consistent pattern throughout the novel. Colors take on some meaning when the author uses them as leitmotifs that stand for particular —and constant— aspects throughout the story, and they are fully realized when the reader makes a referential use of them. Such postmodernist issues are displayed through psychopathology: Plath uses colors as a kind of therapy, giving them different meanings in the two halves of the novel. At the beginning the protagonist is going crazy and she is bombarded by vivid primary colors; in the second half of the novel, and after shock treatment, all colors, and even other sensations, are reduced —the effects that shock treatment have on her are displayed through drab or blended colors. Such a reduction of feelings and color variety implies that there are very few examples of colors in the second half of the novel, grey and beige being the only ones Plath uses to describe what Esther perceives. Although the use of colors in *The Bell Jar* may seem obvious, very little has been published on this aspect. However, it is evident that colors and their tradition are brought together in the novel with such disparate elements as psychiatric treatments and feminist theories.

It was the Russian symbolists in the nineteenth century who first formally attributed metaphysical meanings to colors, and influenced by them, many authors have used colors to give consistency to their dramatic threads. For example, Philip Walker writes about

Zola's use of color images in *Germinal*, where "he invests them like leitmotifs with associations expressive of all levels of meaning of the novel" (1962: 442). There is evidence of this in Plath's novel as well: colors play a chief role in the different temporal stages of Esther's illness, portraying her gradual worsening and numbing. Moreover, the different levels or layers of the novel are also saturated with vivid impressions given by the use of colors: through the technique of repetition, Plath uses colors both naturalistically and symbolically to unify the protagonist's experiences at hospital, at home, at the Amazon hotel, and in her relationships with other characters. This richness of color imagery serves to identify all color shades—from the brighter to the gloomier—with emotions and thus, the novel enriches both outwardly and inwardly, outside and inside the bell jar that protects and isolates Esther. The use of colors in this novel differs from color symbolism in other works, for instance, in the writings of the French novelist Colette. I.T. Olken analyzes this author's imagery and points out that a color, "with reference to clothing, varies in effect according to the person who wears it" (1962: 145). On the contrary, each color is associated with a certain character in Plath's novel, so that color and character stand together for a certain aspect, e.g.: Doreen is dressed in white, being the center of attraction in all social parties; Jay Cee and Esther's mother use the unfashionable color lavender while they try to impose their traditional women's roles on the protagonist; Esther dresses in neutral colors in the second half of the novel while she passes completely unperceived in many circumstances.

Colors are links between the external world and the space within the bell jar in which Esther Greenwood finds herself, and they symbolize the power that one exerts on the other. Esther does not seem to live in a world that understands her, nor does she know how to overcome the gap between the world and herself. Ricardo Quinones, in a study of modernist challenges and perspectives, points out the fact that there is a remarkable rupture with the traditional cultural values in general (1983: 7) and, in Esther's particular case, with the different social forces. This break might be caused by the bell jar, an obstacle to the perception of smells, noises, and flavors, but this is not the case with colors. Colors are seen as the external appearance of things, and they are given a meaning that is highly influenced by the subjective perception of the observer. The stages of Esther's illness

are described symbolically through colors that express abstract ideas and emotions occurring within the protagonist's mind, and it is the reader who has to recreate these emotions through the use of these unexplained symbols. In this case, Esther's process of physical, mental, and sexual maturation makes her more sensitive towards the world that surrounds her, whereas her mental processes are factors involved in the assignation of meaning. The protagonist's feelings of marginalization, of being an outsider, also exert an influence on her understanding of life, and can be paralleled with Plath's external vision of England, where she spent her last years studying at Cambridge with a Fulbright scholarship and then settling into a turbulent marriage and motherhood. As an American in England she would inevitably be marginalized, not belonging to the culture in which she found herself, possibly looking at life through the eyes of an outcast. The color beige in the second half of the novel exemplifies Esther's feeling of alienation during the most critical period of her illness: through her subjective point of view, things are perceived in this nondescript color, emphasizing the physical and psychological abyss that exists between her and the material reality that surrounds her.

Psychology and cognitive sciences are linked to the topic of colors because the way in which the human mind decodes and interprets symbols is important when trying to find a logical relationship between a color and the purpose with which the author is using it. The psychologists Odgen and Richards have studied the theories of meaning and symbols, and they state that their interpretation or decoding is closely linked to the "process of thinking" (1972: 9, 24). This assignment of symbolism to colors follows a universal process of thinking, and it facilitates the identification between the reader's different emotional states and the protagonist's: scenes are colored according to Esther's psychological mood, emphasizing one color over others and thus establishing a link with the reader's personal experience.

In Esther's case, her vision of the world is a consequence of a contemptuous and oppressive cultural and familial education, and it helps the reader to understand the very essence of the protagonist. Again, according to Odgen and Richards, "[T]he sensations that lie at the basis of all perceptions are subjective signs of external objects"

(1972: 79). Thus, colors are the form that Sylvia Plath chose to transmit Esther's experiences. Although the novel is based on Plath's own experiences when she was a student at Smith College, the relationship with her mother, an oppressive relationship, is also a central motif. The usage of colors as powerful symbols is but an example of the subliminal language that the oppressed have to use to escape their oppressors' censorship, which Nina Baym has labeled "alternative speech" (1987: 50) and that in the case of Plath is inevitably influenced by her world-hospital. Therefore, Plath uses colors as alternative speech in an attempt to elude the mother-daughter bond.

We have evidence of these theories in the novel from the very beginning, where Esther's subliminal language and her perceptions start playing an important role. The text opens with a very sensorial and negative description of New York from Esther's standpoint, focusing on smells such as "fusty" or "peanut-smelling," and where black is already associated with negative experiences: a "black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar" (Plath 1966: 1-2).² The color black can be understood as a "sign-situation" (Odgen and Richards 1972: 244) and I interpret it as a powerful symbol/sign that reinforces the effect of the visual images it is attached to. Therefore, I agree with Charles Chadwick that the common feeling of dissatisfaction among symbolist writers is displayed through an attempt to penetrate beyond reality by creating a parallel world (1978: 44). The color black stands for unpleasant aspects in Esther's life, i.e. when she describes how she feels after a disappointing meeting with Buddy, symbolizing lack of love and feelings: "in the cold, black, three o'clock wind" (Plath 1966: 57). However, the blackest elements that appear in the first part of the novel are always connected to ferocious feelings of death, miscarriage, guilt, and terrible failure. For example, Plath conjures up images of death: "with a black mole on her cheek; twenty days after that mole appeared, the girl was dead," or disappointment: "the same dead, black expression" (Plath 1966: 60, 141). The author illustrates Esther's anticipation of failure: "the figs began to go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground," and she subtly hints at her desires for suicide: "its buildings blackened, as if for a funeral" (Plath 1966: 73, 106). Black is present in the clothes of other secondary characters that are placed in a context of death: an Italian in a "black leather jacket"

guided her into the graveyard (Plath 1966: 157); and in macabre objects that become Esther's everyday reality: "ELECTROTHERAPY, printed in black letters" (Plath 1966: 204). Moreover, the color purple, in combination with black, is also linked to death: "[T]hese cadavers were so unhuman-looking they didn't bother me a bit. They had stiff, leathery, purple-black skin and they smelt like old pickle jars" (Plath 1966: 59); as well as illness: "[T]hey were bruised purple" (Plath 1966: 184). Nevertheless, in the second half of the novel, when the idea of death is interiorized within Esther's mind as something natural, it is described ironically as pink in a context in which her clothes and other objects that surround her are darker: "my father's gravestone ... of a mottled pink marble," and she even compares the feeling of death with the thing she likes most in the world, that is, food: "it was like tinned salmon" (Plath 1966: 160). Salmon, though pink colored, is also dead and buried, like her father.

The philosopher Johann W. Goethe was also interested in colors and their symbolic representation. He linked colors to feelings: "[t]hey are immediately associated with the emotions of the mind.... General impressions produced by single colors cannot be changed, that they act specifically, and must produce definite, specific states in the living organ.... Particular colors excite particular states of feeling" (1970: 304-5). The general pessimistic mood of the protagonist throughout the novel is linked to Plath's conviction that though the world seems apparently benign, it hides a potential threat, particularly towards herself. According to this interpretation, white produces a feeling of success and physical attraction that is but the benign appearance of reality: Doreen, with her "bleached blonde white hair and her white dress, she was so white she looked silver" is the center of attraction, while Esther is "melting into the shadows" (Plath 1966: 9, 11). This perception is connected with what Bassnett identifies as the "white Goddess myth" as a symbol of femaleness that, at the same time, raises the problem of relationship with the male (1987: 50). Thus, the diamond that Marco has and which Esther feels so attracted to also shows "a great white light" (Plath 1966: 101); Lenny Shepherd's attractiveness lies in his "strong white teeth," and Buddy is "so handsome, wearing a thick white turtleneck sweater" (Plath 1966: 52-53). These three male characters exemplify Esther's troublesome relationships with men. They are unable to offer Esther any fruitful

interaction either because they seem to be misogynous, as in the case of Marco, or because they do not have anything to share beyond their attractive physical appearance.

Throughout the history of color tradition in Western society, the color white has always occupied a central position. White is linked with light and goodness, in opposition to darkness and evil, represented by the color black. Jennifer Jeffers tries to explain why the British writer A.S. Byatt selects white as protagonist in *Possession*. The long-established associations of the color white with “harmony, silence, purity, innocence, joy” are the reasons why it becomes a protagonist in its own right in the novel (Jeffers 2002). These conventional associations of the color white also appear in *The Bell Jar*, though in my opinion they do not represent the main function of this color in the text. Plath uses the color white only exceptionally as the traditional symbol of either innocence: the fetuses look “so white and defenseless” (Plath 1966: 142); or hope in religion: there was a “white Methodist church” (Plath 1966: 157). But the central issue that white symbolizes throughout the novel is the cleanliness, disinfection, and sterility that Esther lives within both in the Amazon Hotel and in hospital. The critic Renée R. Curry narrows down her analysis of colors in literature and she writes about Plath’s use of white in her writings. She points out what might be one of the main functions of this color in the book when she states that “Plath writes an unfamiliar whiteness into her texts” (2000: 126). This is clear during Esther’s stay at the Amazon hotel and at mental hospitals, and Hoisington and Imbery – though they base their statements on *We*, Zamjatin’s most famous novel— refer to the same feeling that Esther perceives in these two places. For them, “[W]hite conveys sterility as well as purity” (1992: 162) and this is exemplified not only in the descriptions of what surrounds Esther, but also in her relationship with the male characters mentioned above. Plath’s accurate focusing on the whiteness of those places gives the sense that Esther does not feel comfortable in that atmosphere of perfection, especially when the reader finds out about either the hypocrisy or the negative experiences that hide beneath the appearance of purity: she lies in her “white hotel bed feeling lonely and weak” next to a “china-white bedside telephone” that she rarely uses (Plath 1966: 52); she is provided with a “white bathrobe” and “a big white hotel towel” in a bathroom with “white torture-chamber

tiles” (Plath 1966: 17, 41). Ironically, the waiters that serve the poisoned food at the Ladies’ Day banquet are in “hygienic white smocks” with “immaculate white shirts” (Plath 1966: 23, 25). For Esther, the hospital is white with doctors and nurses in white caps; she even has to dress up in a “white coat” and wear a “white mask” when she visits the hospital with Buddy (Plath 1966: 59, 60). Both Buddy and she wear a “white nylon shirt” and “white silk pajamas” or a “white blouse” respectively when they stay in hospital (Plath 1966: 86, 166), where she eats at tables with “white linen table-cloths and glasses and paper napkins” and sleeps under a “thick white blanket” and a “white, drumtight sheet” (Plath 1966: 179-180, 205). This is a superficial cleanliness that actually hides pain and torture. White is, together with black, a protagonist in the text. According to Curry, the frequent use of black and white in the novel “evidences Plath’s perception of the world as racially arranged” (2000: 167). To this opinion, I would also add that black is a good balance for the effects of purity, virginity, and artificial perfection.

This constant association and repetition of colors is also present in the colors of the daisies, lilies, and lavender: they are used in the novel to describe women or womanlike objects. For a young woman like Esther, who describes herself as a Chinaman³, these colors represent all that she wants to be opposed to: bright colors such as “fuzzy pink,” “blue,” “red” have been chosen to describe her lip-sticks, mascara, eye-shadow... and that she identifies with the creation of a superficial mask (Plath 1966: 37). The presents the girls receive at Ladies’ Day are a pocket mirror with “frosted daisies around the edge” and a card written “in lavender ink” (Plath 1966: 23, 51). Esther, like Plath herself, “can scarcely find anything within her that was feminine at all” (Rose 1991: 19) and tends to reject them in the same way she rejects Buddy’s “ashtray in the shape of a lily pad” (Plath 1966: 86). Finally, the fact that both her mother in “her lilac blouse,” and Jay Cee’s “lilac-gloved hand,” and “dress with purple cartwheels” are significant because both are interested mainly in Esther’s conventional and traditional professional development, forgetting about her inner worries and desires to resist convention (Plath 1966: 36, 166). Both women, as mother figures, look “ugly,” “terrible” and “awful” (Plath 1966: 5, 36, 166), in opposition to the lack of interest in the clothing color of Doctor Nolan, who dresses in a fashionable way that Esther likes and who is able to sympathize

with Esther's problems and moral dilemma; she is closer to a friend, someone who tries to be honest with Esther. Rose interprets the clear opposition of Dr. Nolan to other women in the novel as a case of "lesbianism" (1991: 109). Latent lesbianism or not, it is obvious that the feminine lilac color is irksome to both Esther and Sylvia, and probably depends on its symbolizing the passive conventional woman. I agree with Hoisington and Imbery that color conveys "[T]hat which links characters, as well as that which separates them" (1992: 165). As has been illustrated above, colors in the characters' clothes generate feelings of sympathy or dislike in the protagonist.

As it seems in the case with lavender, colors, of course, are gender-sensitive. Linda Wagner-Martin, in her biography of Plath, focuses on the gender differences that children receive at school, and believes that to be one of the reasons why men and women perceive things differently (1999: 6). There is an instance of this in the novel: Doctor Nolan, in opposition to Doctor Gordon, has a negative opinion about electrotherapy, and Esther, as a woman, identifies with the former. The critic Anne Stevenson also states that "Sylvia worried about her gender, about her terrible urge to survive" in a suspicious world (1989: 21). In fact her world is distrustful, and colors seem to be the means by which Esther attempts to decode it. In the novel, male figures make life more difficult for women: they are not only careless about things that women consider important but are also negative influences for them, especially in the field of medicine. Plath was not the first to link color to mental illness in women; Charlotte Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" provides an excellent parallel situation, emphasizing women's concern about colors and the escape from a male and medical world in which creative women are simply not understood.

In this gender struggle, exemplified by the color red in *The Bell Jar*, Plath feels limited by her condition as woman. This limitation is shown in the novel through a clear position of the inferiority of Esther during her encounters with men. She does not feel she is understood by Buddy, a man who does not satisfy her necessities as a woman. In her relationship with Irwin, her trauma becomes much more striking since he causes Esther to start bleeding profusely. The fact that her relationship with Irwin ends up in a flow of red blood is a reminder, according to Bassnett, of non-productivity in the sense that it is a sign

that conception has not taken place (1987: 69). It is significant that Esther's first consummated sexual encounter ends up in tragedy; this trauma creates a sense of guilt, pain, and injury in Esther's subconscious, typical of those women who engage in pre-marital sex, and these feelings increase whenever she sees the Catholic and ever-pregnant Dodo Conway through her window. The color red also receives negative connotations when it represents the bad influences of men towards women in the novel: Mr. Manzi's special chalk is red and in spite of Esther's inferiority in all her heterosexual relationships, she is able to deceive this professor by making him think that she loves the subject he teaches so much that she is attending his lectures without being enrolled in the course. In another instance, male doctors cut Mrs. Tomolillo's skin and a "fierce, bright red" blood begins to run down (Plath 1966: 219). Wagner-Martin interprets the graphic description of blood as a metaphor of emotional loss, and actually it is depicted by the flow of blood coming out of the woman (1999: 46). In opposition to the white chastity, the color red has traditional connotations of lost innocence and purity. However, the spilt blood could also be a symbol of menstruation as waste, and surprisingly enough, some mid-twentieth-century psychiatrists still link it to mental illness. Max Lüscher has studied the effects of colors on the human mind and concludes that "actions related to attack and conquest are represented everywhere by the colour red" (1990: 15). This concept would explain the psychological and physical consequences of this color on Esther. As Lüscher argues, "blood pressure increases and breathing and heart rhythms accelerate" (1990: 15). This feeling of dangerous conflict is present at a turning point in the novel, when Esther more directly faces her true feeling towards her mother, so that *The Bell Jar* expands to encompass much broader themes: "[T]o the man-woman power relation is added the relation between mother and daughter" (Rose 1991: 75). As Bassnett points out, when Esther dumps the dozen red roses brought by her mother as a birthday gift into the hospital waste-basket, she realizes that part of her feeling for her mother is hatred (1987: 76-77). Some of Freud's defenders would analyze the relationship between Esther and her mother as "the concept of the pre-Oedipal mother," also called "phallic mother": "the child responds to the pre-Oedipal mother only because she or he believes that the mother has a penis;" after that, she is "rudely rejected when the child discovers the mother's appalling lack" (Baym 1987: 55-6). In my

opinion, Esther's rejection of her mother could also be the consequence of the pressure and high expectations that the mother exerts over her daughter by trying to impose her moral values on Esther, in an attempt to turn her into what she has been forced to become because of the abandonment of Mr. Greenwood. In opposition to this negative influence, Esther seeks in Dr. Nolan an imaginary mother, friend or lover and finds in her many of the things she has been seeking. The description of the clothes of both women exemplifies Esther's clear preference for the latter. This socially unacceptable and possibly homosexual trend made Esther a suitable candidate for electroshock, which emphasizes conformity, normality and fixed gender roles.

Bassnett believes that the use of symbolic colors is structured in a "kaleidoscopic manner" (1987: 40). The colors mentioned above are considered central colors and basic pillars for the plot, but there are also other colors that derive from that central core. Very detailed and colorful expressions describe and give a deeper meaning to the food and the clothes the characters wear, as well as the objects that surround Esther at the most critical moments. Doreen's white dress is described as if it was the gown of a goddess, while Betsy's plain white blouse and green skirt is what Esther chooses to wear during the climax of her psychological breakdown. Consequently, the result is an underlying continuity and wholeness in this apparent fragmentation and disunity: they are different but complementary ways of presenting Esther's mental evolution through colors. There is continuity because they are coreferential links within the novel, they give coherence to the text and serve the readers as connectors between their own experience and the story. On the other hand, there is discontinuity in the way this piece of art is presented —Esther's illness is presented not as a slow gradual development but as a quick, stumbling and non-proportioned process. In contrast, in the second half of the novel, colors become less bright and less distinct, objects have come to look the same and they blend into the background. There is a significant reduction of the color pattern as Esther's mental illness progresses: grayish, brownish tones appear, beige now being the most alienating color. Plath's concern about her existence shows a contradictory desire of being "absolutely different from everything else in the world and at the same time absolutely undifferentiated from it" (Stevenson 1989: 21) and this is reflected through color. The color scheme of the

sanatorium she spends the end of the novel in is beige: walls, carpets, chairs, sofas, etc. are in this color, and it is even presented as a possible cause for the failure of the treatment she undergoes: the repetitive colors that surround her prevent the improvement of Esther's individuality and mental skills. Colors are much simpler and duller in this second part and they give unity to the action. This monotonous feeling also adds relevant details such as the fact that Esther spends several weeks in the same clothes: "a green skirt and a white blouse" (Plath 1966: 191); these are neutral and cold colors that correspond with Esther's most critical period. We, as witnesses of this experience, also change like colors and Esther: our perception changes as it is inspired by pity, mistrust, or astonishment.

The possible reason for the failure of the medical treatment Esther receives goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century, when electricity was combined with convulsion in electroshock, a technique that flourished in America from the 1920s through the 1940s. Timothy Kneeland describes the side effects of such an intensive cure as a "regimen that rendered the patient profoundly disoriented, unable to speak or remember, incontinent" (2002: 58). Theoretically, it was thought that if a person with mental problems regressed to an infantile state, his or her personality could be reorganized. Kneeland narrows down the target patients of these types of treatments and assures that electroshock treatment (EST) was indicated in any type of psychiatric disorder such as "manic-depressive depression or psychoneurotic depression" (2002: 67). This can be applied to the case of Esther, who is a patient of these features and was expected to restructure her personality after the treatment. However, the studies of longer-term outcomes of EST are less optimistic: the consequences on mind, body and personality were not exactly what doctors and patients expected. On the other hand, the issue of EST clearly connects with the question of gender, so deeply rooted in the novel. Kneeland points out a relevant fact about this medical practice that involves a consistent and lasting association with sex: "physicians who practiced electrical psychiatry were male, while the majority of their patients, by the 1950s were female" (2002: 71). The cases of female patients described in Kneeland's study highlight the passive nature that these women acquire after the treatment, being able to resume their housework and other aspects of their lives they were

against before having EST. This explains Esther's changed attitude in the second half of the novel, where "she gave up her outside interest and became careless in her personal appearance" requiring constant supervision and exemplifying the deep impact that this severe treatment has on her (Kneeland 2002: 72). Plath cleverly expresses this submission and oppression through the dramatic color changes occurring in the second half of the novel. Electroshock acts as a filter which has deadened Esther's senses, such that she no longer sees strong vivid primary colors but drab and dimmer tones.

Thus, colors throughout this novel bear crucial information about the main character's attitudes towards life and about Plath's personal vision of the world. The negative charge in colors also exemplifies Plath's pessimistic attitude towards being a woman, that is, "to be rigidly, tragically, circumscribed" (Rose 1991: 116). As Odgen and Richards point out, "[T]he science of Symbolism is now ready to emerge, and with it will come a new educational technique that will treat language as the most important instrument we possess" (1972: 242). Colors are Esther's individual language in a medium in which she is neither allowed to express herself, nor is understood when she does so. These ironic reflections through the character of Esther appear to be a harsh autobiography in which ghosts from the past are agents in a mental manipulation of colors. And they are therefore an ever-lasting influence on Esther's present and even on Plath's future. Ironically, color therapy is becoming a fashionable alternative to traditional medical treatments, as if Plath were anticipating this healing method by forty years; Plath's use of colors, however pessimistic it may seem, symbolizes her struggle to survive through writing, and so far that struggle has been successful.

NOTES

- ¹. Due to her real mental instability, Plath's works likely reflect the contradictions she suffered in real life.
- ². All quotes from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* have been taken from a second edition. The novel was first published in 1962.
- ³. The author uses this term at the very beginning of the novel (Plath 1966: 3).

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