

THE TRAUMATIC PROCESS OF ADAPTING TO LIFE IN 1950s AMERICA - SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*^a

Natalija Stevanović*

University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Niš, Serbia

ORCID iD: Natalija Stevanović

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5340-3805>

Abstract

Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), gives us an insight into the life of a young woman, Esther Greenwood, and the process of her adapting to life in 1950s America. As it is a rather traumatic process due to her (in)ability to accept and conform to the rules of a male-dominated society, the aim of this paper is to analyse this novel within the framework of trauma studies. The novel follows Esther Greenwood's descent into depression and her attempts to make choices about her future, while showing that she finds the task rather traumatic because her desires are mutually exclusive and not in accordance with what the consumerist American society deems acceptable. Bessel A. van der Kolk et al. state that what makes something traumatic is "the subjective assessment by victims of how threatened and helpless they feel" (2007). Before the analysis of the novel, the theoretical framework is provided in terms of defining trauma, relying on the research conducted by Sigmund Freud, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), and other similar studies connected to the analysis of trauma and, in particular, trauma in Sylvia Plath's oeuvre. The historical background of the novel is also examined, in order to provide a clearer picture of the period the novel is set in. Hopefully, this small scale research offers another way of perceiving the traumatic experience of being a woman in a domineering, patriarchal society.

Key words: 1950s America, depression, patriarchal system, Sylvia Plath, Trauma studies.

^a The article was presented at the *Language, Literature, Process 2023 Conference* at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Serbia.

* Corresponding author: Natalija Stevanović, University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Ćirila i Metodija 2, 18000 Niš, Serbia, natalija.stevanovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

ТРАУМАТИЧНИ ПРОЦЕС ПРИЛАГОЂАВАЊА НА ЖИВОТ У АМЕРИЦИ ПЕДЕСЕТИХ ГОДИНА – ПОД СТАКЛЕНИМ ЗВОНОМ СИЛВИЈЕ ПЛАТ

Апстракт

Једини роман Силвије Плат, *Под стакленим звоном* (1963), даје нам увид у живот младе жене, Естер Гринвуд, и процес њеног прилагођавања животу у Америци 1950-их. Како је то прилично трауматичан процес због њене (не)способности да прихвати и прилагоди се правилима друштва у којем доминирају мушкарци, циљ овог рада је да се овај роман анализира у оквиру студија трауме. Роман прати Естер Гринвуд и њене покушаје да направи изборе о својој будућности док све више постаје депресивна, а истовремено показује да она сматра да је задатак прилично трауматичан јер се њене жеље међусобно искључују и нису у складу са оним што конзумеристичко америчко друштво сматра прихватљивим. Бесел А. ван дер Колк и др. наводе да је оно што чини нешто трауматичним „субјективна процена жртава колико се осећају угрожено и беспомоћно“ (2007). Пре анализе романа, дат је теоријски оквир у смислу дефинисања трауме, ослањајући се на истраживања Сигмунда Фројда, Шошане Фелман и Дори Лауб у *Сведочанство: кризе сведочења у књижевности, психоанализи и историји* (1992) и другим сличним студијама у вези са анализом трауме и, посебно, трауме у опусу Силвије Плат. Такође се испитује историјска позадина романа, како би се пружила јаснија слика периода у коме се радња романа одвија. Надамо се да ово истраживање нуди још један начин сагледавања трауматичног искуства жене у доминантном, патријархалном друштву.

Кључне речи: Америка 50-их, депресија, патријархални систем, Силвија Плат, студије трауме.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963, and use the framework of trauma studies as a theoretical basis upon which the analysis is done. The main character of the novel, Esther Greenwood, is the central point of analysis in this paper; to be more precise, the point of this paper is to analyse the reasons her process of adapting to life in 1950s America is deemed traumatic. The main stances of trauma studies are provided in the introductory part of the paper, followed by an overview of America in the 1950s, in the aftermath of the Second World War, with an emphasis on the lives of women at that time, as well as the omnipresent consumerist and patriarchal values. Afterwards, a close analysis of some of the scenes from the novel is provided in order to show how the process of adapting to life in such a societal climate is rather traumatic for Esther. In the concluding remarks, the most important points about the traumatic process Esther goes through are emphasized. However, it should be stressed that even though *The Bell Jar* is considered to be a semi-autobiographical novel, as it relies heavily on Sylvia Plath's life and her experiences, this

paper chooses to focus on the contents on the novel, without making parallels with Sylvia Plath's own experiences. To do so, this paper uses Roland Barthes' approach stated in his essay *The Death of the Author* (originally published in 1977). In this essay, Barthes disagrees with the practices of analysing a text within the biographical context of the author's life, insisting on removing the author from the "writing", so that it can no longer bear any other function but that of the symbol itself (p. 142). Therefore, this paper analyses the novel as a story of a symbolic young woman maturing and attempting to adapt to life in 1950s America. The historical background is provided as it is important for the understanding of the novel, which is set in America in the 1950s as we know it.

TRAUMA STUDIES

The 20th century marks the rise in the interest in the field of trauma studies, and in particular trauma studies within the realms of literature and art. Cathy Caruth, in her *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), brings forth some rather interesting claims regarding trauma and trauma studies in general, relying heavily on Sigmund Freud and his studies. Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (an essay originally published in 1920) in particular draws attention to something he terms "traumatic neurosis", a condition which occurs after a person goes through a life-threatening accident or some severe mechanical shock (Freud, 2003, p. 50). Caruth proceeds with this outline by further adding that this trauma which occurs stems from a Greek word for "wound", and that the trauma Freud has in mind is rather a wound inflicted upon the mind, not upon the body (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Throughout her whole study, she expands on Freud's theories and claims that trauma is something not easily assimilated into consciousness, but rather something which happens unexpectedly, something which imposes itself again repeatedly in the survivor's nightmares and repetitive actions (Ibid.). According to Caruth, trauma causes problems in a person's everyday life by overtaking their dreams and actions. Some of Caruth's claims have since been disproved or improved, but the premise stays the same. Trauma is something which renders a person unable to lead a normal life, and it can vary from an event not deemed traumatic to other people to atrocities such as wars. The period of the 1990s was a time of turmoil and a perfect period for the rise of trauma studies.

Trauma studies hugely impact the analysis of literature as well. Kali Tal, in her *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), focuses on writing about the personal narratives of the Holocaust victims, the Vietnam war, and women and children who were raped. She emphasizes that trauma is something which happens outside the boundaries of "normal" experience, and this traumatic event cannot be represented accurately; however, textual representations are there in order to mediate the experience

without the traumatic impact (p. 15). Literature often does that, by presenting an event which is rather traumatic, but which we would not know about in a different way. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub elaborate on the importance of works of art, specifically literary works, as *testimonies*, which bear the fragments of a memory which is not yet settled into understanding or remembrance, or of acts which we would not be able to understand, as they exist outside our frame of reference (1992, p. 5). They also mention Sigmund Freud when they say that Freud's attempt in psychoanalysis is to "bring evidence materialized by the unconscious testimony into the realm of cognition", which in turn, leads Felman and Laub to claim that testimony as they put it is to be understood "not as a mode of statement, but rather as a mode of access to [that] truth" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 15). Essentially, if we consider literature as a testimony of the characters, then trauma studies can analyse events of literary (and human) history through the characters' point of view.

Finally, there is an inherent inability to determine what kind of an event can be deemed traumatic. Bassel van der Kolk et al. emphasize that the critical element which deems an event traumatic is "the subjective assessment by victims of how threatened and helpless they feel" (2007, p. 6). Even though some events can be assessed objectively as not traumatic enough, unlike those upon which there is a general agreement (the Holocaust, wars, racism, rape), if the person who goes through that event feels as if their whole life revolves around it and as if they cannot avoid reliving that event in their mind, it is traumatic for them. Also, if their inability to live a life deemed normal by the standards of the society they are a part of is making their everyday functioning difficult, we can talk about a traumatic event. Further on in this paper, in the part of the analysis of the novel, the reasons why Esther's process of adapting to life in 1950s America is traumatic are evident. Before that, the historical overview of that period is provided.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BELL JAR

The historical context is given from the very beginning of the novel, when the narrator, Esther Greenwood, describes the period as a sultry summer when: "[...] they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York" (Plath, 2013, p. 1). Ethel and Julius Rosenberg are a couple charged with siding with the Soviet Union and betraying the United States by selling its atomic secrets (Gill, 2008, p. 24). The overall atmosphere ruling the United States at the time was rather oppressive, with the omnipresent threat of the Soviet Union and the looming presence of the Cold War followed by the general mistrust of the United States in its own people. At the same time, it was a period of prosperity, when even women were encouraged to pursue a more independent

future and personal opportunities (albeit with certain restrictions, which are discussed throughout this paper). However, apart from the Soviet Union, the threat to the United States also came from China, as well as from the consequences of the war North Korea waged on South Korea in the 1950s. There was an overall threat of the communist forces, which could possibly infiltrate political, cultural, and educational establishments. Apart from these ideological shifts, there were cultural shifts as well, such as the changing face of American architecture and family life, particularly the rising birth rates, and the flight from the cities to the suburbs (Gill, 2008, p. 25/26). The role of the “instigator of morality” in children and men, and “guardians of national virtue” fell upon women who were pressured into staying home and not seeking employment outside of their housewife role (Gill, 2008, p. 27). It is evident that these cultural shifts were rather favourable for the rise of patriarchal pressure, as men were supposed to provide for their families, to be the ones to protect them, and thus those who had the power to make all the important decisions regarding their families. Women were there to support them, feed them, and keep them happy. Outside of family life, men were also the ones occupying prominent positions, as their insistence on higher education was not denied, unlike women's.

In the famous “Kitchen Debate” between Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon at the opening of the American National Exhibition at Sokolniki Park in Moscow, it is apparent what kind of attitude the United States held towards the women of the time. Standing in front of a built-in panel-controlled washing machine, Nixon disregarded Khrushchev's comment that the Soviet Union had the same thing, by saying that the machine in question was the newest model, as the United States were interested in making life easier for their women. When Khrushchev replied that in the Soviet Union they did not have “the capitalist attitude toward women”, Nixon said: “I think that this attitude toward women is universal. What we want to do is make easier the life of our housewives” (Hamilton & Phillips, 2014, p. 47). This debate showcases that one of the instances of the United States' defence against the communist threat was mapping the role of women in modern society (Hamilton & Phillips, 2014, p. 11). Not only were women controlled by their husbands, should they marry, but the society they live in had some predetermined notions and expectations regarding them. Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (originally published in 1963), delves deeply into the society of 1950s America, as she herself lived in that time. She reiterates the accepted expectations of women of the time by stating that the suburban housewife is “the dream image of the young American women and the envy [...] of women all over the world” (Friedan, 1979, p. 13). The American housewife's life is made easier by making available all the modern appliances, and here consumerism comes into

play, as it is supposed to distract women from the problematic aspects of their lives. She can get all the appliances imaginable to help with her house chores, and her only purpose is to be healthy, beautiful, and to take care of her husband and her children. It is unacceptable to talk about her problems, or her dissatisfaction about her life, because there is nothing to be dissatisfied with. She also has the opportunity to educate herself; however, there was an omnipresent opinion at the time that those women who are educated are naturally made unhappy in their role as housewives (Friedan, 1979, p 18). Adrienne Rich, an American poetess of the period, writes of her own inability to accept life in 1950s America as it was:

Because I was also determined to have a “full” woman’s life, I plunged in my early twenties into marriage and had three children before I was thirty. There was nothing overt in the environment to warn me: these were the ‘50s, and in reaction to the earlier wave of feminism, middle-class women were making careers of domestic perfection, working to send their husbands through professional schools, then retiring to raise large families. People were moving out to the suburbs, technology was going to be the answer to everything, even sex; the family was in its glory. Life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage. I have a sense that women didn’t talk to each other much in the fifties – not about their secret emptiness, their frustrations.

(Rich, 1972, p. 22)

Obviously, there are some conflicting emotions within women about their way of life in 1950s America. However, despite education, it is rather difficult for women to admit that there is something wrong with the way they live. Nevertheless, that does not mean they are not aware of the shortcomings of their society. Some manage to accept the life that they are forced to have, living privately, keeping to themselves, and not voicing any of their inner struggles. When exposed to a certain culture, your experience is shaped. Identity is also created and forged amidst cultural currents. And sometimes the cultural effects upon a person can be detrimental. In the case of women in 1950s America, a sudden change in the post-war world shaped their experience. However, in the case of Esther Greenwood, we can see what happens when a woman is aware that there is something inherently wrong with the society she lives in, and how, due to her inability to accept said society, the whole process of living in such times is rather traumatic for her.

ESTHER GREENWOOD IN THE BELL JAR'S 1950S AMERICA

There have been numerous attempts in academic articles to explain Esther Greenwood's behaviour in the novel by emphasizing that she is suffering from a mental illness, or rather, that she is depressed, and that this is the reason she acts the way she does. However, Marjorie Perloff attempts to explain that the focus in the novel is not only on the mental illness "per se", but that it is rather on the "relationship of Esther's private psychosis to her larger social situation" (Perloff, 1972, p. 511). Esther finds herself in a dilemma which rather seems to have a great deal with being a woman in a society "whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject" (Ibid.). From the very beginning of the novel, it is brought to the reader's attention that Esther has not even an inkling of an idea about what she wants to do with her life. She comes to New York, on a summer internship program at a prominent women's magazine. What is supposed to be a place which encourages women's creative aspirations, becomes a place of reinforcing patriarchal ideas of what these women are supposed to be. It seems that this course is actually programmed to mould young women into perfect, marriage materials. Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*, delves deeply into the society of 1950s America, as the author herself lived in that time. As an educated woman who is also a wife and a mother, she states in the book that she feels that her abilities and education meant taking her away from home. She also mentions that the magazines of the time promoted the image of an ideal woman, "young and frivolous, almost childlike"; she is supposed to be feminine and passive, whose only pursuit in life is the pursuit of a man, all the while taking care of the most important notion about her – not her thoughts and ideas, but her body (Friedan, 1979, p. 31). Esther finds herself in a similar situation, where she is presented with various images of femininity. However, those images are so distorted by the various aspects through which they are perceived that "contradiction and neurosis can be said to be built into the structures of her society" (Smith, 2008, p. 35). In her essay *Seeing Through the Bell Jar: Distorted Female Identity in Cold War America*, Rosi Smith presents three women Esther meets during her time in New York, and each of them is evocative of options Esther has when it comes to choosing what type of a woman she can become. The first one is Betsy, "the personification of domestic femininity"; Doreen, "sexually adventurous and iconoclastic; and finally, Jay Cee, Esther's editor, a woman formed by early feminism, career-minded (Smith, 2008, p. 41). However, faced with all those different types of womanhood, Esther is unable to fully accept any of them, as "each has influenced her and none seems a coherent mirror of her own identity" (Smith, 2008, p. 42). These types of womanhood are filtered through patriarchal standards, and some of them are acceptable in society, whereas other are frowned upon.

In modern times, it is difficult to comprehend how Esther allows herself to be controlled by a domineering patriarchal society, let alone how she feels traumatized as a result. Therefore, this novel is a perfect example of a testimony, which Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub stress the importance of (as is stated in the introductory part of this paper) in order to understand a certain period or event by reading stories which bear the fragments of a memory not yet settled into understanding or remembrance, due to the fact that they are outside of our frame of reference (1992, p. 5). Furthermore, there are various perceptions about what events can be deemed traumatic. In his essay *Trauma in Cultural Perspective*, Marten W. deVries points out that the belief that an individual can control their own destiny has emerged only in recent generations (deVries, 2007, p. 399). Therefore, if there is an inherent inability to control one's life, or societal circumstances do not allow it, the process of adapting can be rather traumatic. Culture may be viewed as a "protective and supportive system of values, lifestyles, and knowledge", the disruption of which can have a detrimental effect on its members (deVries, 2007, p. 400). Culture is especially important during social and cultural changes, followed by drastic changes in people's expectations and communal values. In case of individuals who manage to strongly identify with the cultural values, they succeed in benefiting from the traumatic impact of the change; however, when individuals are unable to successfully integrate themselves, it can lead to a negative impact on their health and psychopathology (Ibid.). This is precisely what happens to Esther in the novel. As van der Kolk says, "one core function of human societies" is to provide their members with "traditions, institutions, and value systems" which in turn can protect the members of society against "becoming overwhelmed by stressful experiences" (Van der Kolk et al, 2007, p. 25). However, the changing and unpredictable face of the American society forces Esther to go through a process of adapting to a lifestyle she cannot accept as a given, as there is not only one option, but multiple, usually mutually exclusive in the society which places great importance on a certain type of woman. Her inability to choose a path to acceptance and the resulting overwhelming sense of stress is evident in one of the most striking paragraphs from the novel, where she visually presents her inability to choose through a metaphor of a fig tree:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't

quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.

(Plath, 2013, p. 73)

Inevitably, she does not know how to deal with the choices, or rather, the lack of choices. Friedan states that despite the choices women were given on the surface in 1950s America, the only road to fulfilment actually offered to American women was to help them adjust to their role as housewives. Still, despite the apparent acceptance of the societal expectation, and despite adjusting to the role women are given, they had to ignore the “dissatisfied voice stirring within her”, because that would be less painful (Friedan, 1979, p. 21). For Esther, the whole root of the problem lies in the fact that she cannot ignore and she cannot accept the options available to her, as she cannot reconcile with the fact that for that period, they are mutually exclusive. Her own mother is not helpful, as she is a rather practical woman, a widow, who encourages Esther to learn shorthand after college in order to be able to support herself, as she herself had to go through a process of taking care of her family on her own after her husband's death. She had no choice, but Esther, on the other hand, seems to have a choice. Yet, the choices are bleak, as she can either become a feminist, the career woman, but alone in the end, or the gentle wife, a mother, loved and supported by her husband (Friedan, 1979, p. 93/94). She even states at one point that she “hated the idea of serving men in any way” (Plath, p. 72). This statement makes it obvious that Esther is aware of the patriarchal influence in her society, and of the fact that one way or another, she has to accept a path in life which will inevitably lead her to a subordinate position to a man. So in the end, there is not much choice left. The fig passage is reminiscent of what Friedan states in her book – the women in the 1950s were no longer like their mothers or their aunts, because they finally got the right to choose (Friedan, 1979, p. 93). However, the choice would still leave them with something lacking.

Upon her return from New York, there is an apparent change in Esther's behaviour as she is spiralling further into depression. She cannot write, she cannot read, or do all those things she used to find pleasure in. She seems to be disintegrating, and there are crucial changes in a part of her identity due to the inability to assimilate into the regular world. The society demands change, which is rather traumatic for her, and she cannot comply with it without some permanent damage to her very core. She is also aware of the fact that her behaviour and inability to choose are something which is not standard for the women of the period, and she explains her indecisiveness by saying that if wanting two mutually exclusive

things at the same time is neurotic, then she is “neurotic as hell” (Plath, 2013, p. 90). In his *The Trauma Question* (2008), Roger Luckhurst claims that trauma is a “piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication”; trauma “violently opens passage-ways” between those systems which were once discrete, and it makes “unforeseen connections that distress or confound” (2008, p. 3). Not only does Esther go through emotional turmoil due to her trauma, but it also affects her in terms of the physical aspects of her being. Her body follows her mind, and both of them are affected by the trauma, which Luckhurst explains by claiming that one of the aspects of trauma is its transmissibility – it leaks between mental and physical systems (Ibid.)

So many things in Esther’s life, in her process of building her own identity, have been traumatic. First of all, her relationships with men. There is a missing father figure, as she lost her father when she was nine years old, which was a rather traumatic event for her. Her encounters with men once she becomes a young woman are not pleasant. She either meets hypocrites or abusers, such as Marco, who attempts to rape her. Buddy Willard, who she is supposed to get married to, does not encourage her aspirations to become a poet. He always tells her that she will feel differently when she gives birth, using the rhetoric of the patriarchal society in 1950s America. Both of them happen to witness a woman giving birth when they visit Buddy Willard’s friend, Will, who is a medical student assisting with the delivery. Esther is rather traumatized by the sight of the woman on the table, comparing it to an “awful torture table”, drugged so that she could forget all about the pain after the delivery (Plath, 2013, p. 61). In Esther’s commentary about the woman, she states that the drug must have been an invention of a man so that the woman could forget about the pain, go home, have another child, and all the while in some secret part of her that “doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again” (Plath, 2013, p. 62). She is appalled by the lack of agency on the part of the woman, and even more shocked by the fact that doctors control the way the most important day of that woman’s life is going to develop. Throughout her thoughts in the novel, it is obvious that Esther thinks of marriage and motherhood as a way to trap women. She also compares getting married to being brainwashed, saying that after you get married you go about “as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (Plath, 2013, p. 81). Her attitude to marriage is also obvious when she lists all of the advantages of being married, and then mentions security. However, her inner self rebels and she states that the last thing she wants is infinite security and “[...] to be a place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change, and excitement, and to shoot of in all directions myself.” (Plath, 2013, p.79). This is evocative of something which Kali Tal mentions, which can be regarded as a discrepancy between the national and the personal myth. Basically, a national (or collective) myth is

“propagated in textbooks, official histories, popular culture” and it “belongs to no one individual, though individuals borrow from it and buy into it in varying degrees” (Tal, 1996, p. 115). Essentially, those are myths which shape an individual’s understanding of nations, characters, and identity. On the other hand, there are personal myths, which are “the particular set of explanations and expectations generated by an individual to account for his or her circumstances and actions” (Ibid., p. 116). When there is a discrepancy between a personal and the national myth, or a failure to find the same values in the national myth which a person has established in their personal one, it may lead to a traumatic experience of trying to find ways to live a life with that discrepancy. And Esther, who tries to live by her own personal myth, finds the pressure of the people around her overwhelming, and as a result becomes unable to vocalize her inner split and the trauma it causes her. The fact that she internalizes the “state-sanctioned ideal of domestic femininity”, and the fact that she subjects herself to the patriarchal ideologies of society while being unable to accept them in her core render her unable to connect to the active process of participating in such a society (Smith, 2008, p. 36).

Her trauma throughout the novel and her depressive episodes are also evident in some seemingly unimportant scenes. She cannot recognize herself in the mirror, cannot sleep for twenty-one days. She finally notices the effect that her attempts to become a member of society have on her. This can be connected to Cathy Caruth’s claim stated at the beginning of this paper – trauma is not easily assimilated into consciousness, but rather something which happens unexpectedly and which returns to haunt a person on a daily basis. All of the demands the society has imposed upon Esther which continuously exist in her unconsciousness and her own alienation from them, lead her to feeling as if there is a separate self being locked within her, something completely separate and distinct from what she appears to be in society (Bonds, 1990, p. 52). This division within herself is connected to dissociation, due to her inability to compartmentalize her experience, as she cannot integrate the elements of her trauma into an “integrated sense of self” (Van der kolk et al., 2007, p. 306). The fact that she becomes assimilated into society’s expectations, and performs in accordance with them, but fails to present her own identity, leads to the further “fracturing of identity” (Smith, 2008, p. 44). Thus begins her quest for self-annihilation, through her suicide attempts. Learning to live in a society which offers her unattainable versions of herself that are mutually exclusive is traumatic, and death in this case is something which is simple, unpoluted, “incorruptible by fantasy and expectation” (Smith, 2008, p. 52). The first attempt is marked by her trying to cut her wrists, but stopping, realizing that what she wants to kill is “somewhere else, deeper, more secret and a whole lot harder to get at” (Plath, 2013, p. 142). Her last attempt is when she drinks sleeping pills and crawls into a hole in

the ground of her basement. However, she is saved, and upon waking up and realizing that she cannot see, as she is bandaged, a voice informs her that she should not worry about being blind, for she will surely “marry a nice blind man someday” (Plath, 2013, p. 165). Once again, there is a complete disregard for the woman’s feelings, as she is still valuable in the sense of being able to fulfil her duty, that is, to become a wife.

Her institutionalization shows her conflicting emotions towards psychiatrists. Van der Kolk says that “when dealing with traumatized individuals”, it is necessary that “professionals and policy makers need, on the one hand, to respect the national desire to take action to overcome post-traumatic helplessness”, and on the other hand to help people “find ways of communicating about the dangers of recreating their traumas in new social contexts” (Van der kolk et al., 2007, p. 34). However, Esther does not encounter psychiatrists who are ready to help her gain agency in dealing with her own trauma. Doctor Gordon, a man, does not listen to her plight, but assigns shock treatments which only further traumatize her. Upon being sent to another institution after her last suicide attempt, she meets a female psychiatrist, Doctor Nolan, whom she trusts at first, but who administers electro-shock treatments as well, without warning her, and she feels betrayed yet again. Rosi Smith points out that subjects in a society are aware of the self-evident priorities, and even though they are restricting, they participate willingly in that restriction by acting out their designated roles (2008, p. 41). However, Esther fails to choose the role prescribed for her, and thus she has to suffer the consequences, that is, go through shock treatments. She feels betrayed by Doctor Nolan, and seems more shocked by her “bare-faced treachery” than by the shock treatments (Plath, 2013, p. 203). Later on, she insists on doing something about herself, which is going to make her less dependent on men. She goes to a gynaecologist to get fitted for a diaphragm, and afterwards, she feels like she is her own woman, like she is buying her freedom (Plath, 2008, p. 213).

For many people, the novel ends on a positive note. She enters a room where doctors are having a board meeting to decide her future. She steps into the room as if guided by a “magical thread” and faces turn towards her (Plath, 2013, p. 234). However, prior to this sentence, Esther says something rather disturbing. She says that there should be a “ritual for being born twice –patched, retreaded and approved for the road” (Plath, 2013, p. 233). So far, her attempts to adapt to the life in her society have been futile, resulting in the intervention. Now that she has gone through therapy – shock treatments, there is a possibility that she is moulded into a person who would be acceptable in her society, or “approved”. This is not something which can be deemed too optimistic, because in this scene she is under extreme scrutiny and will continue to be so in order to prevent any possible deviations in the future. She succumbs to the pressure of the society and decides to be normal, or rather, others decide for her.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the character of Esther Greenwood does go through a lot of trauma in order to adapt to the societal expectations placed on women in 1950s America. The patriarchal constrictions of women, and the inability to choose something which is deemed acceptable as it is in complete contrast to what is needed all exacerbate Esther's fragile mental state. Her whole existence, from her childhood when she lost her father, to her adulthood, when she starts losing herself, has been marked with traumatic processes of accepting, adapting, and possibly, overcoming. Still, even though she accepts to undergo the healing process under the supervision of an institution, it is difficult to say that it was the best decision for her. Despite the rise of opportunities for women in the 1950s, the opportunities themselves are overshadowed by a general consensus (albeit unwritten) that, after all, women are best fitted for one role, the role of a housewife. This once again underlines the main point of the "Kitchen Debate" and Vice President Nixon's comment that the advances in technology are meant to make life easier for American housewives, and when Esther, unable to accept this unwritten rule of being encouraged to pursue opportunities, but expected to eventually fulfil her insinuated predetermined role, goes through a traumatic process and descends into depression in order to try to find her place in a society not fitted to cater to women who are willing to question, and possibly break the rules imposed upon them.

Acknowledgement. This study was supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovations of the Republic of Serbia (Contract No. 451-03-47/2023-01/ 200165).

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (1977). The Death of the Author. In *Image, Music, Text*, S. Heath (transl.), (pp. 142–48). London: Fontana Press.
- Bonds, D.S. (1990). The separative self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. *Women's Studies*, 18, 49-64.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- deVries, M. (2007). Trauma in Cultural Perspective. In van der Kolk, B. A., McFarlane, A. C., & Weisaeth, L. (Eds.). *Traumatic stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society*. The Guilford Press.
- Felman, S. & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature psychoanalysis and history*. Routledge.
- Freud, S. (2003). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*. Penguin Classics.
- Friedan, B. (1979). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.
- Gill, J. (2008). *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511817007>.

- Hamilton, S. & Phillips, S. T. (2014). *The Kitchen Debate and Cold War Consumer Politics: A Brief History with documents*. Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Luckhurst, R. (2008). *The Trauma Question*. Routledge.
- Perloff, M., & Plath, S. (1972). A Ritual for Being Born Twice: Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar". *Contemporary Literature*, 13, 507-522.
- Plath, S. (2013). *The Bell Jar*. Faber and Faber Limited Bloomsbury House.
- Rich, A. (1972). When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision. *College English*, 34(1), 18–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/375215>
- Smith, R. (2008). Seeing Through the Bell Jar: Distorted Female Identity in Cold War America. *Emerging voices in American studies*, Aspeers 1, 33-55.
- Tal, K. (1996). *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. Cambridge University Press.
- van der Kolk, B. A., McFarlane, A. C., & Weisaeth, L. (Eds.). (2007). *Traumatic stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society*. The Guilford Press.

ТРАУМАТИЧНИ ПРОЦЕС ПРИЛАГОЂАВАЊА НА ЖИВОТ У АМЕРИЦИ ПЕДЕСЕТИХ ГОДИНА – ПОД СТАКЛЕНИМ ЗВОНОМ СИЛВИЈЕ ПЛАТ

Наталија Стевановић

Универзитет у Нишу, Филозофски факултет, Ниш, Србија

Резиме

Овај рад као основу за анализу узима роман Под стакленим звоном Силвије Плат, објављен 1963. године. Тачније, анализира се главни лик романа, Естер Гринвуд, млада девојка која живи у Америци 1950-их. Будући да живи у патријархалном друштву обележеном присуством Хладног рата и претњом комунизма из Совјетског Савеза, њено сналажење у друштву је праћено трауматичним искуствима због немогућности да се прилагоди очекивањима друштва. Стога овај рад као основу за анализу узима студије трауме, како би описао искуства Естер Гринвуд и објаснио због чега су њена искуства трауматична и због чега на крају доводе до њене депресивности и покушаја самоубиства.

Цео рад се заснива на студијама о трауми, у животу а и у књижевности, почев од студија Сигмунда Фројда, до студија аутора заслужних за уврштавање студија траума у академски дискурс, попут Кети Керут, Шошане Фелман и Дори Лауба. Ставови изнети у њиховим студијама се користе као основа за анализу живота Естер Гринвуд, њене немогућности да прихвати ставове друштва које у суштини не дозвољава претерану слободу женама, њеног трауматичног односа с мушкарцима као и институцијама које је касније узму под своје и покушавају да је излече. Овај рад покушава да покаже како је трауматично уколико је неко свестан ограничавајућих услова друштва у коме живи а истовремено неспособан да нађе начин да ради нешто што би им било истински потребно. Истовремено, разлози за то се налазе у претерано патријархалном друштву у коме је конзумеризам узет као основа за задовољавајући живот.