

The Inoperative Community in *The Bell Jar*: The Sharing of Interrupted Myth

MARÍA LUISA PASCUAL-GARRIDO

Universidad de Córdoba

ffipagam@uco.es

In this essay I intend to offer an analysis of Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) that goes beyond the scope of the confessional and feminist readings which have prevailed in Plathian studies. Following the critical interest raised by the notion of community and its problematic relationship with individual subjectivity in recent decades, I draw on Jean-Luc Nancy's understanding of "community" (1985-1986) in order to offer an alternative interpretation of *The Bell Jar*. The theoretical framework which inspires this essay declares the impossibility of an operative community which actually fulfils the natural longing of all human beings for immanence and transcendence. I argue that *The Bell Jar* actually tackles the interruption of two long-standing myths—the possibility of community and the assertion of autonomy of the self. Since the latter has already been addressed by several authors as a central issue in Plath's novel, I here focus on how she deals with the shattered myth of community. Far from being a narcissistic account of private traumas, the novel is paradoxically an attempt to share with others a universal plight—the overwhelming sense of humans as exposed and finite beings facing the absence of a community of immanence. Ironically, it is the sharing of that disturbing truth which allows the emergence of community in Plath's novel.

Key words: Sylvia Plath; *The Bell Jar*; inoperative community; singularity; finitude; exposure

. . .

La comunidad inoperativa en *The Bell Jar*: compartiendo el mito interrumpido

En este ensayo se pretende ofrecer un análisis de la novela de Sylvia Plath *The Bell Jar* (1963) que trascienda el enfoque confesional y feminista de la mayoría de interpretaciones que han dominado los estudios sobre su obra. Al hilo del interés crítico generado por el concepto de comunidad y su problemática relación con la subjetividad del individuo en las últimas décadas, este artículo parte la noción de comunidad definida por Jean-Luc Nancy

(1985-1986) para brindar una interpretación alternativa de *The Bell Jar*. El marco teórico en el que se sustenta este trabajo declara la imposibilidad de que exista una comunidad operativa que satisfaga el deseo de trascendencia natural en todo ser humano. Defiendo la idea de que en *The Bell Jar*, en efecto, se aborda la interrupción de dos mitos básicos: la posibilidad de comunidad y la afirmación de la autonomía del ser. Puesto que este último ya ha sido estudiado por varios autores como asunto central de la novela de Plath, aquí se presta atención al desmoronamiento del mito de la comunidad. Lejos de ofrecer el relato narcisista de traumas personales como alegan la mayoría de los críticos, la novela es paradójicamente el intento de compartir con otros un problema universal: la conciencia abrumadora de existir como seres expuestos y finitos enfrentados a la ausencia de una comunidad de inmanencia. Resulta irónico que el compartir esa verdad angustiosa permita el advenimiento o la manifestación de comunidad en la novela de Plath.

Palabras clave: Sylvia Plath; *The Bell Jar*; comunidad inoperativa; singularidad; finitud; exposición

The thought of a community or the desire for it might well be nothing other than a belated invention that tried to respond to the harsh reality of modern experience: namely, that divinity was withdrawing infinitely from immanence [*deus absconditus*], that the god-brother [*deus communis*] was at bottom *himself* the *deus absconditus* (this was Hölderling's insight) and that the divine essence of community—or community as the existence of divine essence—was the impossible itself. (Nancy [1985-1986] 1991, 10; italics and brackets in the original)

1. INTRODUCTION

When Sylvia Plath was completing *The Bell Jar* (1963), she wrote to her mother explaining that she had just “thrown together events from [her] own life, fictionalizing to add color” to show “how isolated a person feels when [she] is suffering a breakdown [...] to picture [her] world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar” (Ames 1999, 262). It is the belief that the novel is simply a fictionalized autobiography that has sustained the reductionist scope of confessional interpretations and deprived the novel of its deeper significance. Hence, many critics have focused on Plath's psychotic personality to explain the poignant feelings of the protagonist as she undergoes a mental breakdown and attempts suicide. Al Alvarez refers to the “autobiographical heroine of *The Bell Jar*” ([1971] 1974, 36) stressing the idea that the book was written by the author to “free herself from her past” (37). Likewise, the authors of *Sounds from the Bell Jar* state that “Sylvia Plath's journals, and their schizoid contrast with letters written simultaneously, show her to be a psychotic writer, but the poems and prose meant for publication show it equally clearly. All her writing is autobiographical; she can never escape from the subject of her own impressions, her own miseries, terrors and nightmares (Claridge, Pryor and Watkins 1990, 207). From this perspective, the ‘distorted picture’ offered by the artist could only be interpreted as the inevitable outcome of her psychotic mind, reducing the novel's import to that of psychiatric fiction.

However, most commentators have adopted an openly feminist perspective (Perloff 1972; Macpherson 1991; Wagner-Martin 1992; Brain 2001; Jernigan 2014), exploring the limitations patriarchal culture imposes on aspiring women and the existence of the hypocritical double standards which trouble the young protagonist of *The Bell Jar* as she decides on a coherent self-identity. Feminist critics have also highlighted the inner contradictions of competing models of femininity presented in the novel, suggesting for example, that the novel “examines the problem of the poet who can find no serious female role models, of the young woman writer who finds the shift from silent muse to speaking subject difficult” (Brain 2001, 148). Assessment of the novel from this perspective has tried to clarify the causes for Esther Greenwood's maladjustment and distress, blaming the prevalent male-dominated ideology for her failure to integrate successfully in society. Adam Jernigan's reading, for instance, argues that Plath together with other mid-twentieth-century women writers “resisted the temptation to exploit

the figure of the typist in order to bolster their status as creative writers" (2014, 20), focusing on Esther's refusal to adopt the subordinate and reproductive role associated with "paratextual labours" that most women in *The Bell Jar* do.

More recently, the novel has also been examined from a sociological perspective as a text tailored to meet the requirements of the literary market. Both stylistically as well as thematically *The Bell Jar* would fit into the category of the popular fiction generally published in the 1950s in American magazines like *The New Yorker* (Ferrater 2010, 24). As such, Luke Ferrater identifies in the popular fiction written by women by the end of the fifties a pattern with "a heavy emphasis on love stories, on stories about families and on marriage as the conclusion of the love stories" and with the gradual incorporation of "formerly taboo issues" like "extramarital affairs" and "unwed pregnancies" which were eventually "incorporated within the ideology of marriage" (2010, 37). In this sense, Plath's novel might be considered a mass-market product intended to appeal to a middle-brow female readership interested in women's experience. Featuring characters who are undergoing deep personal crises, such narratives attracted a considerable audience to the pages of *The Ladies' Home Journal* and *Mademoiselle*, where Plath had served as guest editor in the summer of 1953.¹ As Ferrater has pointed out, Plath certainly drew on an incipient tradition in "women's madness narratives" available at the time (2010, 43). This so-called "psychiatric fiction" explored the relationship between mental illness and the effects of cultural constrictions on its protagonists—women most often, although J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), a clear precursor of *The Bell Jar* (Wagner-Martin 1987, 186-187) has a male protagonist. The influence of Shirley Jackson, a forerunner of this genre, on *The Bell Jar* has also been pointed out both by Wagner-Martin (1987, 164) and Ferrater (2010, 47).² Plath herself described *The Bell Jar* as being one of the aforementioned "potboilers" and decided to publish it under a pseudonym (Schober Plath 1975, 490), aware of the fact that she was drawing on stock formulae of a certain kind of popular fiction.³

But in this brief overview of the most significant readings of *The Bell Jar*, I would like to highlight the relevance of recent politically-oriented studies which, in my view, entail a radical departure from what were considered until recently the central issues in the novel. Such is the case of Kate Baldwin, who remarks that in most appraisals of *The Bell Jar* certain aspects "have been partially obliterated by the seductiveness

¹ Ferrater notes the example of several professional writers—Jean Stafford, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Mavis Gallant—who notably influenced Plath in terms of style and the issues addressed in *The Bell Jar* (2010, 27-36).

² While Wagner-Martin mentions Shirley Jackson's 1954 novel *The Bird's Nest* as a major source for *The Bell Jar*, Ferrater considers *Hangsamen* (1951) to be of greater significance (Ferrater 2010, 47).

³ However, Saul Maloff argues against taking Plath's assertion at its face value in his review of the American edition (1971, 33). The "painstaking quality of the writing," the fact that Plath had already written a draft of the novel by 1957, and the efforts she made to complete it "under the auspices of a Eugene Saxton Fund fellowship in 1962" seem to support Maloff's claim that Plath considered the novel much more than a mere "potboiler," as she suggests in a letter to her mother (Schober Plath 1975, 490).

of Esther's solipsism" (2004, 23). In contrast, Baldwin has called attention to communitarian issues as she demands that the question of selfhood in Plath's novel be studied in the wider historical and political context in which the story is set, bearing in mind the role narratives usually have "in building a sense of national community" (2004, 24). In my view, Baldwin enlarges the scope of her analysis beyond the purely confessional and feminist approaches by focusing on Esther's "nostalgia for substance" and her entrapment in the models of self-identity and citizenship fostered by "nation-building narratives" (32). Rather than helping to create social bonds amongst citizens as other texts might do, *The Bell Jar* questions a grand narrative encouraging specific paradigms of self-achievement in the Cold War era—marriage and motherhood or female professionalism, according to feminist readings. If adopted, such paradigms would provide a sense of personal fulfilment and belonging to community, but the problem in *The Bell Jar* is that the protagonist finds it impossible to assume them. I believe that Esther's confusion derives from her disapproval of the self- and nation-building narratives, just as Baldwin suggests.

Therefore, I would argue that taking into account the coercing power these grand narratives may exert on singular individuals will certainly reveal other concerns of the writer and provide greater insight into this text. However, instead of adopting an exclusively political approach, I will rather pursue a more philosophical and ethically-oriented reading of Plath's novel. My contention is that *The Bell Jar* underscores the difficulties faced by the conscientious individual longing for substance and self-transcendence within the community. Moreover, Esther's counter-narrative questions the very possibility of enacting an operative community. Her cynical and painful account refutes the utopian conception of community and, her isolation inside a bell jar, reveals its absence. Interpreting Plath's novel in this light allows us to read *The Bell Jar* as a work that exposes the predicament of self—of the singular being—in its disturbing relationship with an "inoperative community" (Nancy [1985-1986] 1991).⁴

In order to highlight Plath's political awareness and its weight on Plath's novel, Peel documented Plath's interest in civic and communal issues, noting also the contradictory nature of the ideological discourses she was exposed to (2002; 2007). Assessing the impact of Cold War politics on Plath's work the same author states that:

⁴ This pessimistic view of community is articulated in Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* ([1985-1986] 1991, 9-16). Nancy's claim is that there has always been in western political thinking a nostalgic desire for the restoration of an archaic community which disappeared with the advent of modern society. Nancy illustrates the longing for the lost community by referring to the natural family, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community or the many brotherhoods established at different historical moments as paradigms. While that community was characterized by the harmonious and intimate links that gave its members a sense of immanent unity and belonging, modern society is alienating and driven by selfish pursuit. Accordingly, the idea that alienation in modern society derives from the disappearance of an original community is what fuels most communitarian thinking. However, Nancy is critical of communitarian philosophy as he sees the danger of communitarian identity as being imposed by violent means, thus restricting self-autonomy and crushing self-identity and singularity.

[T]he narrator of *The Bell Jar* is more politically engaged than the narrator's voice may suggest. An acceptance that there is concealment of this engagement in the person of the immature version of Esther Greenwood allows for the possibility that this is a novel not exclusively about Plath's treatment of her past which has nothing to say about her reading of her present. There is a very definitive link, one that has more to do with stance than subject matter. (2002, 67)

Following Peel's interpretation, I would argue that the narrator's cynical attitude and her eventual derangement signal her resistance both to American core values supporting mythical notions of individual self-attainment and to the sense of belonging to a national community. The latter was prompted by the anti-Communist discourse prevalent in the 1950s, an obvious subtext in *The Bell Jar*. Plath's instruction in politics and history during her years at Smith College (1950-1955) seems essential in the emergence of a budding political conscience, which was developing in England, and can be fully identified in *The Bell Jar*, as the insistent references to the Rosenbergs suggest. As Peel notices, Plath expresses conflicting judgements about the US role in world affairs during her college years, but she is still uncritical as to her identification with the all-American girl before she graduates (2007, 45). However, Plath's experience in England allows her to develop a more detached perspective on the prevailing values nurturing Eisenhower's America: "it is only after 1960 that we see the effective fusion of politics and art in, for example, such imaginative writing as *The Bell Jar* and the poems of 1962 and 1963" (Peel 2007, 48). As a result, Plath's reactions to McCarthyism and Cold War politics are quite pervasive in *The Bell Jar*. Her distrustful attitude to all-American values is also patent in her 1963 essay "America!, America!," where she touches upon the pressure of the American educational system to have everyone "tailored to an Okey Image" so as to create a fake sense of belonging and community, one she cannot endorse (Plath [1977] 2008, 56).

I believe that it is Plath's critical resistance to those fundamental American myths that underlies Esther Greenwood's disturbing narrative, where she has reached the conclusion that, despite her many efforts to genuinely communicate with others, it is impossible for the singular being to enter community. This entails, as thinkers like Maurice Blanchot ([1983] 1988) and Jean-Luc Nancy ([1985-1986] 1991) have argued, the failure of ideals of self-fulfilment and immanence within community and hence the interruption of the myth of community.

2. COUNTERING THE RHETORIC OF DECEPTION AND THE SHARING OF INTERRUPTED MYTH

The Bell Jar certainly evokes the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and its destructive effect on the conscientious individual. The story begins in New York where Esther Greenwood has won a guest editorship at a women's magazine. Her short but intense

experience in New York causes her to gradually fall into despair. She seems unable to establish lasting bonds with others and finds no purpose in pursuing what look to other people like satisfying life goals. Signs of her depression are obvious after she returns home. The narrator also details the experience of her mental breakdown and failed suicide attempt, after which she is sent to a mental institution. After a few months of seclusion and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), Esther seems to have recovered from her mental illness and the novel ends with her discharge from the asylum back into society.

As Steven Axelrod points out (2010, 134), the novel presents its young heroine at a crucial moment in her life. Esther Greenwood is enmeshed in the painful and distressing process of transition from youth to adulthood, where she has to pass through confusing rituals of passage that she is unable to cope with because she perceives a fake post-war American society guided by the ethics of success and the hatred of Communists. From the perspective of community theory and Nancy's understanding of community and being, I contend that what is at stake in this novel is not only the problem of being an ambitious woman in the 1950s, or being able to handle the rites of initiation into adulthood for single women, as several authors have claimed. Rather, by offering what seems a "distorted" perception of the world, Plath is acknowledging there is pervasive rhetoric of deception in American culture which fuels the belief in an operative community. The belief in such community implies the assumption that it is possible to achieve perfect communion with other beings and, through it, a sense of individual transcendence. Yet, as events unfold, Esther abandons that longing for community and adopts a distrustful and fault-finding attitude. Having been in the bell jar for a long time, disconnected from others, she ends up mocking both other people's optimism as well as her own hypocritical pretensions to communicate with them.

As I see it, *The Bell Jar* should not be read simply from confessional or feminist approaches, but should rather be interpreted as a narrative that reveals the author's awareness and rejection of false cultural assumptions in a "world of competition, conformity, consumerism and commodification" (Plath [1963] 1966, 135). Esther's narrative is much more than the bewildering account of the self-disintegration of a young and ambitious female being confronted with her passage from youth to adulthood (Perloff 1972, 511). Going beyond an exclusively feminist reading of the text, I would thus contend that through Esther Greenwood's anti-heroic narrative Plath illustrates the impossibility of entering an operative community, one that would theoretically provide the subject with a sense of personal fulfilment and communal transcendence.

It cannot be denied that the process of mental decay and apparent healing are narrated from a female perspective, hence it points to those constraints imposed on females by the patriarchal ideology prevailing in the 1950s. Yet the sense of alienation and despair is also common to other male protagonists of Cold War narratives which

question the prevalent rhetoric of personal attainment and successful integration in community generally associated with the American dream. Despite the suggestion of recovery at the end of the novel, there is no certainty as to whether Esther's feeling of estrangement is completely overcome, or, indeed, that it could ever be. At the same time, in the absence of an ideal community where beings fuse with each other, *The Bell Jar* subtly hints at alternative ways of approaching another sort of community, the "inoperative community" (Nancy [1985-1986] 1991, 1).

But before proceeding further, I should clarify the concept of community I am working with in this essay. Jean-Luc Nancy has rethought the idea of community ([1985-1986] 1991; [1996] 2000) and offers an alternative understanding of community as inoperative. For him, "community" is

what takes place always through others and for others. It is not the space of the *egos*—subjects and substances that are at the bottom immortal—but of the I's, who are always *others* (or else nothing). If community is revealed in the death of the others it is because death itself is the true community of I's that are not *egos*. It is not a communion that fuses *egos* into an Ego or a higher We. It is the community of others. The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community, establishes their impossible communion. Community therefore occupies a singular place: it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject. In a certain sense community acknowledges and inscribes—this is its peculiar gesture—the impossibility of community. A community is not a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project—nor is it a project at all. ([1985-1986] 1991, 15; italics in the original)

It follows then that the only community that can exist is the "inoperative community," and this does not comfort the subject with the idea of belonging or fusion with others, but instead undoes the subject. As soon as the being enters community it does so to lose itself in others, so community does not assert the self, but precisely the opposite.

When Esther arrives in New York as a promising guest editor, her main preoccupation is to fit in, to fulfil the requirements to be an acceptable member of society. However, she is at the same time trying to assert her identity, testing several versions of the self, which she alternatively imitates and discards—Betsy's Pollyanna, Doreen's man-eater, Jay Cee's devoted scholar, Philomena Guinea's successful writer, Dodo Conway's model of motherhood. Her attempts to enter community by "trying out" different alter-egos such as Elly Higginbottom or a fictional heroine named Elaine only increase her own sense of self-alienation (Axelrod 2010, 37).

Therefore, one of the issues Plath obviously questions in this novel is the collapse of the traditional myth of community, understood as a fusion or communion of *egos*. She brings the absence of community to the fore by having Esther undergo a process

of self-fragmentation which results in a deep depression that alienates her from others, reasserting “the bitter consciousness of the increasing remoteness of such a community” (Nancy [1985-1986] 1991, 13). According to Nancy, “community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us*—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of society” (11; italics in original). Accordingly, there is no such thing as a working community that can fulfil the individual’s longing for transcendence, but rather only a society of interests. Society is identified in Nancy’s essay with “the dissociation of forces, need and signs” and as such it provokes “much harsher effects (solitude, rejection, admonition, helplessness) than what we expect from a communitarian minimum in the social bond” (11). Assuming this pessimistic view of community, I cannot agree with those who believe that in Esther’s story suicide stands for a symbolic rebirth and renewal of the self (Wagner-Martin 1986, 64). Instead, I contend that what the narrator is sharing with us is the terrible insight she gains from her own traumatic experience: the loss or the absence of a working community, one that provides human beings with a sense of solace and transcendence.

As Elisabeth Bonfren explains when considering Plath’s prose: “from the start many of her stories set out to analyse the implications of this culturally sanctioned rhetoric of deception, the lies we tell ourselves to make sense of the world and convince ourselves that we fit in, the lies we live to assure ourselves of being loved and acknowledged, but also the tragic cost of such pretence” (1998, 100). It is my contention that Plath is clearly condemning the pervasive ‘rhetoric of deception’ which governs modern life, and in particular the American ethos of the 1950s, remarking the fallacy of community, one of the most pervasive “inherited myths” in Western culture (Nancy [1985-1986] 1991, 13).

In my view, the experience imparted by the narrator in *The Bell Jar* highlights the fact that we live through shattered myths, as Nancy suggests in *The Inoperative Community* ([1985-1986] 1991). Actually, two essential myths are being explored in *The Bell Jar*, the collapse of which Esther Greenwood experiences as an overwhelming reality. In the first place, there is the myth of communion with others—the idea that the self can in fact communicate effectively and eventually achieve some sort of communion, that is, fuse with other beings, and hence attain a transcendental feeling of immanence within community. Yet, the possibility of entering an operative community which fulfils the longing for permanence and meaningful belonging is clearly challenged by Esther’s experience in *The Bell Jar*. It is her *distorted* perspective of social bonds, her critical attitude towards sanctioned behaviour, models and norms which lead her to remain detached and unsympathetic to most people—her mother, the girls she meets in New York, as well as the more mature women she encounters, the insensitive Dr Gordon, her boyfriend Buddy Willard, along with the other male figures she tests out as possible matches. The awareness of living in a bewildering world upholding a number of fake beliefs and twisted principles everybody accepts explains why Esther Greenwood will not be able to genuinely share with other beings her feelings of alienation and

hopelessness. The second myth the novel shatters is the conviction that the self is a unified and coherent being (Perloff 1972, 514; Bonds 1990; Axelrod 2010, 136). The notion of self-autonomy and the unity of being are also challenged by Esther's inability to develop a consistent personality as she struggles to emulate other characters and to identify or communicate with them.

Diane Bonds' (1990) deft analysis of metaphors of the "separative self" in *The Bell Jar* provides considerable evidence to support the fact that Plath saw through this myth of self-containment and independence which American culture transmitted to her. As Bonds points out, Plath clearly identifies the "destructive effects of our cultural commitment to that model" and she illustrates them in Esther's death wish and descent into madness (1990, 50). The abundance of images of dismemberment and disconnection in *The Bell Jar* as metaphors for the broken, fragmented self are quite symptomatic of the burden this dominant model of the self has imposed on contemporary western societies, and American culture in particular. As Bonds (1990) and Axelrod (2010) have offered convincing accounts of how Plath's narrative challenges the myth of the unified and bounded self in *The Bell Jar*, I now intend to focus my attention on how the myth of the operative community is also discarded as a feasible alternative for any conscientious being.

Esther's seemingly perturbed vision of the world questions well-established cultural assumptions—the existence of a working community of shared values and goals, and the autonomy and coherence of a separate or bounded self. Most critics have read Esther's ability to retell her experience as a clear symptom of her reintegration into society, principally assuming that the message underlying her release from the mental institution and her previously rejected compliance with the rituals of marriage and motherhood imply Esther's restoration to her *healthy* being. However, in my view, Plath is in fact revealing that there is a rhetoric of deception that deludes us into believing that mutual recognition and genuine communion with others is possible, allowing the isolated being to attain a sense of fulfilment and belonging.

My analysis is that the character's inability to fit in and her descent into madness are actually due to her awareness of the interruption of both myths, which the harsh reality of modern experience makes all too obvious to her. Esther's bewildering experience is the result of her confrontation with a disquieting truth. The ideal of being able to integrate successfully, to fuse with other beings, without losing some essential part of the self is shattered by the experience of the singular being who realizes this impossibility of immanence and transcendence in community, becoming, thus, estranged both from community and self as a result.

Therefore, Plath presents Esther Greenwood as a highly perceptive being who feels alienated from community, for this is a community which does not correlate to the ideals her culture has transmitted to her. As Perloff affirms, "*The Bell Jar* is the archetypal novel that mirrors, in however distorted a form, [youth's] personal experience, their sense of what Irving Howe calls 'the general human condition'" (1972, 508). The

novel shares with the works of other Cold War writers—Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957)—the experience of sheer alienation from community. Along with them, Plath partakes of efforts to try to communicate this terrifying experience of utter failure and frustration at achieving communion while becoming a unified and autonomous self.

However, the serious concern with the impossibility of truly communicating or identifying with others allows for the creation of another sort of community, a literary community where the interruption of long-established myths is imparted as a disheartening but unavoidable truth. It is that sharing of an ineluctable sense of alienation from others and exposure as singular, vulnerable beings which makes *The Bell Jar* a worthy piece of literature, despite the repeated ascription of the novel to such popular subgenres as the confessional and the psychiatric novel.

The Bell Jar should, in consequence, be read as a symptom of a diseased culture which has promoted certain ideals about the bounded nature of the self and its relationship with community. *The Bell Jar* voices the distress of incomplete, fragmented but singular beings in the face of an inoperative community—a community that does not work, and hence returns the feeling of utter isolation and disintegration of the self that is so characteristic of the modern and postmodern condition.

3. *THE BELL JAR* AND THE “INOPERATIVE” OR “UNAVOWABLE COMMUNITY”

The Bell Jar is a literary text that has, as Blanchot put it in *The Unavowable Community*, “the anonymity of the book which does not address anybody and which, through its relationship with the unknown, initiates what George Bataille (at least once) will call ‘the negative community’: the community of those who have no community” ([1983] 1988, 24).⁵ Esther’s attitude “invites in the reader an uneasy mixture of dislike and sympathy, distance and identification” with the narrator (Axelrod 2010, 135) for she is sarcastic and hypercritical with most characters. As a matter of fact, Esther is only able to empathize with marginal beings who, for one reason or another, are rejected by society and usually exiled or confined—like Esther and the other inmates at Belsize—or else sacrificed—as the Rosenbergs’ execution proves.

According to Blanchot, the basis of communication “is not necessarily speech, or even the silence that is its foundation and punctuation, but the exposure to death, no longer my own exposure, but someone else’s, whose living and closest presence is already the eternal and unbearable absence, an absence that the travail of the deepest mourning does not diminish” ([1983] 1988, 25). In other words, being exposed to our finiteness is what makes us come closer to the idea of our having something in common

⁵ Blanchot ([1983] 1988) and Nancy ([1985–1986] 1991) partake of the same understanding of community. It is a negative community which does not fulfil the individual longing for transcendence. Following their theory of community, I will use the terms “inoperative,” “unworking” and “unavowable” as synonyms to refer to a community which is only enacted through an awareness of death or the absence of the other.

with others. Thus, Esther starts to identify with political dissidents like the Rosenbergs as she becomes aware of their exposure, of their impending death. Similarly, she feels a conflicting sense of kinship with Joan, the lesbian girl who has previously attempted suicide, and who finally manages to kill herself, which once again confronts Esther with, the feeling of exposure to death, the loss of other beings and the absence of community.

Imbued with the myths of community and self autonomy which Esther has absorbed throughout her short life, she arrives in New York as a conformist, whose highest goal is to fit in. However, unable to communicate with other people, Esther constructs a landscape of radical estrangement, characterized by images of physical division and dissolution of the self.

By exposing Esther's alienated being, Plath provides what Nancy would call a narrative of "exposure of singular beings" ([1985-1986] 1991, 6). In her first-person account, the narrator becomes aware of the vulnerability of other beings, and by the same token, exposes her own vulnerable self, her own finitude to the reader. Nancy points out that although community cannot exist, the singular being may have a sudden revelation of the commonality of their own mortality and that of other human beings. Having had this realization, Esther's finite being begins to approach "the other," pitying the Rosenbergs or realizing she will miss Joan, and thus she approaches the limit where community emerges by sympathizing with those who die in the novel.

Seen in this light, Esther's account cannot be taken to be a narcissistic narrative, nor her suicide as a strategy for renewal and reintegration in society. Following Nancy, it can be stated that Plath shares the disquieting truth about the myth of an operative community by bringing to the fore Esther's singularity and her inability to fuse with other beings. Esther's sense of futility derives from her having discovered the loss of community in the death of others. As Bonds claims, the pervasive imagery of dismemberment suggests "Esther's alienation and fragmentation as well as a thwarted longing for relatedness with others and for a reconnection of dismembered part to the whole" (1990, 50). *The Bell Jar* clearly echoes the alienated ethos of the above-mentioned narratives of the Cold War era, focusing on the failure of the myth of a working community.

Furthermore, Esther is not at all a mythical heroine; she is in fact quite anti-heroic. Although unresponsive to most people, she is also sensitive, intelligent and honest. Above all, Esther wants to tell the truth about the culture she inhabits, to reveal its self-deceptive rhetoric of success and her uncertainty about the possibility of communion, by bringing to the fore the contradictory logic that demands loyalty to communal values as well as an assertion of an autonomous self.

From the outset, Esther reveals her sense of alienation by focusing on the death of the Rosenbergs: "I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think of was the Rosenbergs" (Plath [1963] 1966, 2). Esther's identification

with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, condemned to the electric chair for having passed secrets to the Soviets, attests to her rejection of communal values. Esther sympathizes with those excluded from community and sacrificed by society rather than with any of the all-American women she meets: “Although the elimination of the Rosenbergs [...] is intended to strengthen the bonds among community members who remain, it has the opposite effect on Esther, who identifies herself with the couple’s transgression and pain” (Axelrod 2010, 136). It is the suffering and death of those beings that prompts a sense of solidarity, a shared sense of belonging to a community of singular, finite and exposed beings. Although Esther cannot actually communicate with the Rosenbergs, her horror at their impending death is a manifestation of her coming closer to the other, although death hinders the actual possibility of fulfilment of that community of singular beings. The opening scene of the novel anticipates the experience of the ECT Esther is given to help her recover from her mental breakdown: “The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that’s all there was to read about in the papers [...] It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves” (Plath [1963] 1966, 1). Esther’s insistence on the fact that she “couldn’t get them out of [her] mind” (1) sets the demoralized tone for the rest of the narrative. Esther’s odd reaction to their imminent execution—their loss—makes her aware of the fact that something is wrong with her although she “was supposed to be having the time of [her] life” (2). The Rosenbergs’ exposure of their inextricable mortality supplies Esther with the overwhelming certainty of her own mortality, of her finitude, as Nancy would put it. And it is precisely on the basis of that responsiveness to the finitude of other beings that community appears. In Nancy’s words:

Sharing comes down to this: what community reveals to me, in presenting to me my birth and my death, is my existence outside myself. Which does not mean my existence reinvested in or by community, as if community were another subject that would sublate me, in a dialectical or communal mode. *Community does not sublate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition.* It is the community of finite beings, and as such it is itself a *finite* community. In other words, not a limited community as opposed to an infinite or absolute community, but a community of finitude, because finitude ‘is’ communitarian, and because finitude alone is communitarian. ([1985-1986] 1991, 26-27; italics in the original)

Esther, thus, finds it easy to identify with the Rosenbergs because they are also marginalized beings and have experienced estrangement from community. Moreover, the Rosenbergs’ sacrifice reveals the terrible idea that the singular being, the dissident from the common, is punished with death. In fact, Esther considers her own ECT at Dr Gordon’s hospital a sort of punishment for not conforming to the ‘Okey image’: “I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done” (Plath

[1963] 1966, 38). But above all, she is appalled by Hilda's insensitive attitude to the Rosenbergs' execution. Her merciless remarks make Esther claim that a devil must be speaking through her:

So I said, 'Isn't it awful about the Rosenbergs?'

The Rosenbergs were to be electrocuted late that night.

'Yes!' Hilda said, and at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat's cradle of her heart. It was only as the two of us waited for the others in the tomb-like morning gloom of the conference room that Hilda amplified that Yes of hers.

'It's awful such people should be alive.'

She yawned then, and her pale orange mouth opened on a large darkness. Fascinated, I stared at the blind cave behind her face until the two lips met and moved and the dybbuk spoke out of its hiding place, 'I'm so glad they're going to die.' (96)

To Esther's astonishment, Hilda lacks the capacity to pity others, and remains unmoved by the appalling fate of those singular beings, and as such, communication, sharing and mourning are deemed impossible. In fact, the execution of the Rosenbergs frames Esther's increasing process of isolation and estrangement in New York. It is significant that a public event of this nature marks the beginning of Esther's adventure in New York but also the end of that crucial stage in her life, her youth, signalling her descent into insanity. After the stay in New York is over, Esther's gradual sense of disconnection with the living foregrounds her closeness to the most vulnerable and singular beings, those approaching their death.

The second time Esther seems to fleetingly approach community is when Joan, the lesbian inpatient at Belsize, commits suicide. Although Esther has recoiled from Joan's uncalled-for displays of affection, it is when she learns that they have both attempted suicide that she thinks "[f]or the first time it occurred to me Joan and I might have something in common" (192). There is a mutual exposure and common vulnerability in their having being so close to death, which means they shared an awareness of their mortal humanity, of their singularity. Evidence of her approaching the limit of community is found in Esther's recognition of Joan as the "beaming double of [her] old best self, specially designed to follow and torment [her]" (197). Raised in a society where homosexuality is considered deviant, Esther finds Joan's frankness and tenderness quite disturbing. Yet, eventually Esther comes to acknowledge that "[i]n spite of the creepy feeling, and in spite of my old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me. It was like observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings *but we were close enough* so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own at the same time" (209-210; my emphasis). Although Esther seems unable to escape the prejudice of a rigid heterosexual education, she still perceives that Joan and herself have much more in common than she would like to admit.

Joan is a doubly marginalized figure in the American society of the 1950s, representing both mental derangement and sexual divergence. The knowledge of Joan's death makes Esther recognize her singularity and the fact that they had shared a great deal despite appearances. Eventually, Joan's suicide prompts Esther's awareness of the absence of a singular being, and hence, it pushes Esther to approach the inoperative community once again. The sort of community that emerges here is not mythical, but it is instead a community of loss and death, since once Esther realizes Joan's singularity and mourns her disappearance, there is no possibility of communion.

Having gained this bitter insight, Esther's description of a landscape of fresh "snow [that has] blanketed the asylum grounds" as she is being discharged from Belsize can no longer be read as a symbol of purity, quietness and self regeneration. After her first impression, Esther adds:

But under the deceptively clean and level slate the topography was the same, and instead of San Francisco or Europe or Mars I would be learning the old landscape, brook and hill and tree [...] I remembered everything. I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig-tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds I gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a grey skull. Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind of snow, should numb and cover them. But they were part of me. They were my landscape. (226-227)

It is quite clear that the protagonist does not allow herself to be deluded by appearances. Esther knows that the ugliness of reality is only concealed as if by a blanket of unconsciousness, that 'deceptively clean and level slate' of pure white snow. However, the narrator has the courage to confront the disheartening truth about her own sense of isolation and separation from others. She assumes that below the *nice* surface of agreed lies and half truths there lies the certainty of the interruption of the myth of community. It may resurface again, taking hold of the seemingly *healthy* individual that narrates her experience of the absence of community. The character's hesitation as to whether she is definitely recovered is also highlighted when she states: "But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (230).

Although defined as a 'distortion' of reality, what the narrator communicates is a distressing truth—the absence of community. Esther has seen through the deeply-rooted rhetoric of deception and conformity adopted by most characters, the grand narrative about an actual community, giving the impression that they have managed to communicate successfully and fuse with others. In contrast, Esther can only pass on what she has experienced—the impossibility of connecting or genuinely communicating with most other beings. She has come to the limit of an inoperative community, sympathizing with other singular beings exposed to death like herself.

4. CONCLUSION

Esther fails to communicate with most living creatures. Although she addresses other beings and is addressed by them, her increasing sense of social alienation suggests that it is absolutely impossible for her to establish sincere lasting bonds. This absence of community, the awareness of the loss of a working community, first appears when Esther seems unable to communicate in a genuine way with other characters in New York. Her attempts to find other beings with whom she can identify, other young women like her who might serve as models for her new mature self, prove sterile. No matter how hard the protagonist tries to fit into the different roles offered by society, she remains essentially on the margins, unable to join community. It is this plight of the isolated individual, this predicament of the singular being who mourns the absence of the *other* or the loss of an ideal community that is at the heart of *The Bell Jar*.

Reading the novel in light of this theory of community offers a philosophical dimension and an ethical interpretation of *The Bell Jar*. With its disturbing imagery of disintegration of the self and the poignant message about our shared myths of the self and community, Plath's novel elicits a powerful reflection on the true nature of community and the need to be open to what all beings have in common: exposure, finitude and the singularity of being.

As I see it, Plath's heroine is torn between two mutually exclusive alternatives, leaving her at an impasse—on the one hand, an extreme form of individualism, based on the myth of the bounded unified self; and on the other, a longing for community which would theoretically render her insignificant life and death somehow meaningful. Since other authors (Bonds 1990; Axelrod 2010) have examined in detail the devastating effects of trying to enact the myth of the unified and independent self in *The Bell Jar*, I have devoted this essay to considering what Nancy calls “the interruption of [the] myth [of community]” ([1985-1986] 1991, 47) in order to look at Plath's narrative from a fresh perspective. Yet Nancy has argued that the idea of operative community never took place, except in Rousseau's “state of nature,” despite the romantic belief that some kind of transcendence of the subject is made possible by joining community. Therefore, what can be identified in this novel, as in many other literary works of the Cold War period, is the inscription of the singularity of being by sharing or communicating through a worthy piece of literature the interruption of the myth of community. Plath's novel makes it plain that her protagonist is persuaded of the absence of an operative community whose members might fuse with each other to transcend their mortal singularities. Far from the comforting happy ending of much popular fiction, *The Bell Jar* communicates a discouraging fact about our world—that there is no allowable or operative community.

Ironically, the only community Esther glimpses from a certain distance is the community of death, in other words, an unfeasible community which undoes the self. Death is a pervasive element in the novel. As has been noted above, the only indication of kinship emerges when Esther comes across marginal characters like herself, beings

exposed to suffering and extinction, all of whom die at various points in the novel. The Rosenbergs' death is Esther's obsession in the first part of the novel, while Joan's ghost haunts her after she learns of her suicide in the second: "Joan's face floated before me, bodily and smiling, like the face of a Cheshire cat. I even thought I heard her voice, rustling and hushing through the dark" (Plath [1963] 1966, 224).

Following Martin Halliwell's *American Culture in the 1950s* (2007), Ferrater concludes that this was a "decade first characterized as a struggle between conflicting forces" despite the fact that it seems there was a "monolithic and one-dimensional" Cold War culture (quoted in Ferrater 2010, 91). Joanne Meyerowitz in her essay "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958" (1994) also argues that the women's magazines Plath read and for which she wrote "articulate this complexity of ideological forces and discourses" (quoted in Ferrater 2010, 91). So, although what prevailed at the time of the writing of *The Bell Jar* was a conservative attitude which assumed the so-called rhetoric of deception to promote certain models of the self and a belief in the shared values of an operative community, there were also resistant voices contesting the hegemonic discourse of conformity. In my view, Esther's *distorted* vision of American culture is a critique of the social conventions and restrictions imposed on dissenting, alienated individuals. However, as I see it, Plath is not merely condemning society for its double standards towards single women. Although she tells Esther's story from a woman's standpoint, I believe Plath was voicing the predicament of singular beings confronting the interruption of some enduring myths, the exhaustion of the myth of community being the one example that I have examined in close detail in *The Bell Jar* since to date it has not been studied in the light of communitarian theory.

The Bell Jar communicates the collapse of these inherited myths and underscores the abuse of a beguiling rhetoric of self-fulfilment and belongingness in the middle years of the twentieth century. What Esther Greenwood's disturbing experience reveals is that the only way to enter community is by sharing what, according to Nancy and Blanchot, is common to all beings—our death. Yet, it is actual death that undoes the being, and paradoxically destroys community. Therefore, it is the awareness of the death of other beings that brings to the fore the need to communicate, to share with others the pain of their absence and to mourn their loss. It is only by realizing that all human beings are after all nothing but mortal beings that singular lives acquire an intrinsic value and that awareness may trigger the need to reach other beings and engage with them before it is too late.

As a literary work, *The Bell Jar* challenges commonly held assumptions and shatters the myth of community, offering its readers the humble revelation of our common humanity and inescapable finitude. It is this understanding that may eventually provoke an opening up of singularities to community, an ethical turn to share with the *other* a joint feeling of exposure and vulnerability to death, to alert us to the voices of dissidence, because we may actually be sharing more than we believe.

WORKS CITED

- ALVAREZ, Al. (1971) 1974. *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- AMES, Lois. 1999. "Biographical Note to Sylvia Plath." In *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, 260-276. New York: Harper Collins.
- AXELROD, Steven G. 2010. "Alienation and Renewal in *The Bell Jar*." *The Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies* 3: 134-143.
- BALDWIN, Kate A. 2004 "The Radical Imaginary of *The Bell Jar*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 38: 21-40.
- BLANCHOT, Maurice. (1983) 1988. *The Unavowable Community*. Translated by Pierre Joris. New York: Station Hill.
- BONDS, Diane S. 1990. "The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 18: 49-64.
- BRAIN, Tracy. 2001. *The Other Sylvia Plath*, Harlow: Pearson.
- BRONFEN, Elisabeth. 1998. *Sylvia Plath*. Plymouth: Northcote House.
- CLARIDGE, Gordon, Ruth Pryor and Gwen Watkins. 1990. *Sounds from the Bell Jar. Ten Psychotic Authors*. London: Macmillan.
- FERRATER, Luke. 2010. *Sylvia Plath's Fiction. A Critical Study*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- HALLIWELL, Martin. 2007. *American Culture in the 1950s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- JERNIGAN, Adam T. 2014. "Paraliterary Labours in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: Typist, Teachers, and the Pink-collar Subtext." *Modern Fiction Studies* 60: 1-27.
- MACPHERSON, Pat. 1991. *Reflecting on The Bell Jar*. London: Routledge.
- MALOFF, Saul. 1971. "Waiting for the Voice to Crack." *New Republic*, May 8, 33-35.
- MEYEROWITZ, Joanne. 1994. "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958." In *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, edited by Joanne Meyerowitz, 229-262. Philadelphia: Temple UP.
- NANCY, Jean-Luc. (1985-1986) 1991. *The Inoperative Community*. Translated and edited by Peter Connor. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- . (1996) 2000. *Being Singular Plural*. Translated by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP.
- PEEL, Robin. 2002. *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath's Cold War Politics*. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson UP / London: Associated U Presses.
- . 2007. "The Political Education of Sylvia Plath." In *Unraveling the Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*, edited by Anita Helle, 39-64. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P.
- PERLOFF, Marjorie. 1972. "A Ritual for Being Born twice: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Contemporary Literature* 13 (4): 507-522.
- PLATH, Sylvia. (1963) 1966. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber.
- . (1977) 2008. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- SCHOBER PLATH, Aurelia, ed. 1975. *Letters Home by Sylvia Plath: Correspondence 1950-1963*. London: Faber.

- WAGNER-MARTIN, Linda. 1986. "Plath's *Bell Jar* as a Female Bildungsroman." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12: 55-68.
- . 1987. *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*. New York: St. Martin's.
- . 1992. *The Bell Jar, A Novel of the Fifties*. New York: Twayne.

Received 26 January 2016

Revised version accepted 8 November 2016

María Luisa Pascual-Garrido is a Lecturer at the Department of English and German Studies at the University of Córdoba (Spain). Her research interests are varied, ranging from literary translation to modern English literature (Shakespeare, Johnson), contemporary American literature (Plath, Oates, Hoban) and women's writing. She has published articles and book chapters in those areas and Spanish editions of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (Berenice, 2007), Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (Cátedra, 2011) and, more recently, Mary Astell's proto-feminist essays "A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I" and "Some Reflections on Marriage" collected in *Mary Astell. Escritos Feministas* (Maia, 2013).

Address: Departamento de Filologías Inglesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Universidad de Córdoba. Plaza del Cardenal Salazar, 3. 14071, Córdoba, Spain. Tel.: +34 957 218812.

