



TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

**«FROM THE KITCHEN TO THE STREETS: THE FEMINIST
COUNTERCULTURE»**

Autor: M^a CARMEN AMAYA MACÍAS

Tutor: MAURICE O'CONNOR

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Curso académico 2015-2016

Fecha de presentación: 09/06/2016



FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS

1. INTRODUCTION: RELEVANCE OF THE PROJECT	3
1.1 A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR THE COUNTERCULTURAL MOVEMENT	4
1.2 DEFINING A NEW ERA: THEORIZING ABOUT COUNTERCULTURE.....	5
2. DOMINANT DISCOURSES IN THE COUNTERCULTURAL MOVEMENT	6
2.1 MAIN WORKS AND THEIR MEANINGS	6
2.2 MARGINAL VOICES: WOMEN WRITERS IN THE COUNTERCULTURE.....	8
3. ANALYSIS	10
3.1 MCCARTHY'S <i>THE GROUP</i>.....	10
3.2 PLATH'S <i>THE BELL JAR</i>	17
COMPARISON.....	25
4. CONCLUSION	26
5. BIBLIOGRAPHY	28

ABSTRACT

Our project examines countercultural production related to women and feminist movements. *The Bell Jar* and *The Group* will be analyzed in search of discourses in favor of the liberation of women and we will point out how they represent the modern woman. The texts we have selected for this work have been all but ignored in previous criticism of the counterculture movement, despite the fact that they were best-sellers in their day. Nevertheless, they foresaw the advent of the feminist movements at the end of the 60s as we shall demonstrate.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Mary McCarthy, counterculture, feminism, feminist movement, women studies, feminist criticism.

RESUMEN

Nuestro trabajo examinará la producción contracultural en relación a la mujer y el movimiento feminista. Analizaremos *La campana de cristal* y *El grupo* a la luz de los discursos de liberación femenina y trataremos la representación de la mujer moderna. Estos textos pasaron desapercibidos en cierta medida por la crítica de la contracultura, pese a su éxito de ventas. Sin embargo, son precursores del movimiento feminista de finales de la década de 1960, como demostraremos.

Palabras clave: Sylvia Plath, Mary McCarthy, contracultura, feminismo, movimiento feminista, estudios de la mujer, crítica feminista.

1. Introduction: relevance of the project

This project shall focus on an important political, social and literary movement that reaches its boiling point in the America of the 60s: the counterculture movement. It is essential, then, to know and understand the historical background of the 60s (as the publishing date of our selected works is 1963) and the most relevant literary manifestations at the time. This new trend of thought was based on certain discourses related to sexual liberation and challenging previous lifestyles we will analyze later in the development of our analysis. Therefore, the predominance of some of these discourses prevented the discovery and further study of many others not considered as valid as the former.

Our point is to analyze these pieces of rather marginalized literature in the 60s and bring light to its interpretation. In order to achieve this purpose, our attention will lay on the production of women writers and the feminine sphere within the countercultural movement. Our corpus of analysis consists of Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, which was a bestseller in *New York* for two years after its publication, and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, which was published under pseudonym and did not appear in the US until 1971. We consider both novels to be an example of the reshaping of the countercultural dominant discourse. Furthermore, these works present controversial themes related to women sexual liberation, contraceptive methods and the balance of power between the two genders that were revolutionary at that time. Marginal voices emerged as possible discourses within the countercultural movement as it is suggested by Campbell and Kean:

What had to be discovered was that which had been obscured by dominant, but limited definitions of American identity, that excluded or marginalized vital groups with much to contribute. It is significant that alongside and within the counter-culture emerged other alternative, previously marginalized voices (African Americans, Native Americans, women, gays, etc.) offering different expressions and definitions of identities (Campbell, 2012: 37).

We would like to clarify likewise that our analysis of the literary *corpus* will be mainly based in our own analysis –with the basis of general studies about counterculture and feminine production–, as the sources related to our novels are rather scarce. It is true, however, that there is much more information about Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as her work has lately become an object of study because of her controversial life and death. Mary McCarthy's *The Group* has been almost forgotten by criticism in spite of its popularity during the sixties. Therefore, we could say our work is to some extent an open door to further investigation.

1.1 A historical background for the countercultural movement

The politic, cultural and social scenario in the America of the 60s was a reaction to the previous authoritarian politics of the post-World War II era together with the Vietnam military intervention. This period saw the quest for freedom that had been repressed before:

The political, cultural and social upheavals of the Vietnam Era emerged not simply in protest against an unpopular war on the other side of the globe. The war itself, overwhelmingly regarded as a disaster by those who both supported and opposed it, illuminated the flaws in American Cold War policies. But it also coincided with the cracks in the domestic cold war culture within the United States. The Vietnam War widened those cracks, and hastened the collapse of the Cold War consensus that had prevailed since the end of World War II. [...] The era marked the end of “containment”¹ -not only as a foreign policy imperative, but also as an ideological consensus at home (May, 2002: 15).

However, it is essential to look back in time to achieve a suitable frame for the 60s as we have mentioned above. The red shadow of Communism that started in the mid-40s became a threat to some sectors in the US government. Organisms such as the HUAC² played a decisive role in the elimination of any suspected communist within the American country and artistic spheres³. One of the most controversial and shocking cases was that of the Rosenbergs. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in 1953 after being accused of espionage⁴. This situation led to a general atmosphere of suspicion, fear and anxiety which found its climax with Senator Joseph McCarthy. Historians have agreed in calling this historical period McCarthyism. The system imposed by the Senator established a witch-hunt that ended up with thousands of people arrested, watched or imprisoned:

McCarthyism, a term meaning sensational, indiscriminate, and unsubstantiated allegations of Communist sympathies and associations. [...] McCarthyism poisoned American public life, demoralized and impaired the efficiency of the State Department, and gravely damaged the reputation of the United States abroad (Jones, 1995: 531).

After a tumultuous decade, the opening of the 60s was marked by the election of Kennedy as the head of the country. Kennedy’s campaign promised a new era of social improvements. Although his rather relaxed stance towards McCarthy’s policies was criticized he gained the favour of citizens and after his assassination in 1963 he became one of the most

¹ The term ‘containment’ first coined and theorized by George F. Kenan refers to the control exerted by the government both upon citizens in their domestic sphere and the military development of foreign countries. Cf. May, 2002, p.15.

² The House Un-American Activities Committee, which was originally formed in 1938 to fight Nazism. Cf. Jones, 1995, p. 529.

³ A good example was Arthur Miller’s case who was convicted of contempt of Congress as he refused to report other communist sympathizers.

⁴ The trial of the Rosenbergs left its footprint in the character of Esther Greenwood in Plath’s *The Bell Jar* that we will analyze later.

acclaimed presidents of the United States. The trigger for the social movements was Vietnam War, which began with the bombing of North Vietnam in 1965. The disaster caused by the cost of the war and the high number of casualties contributed to a massive popular rejection of the war in the United States.

Different upheavals were to follow and were fueled by the anti-war movement. A hope for social, political and cultural change grew among fed up citizens that now fought to have a voice of their own and let minorities be heard. The liberation movement that most directly affect our objects of study was the Women's Movement. Women organizations assembled to undermine the status of women as domestic subjects.

1.2 Defining a new era: theorizing about counterculture

The term counterculture is irrevocably associated with Theodore Roszak's (1933-2011) philosophical theory exposed in *The making of a counterculture*. Published in 1969, his work has become the foundational text for the whole decade and the rest of countercultural movements. The value of his analysis is still an essential tool for those interested in going deeper into the roots of this artistic period that has been sometimes rather superficially studied. Throughout his book, Roszak gives many approaches to the countercultural movement and its foundations which, he assures, can be traced back to other movements such as Romanticism. For Theodore Roszak, the main source of countercultural activity surges from young people. It is among the youth where the criticism of the adult values appears with more intensity:

If the counter culture is, as I will contend here, that healthy instinct which refuses both at the personal and political level to practice such a cold-blooded rape of our human sensibilities, then it should be clear why the conflict between young and adult in our time reaches so peculiarly and painfully deep. [...] It is the young, arriving with eyes that can see the obvious, who must remake the lethal culture of their elders, and who must remake it in desperate haste (Roszak, 1969: 47-48).

With the basis of Roszak's definition, we consider our selected literary corpus for study to be great examples of his concept of counterculture. It is precisely in books as *The Group* and *The Bell Jar* where we can find the huge generational gap between the established traditional society – represented by the parents, especially the mothers, of the female characters – and the new, young and craving for change impulse – embodied in the main female characters.

In the following paragraphs we will analyze the roots and the literary development of the counterculture focusing on its best known authors and works. A brief summary of the Beat Generation will be given together with an approach to its ideology and dominant discourses.

2. Dominant discourses in the countercultural movement

The countercultural movement founded its basis in the Beat Generation. These authors presented a life governed by new ideas, being different from the proposals made by the media and society in general. However, it was a very masculine movement and at first the counterculture seemed to be aimed towards men exclusively.

2.1 Main works and their meanings

The Beat Generation appeared in a time in which American society and American culture were suffering a deep crisis of identity, due to the advances of the capitalist ideology, the media and consumerist culture. As we have already said, the 40s and the 50s saw the beginning of a growing culture of homogeneity, in which individuals did not want to stand out of the rest, because of the possible reprisals. American society accepted being under control and adopting the form of a homogeneous block to be conducted by a certain ideology and government:

One great publishing success in 1950 was David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, an influential Yale University study of contemporary conformism arguing that the American character— indeed the human character— was entering a new inevitable stage of social evolution marked by a diminution of individuality and difference. Modernity and homogeneity seemed clearly linked (Holton, 2004: 12).

It became clear then that alienation had necessarily become the generalized sentiment among the American population. After the tumultuous years that preceded the 50s, society was now exhausted and did not want to continue the political, social and cultural struggle between the forces of change and those of preservation:

With the exception of marginal socialist groups, the focus of remaining postwar dissent shifted away from traditional political channels. With so many ideals exhausted by the Depression, eroded by the horrors of the war and the ugly politics of McCarthyism, glutted by the new profusion of consumer goods and lost in the explosion of mass marketing techniques, no cohesive political movement emerged to direct alienation toward positive social goals. Because alienation came to be viewed as an inevitable consequence of modernity itself rather than as the legacy of the contradictions of capitalism, solutions were not readily available (Holton, 2004: 14).

The Beats therefore assumed the role of a cultural upheaval that went against the establishment of alienation and homogeneity, calling for the individuality of the American citizen. They claimed it by living amid what was considered the lowest elements of society, if not outsiders. Then drugs, alcohol, jazz music and unconventional sexualities and lifestyles became their common vehicle towards the experience of living outside the system.

After meeting in Columbia in 1944, the original circle of the Beats was roughly composed by Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Lucien Carr, Joan Vollmer

(Burroughs' wife) and Edie Parker, among many other writers, painters or figures that became muses to the artistic members of the group. In the years following there were many other people related to the group, such as Gregory Corso, Diane di Prima and others.

For roughly a decade the Beats started a cultural production that challenged American society and their tenets, proposing alternative lifestyles as well as they being involved in several scandals, such as Kerouac's involvement with the killing of David Kammerer by Lucien Carr, or Burroughs' shooting dead of Joan Vollmer whilst playing William Tell with a gun. Ginsberg also was interned in the Psychiatric Institute in New York in 1949, where he met Carl Solomon, who fueled and inspired a great deal of his masterpiece "Howl".

The Beats had a profound link to literature, as most of the members were writers or at least spent some time of their lives writing. They especially wrote poetry and prose. Although their lifestyle was not considered serious, the Beats regarded themselves as a renewal in American letters:

I stress the extent to which – from the very start – the Beat Generation saw themselves as serious artists, immersed in canonical and avant-garde materials and attempting a revolution in American literature, even at a time when little of their work had been published outside small college magazines (Gair, 2008: 26).

Kerouac and Ginsberg were the most successful and iconic members of the Beat Generation, as both *On the Road* and "Howl" became part of American culture and literary history soon after their publication. Not free from controversy⁵, they epitomized the main countercultural elements of the Beats. They dealt with drugs, homosexuality, alcohol and a rather pessimistic view of the American individual in relation to society. *On the Road*, which became the countercultural work *par excellence*, claimed for new visions of the American man. Metonymically represented by Dean Moriarty (a character based on the Beat Neal Cassady), the 'new man' criticized the representation of the man at that time as driven by consumerist culture and in some way castrated by family life.

Moriarty, therefore, led the way for a new conception of the American man as an authoritarian individual whose power could not be contested neither by the government nor by society. His power came from a hypertrophied sexual instinct and physical strength and therefore could not be denied by social constructions. *On the Road* then dominated the mainstream discourses of the counterculture, offering new visions of the man, but regrettably leaving the woman outside the scene, only entering as a mere ornate or sexual entertainment.

⁵ 'Howl' was victim of an extensive judicial process for immorality, which finally won, when the final sentence did not see why the text could be object of ban.

When dealing with our concern, the Beats did not much towards women liberation and women Beats were few, because the movement was mainly masculine. In the following point we will deal with women Beats and the beginning of the real feminine and feminist counterculture in the 60s.

2.2 Marginal voices: Women writers in the counterculture

The context of the 50s for women was less propitious for their participation in the Beat Generation, as they were still traditionally tied to family and wifely life. However, there were some figures among the Beats that gained some respect and importance in the circles of the Beat Generation, but which have been on the whole excluded later by critics until the advent of feminism criticism which drew adequate attention to them. Nevertheless, there is an essential difference between the male Beat and the female one: social visibility and authority. Whereas the male's figure was somewhat untouchable, women Beats could still be controlled by family and society by much harsher means than men:

History has not been kind to the women of the Beat Generation. Their presence is largely unknown to most casual readers, and considered largely unimportant to those who would delve a little further. Perhaps it is because the feminists that followed in the decades to come would deem women to be a valuable part of society, whereas the Beats, male and female, had little interest in playing any active role in society. The female Beats were interested in drinking, fucking and taking drugs, too, and that's not an aspect of a gender worth highlighting when seeking inclusion in society.

Certainly that might be one reason, but there are many others. [...] The 1940s and 50s were times when women belonged to their parents first, and their husbands second. Their independence was either limited or non-existent. If they acted up, got out of line, or embarrassed their parents, they were punished brutally. For men, such humiliation resulted in being cut lose, thrown out of the family, forced to take the Beatnik kick on the road. But for the women it meant mental hospitals, electro-shock treatment and being locked up at home and force fed conservative values (Wills, 2008: para. 1-2).

The women Beats did not enjoy the prestige some of the male figures earned, as we have already said, but we consider they set the path for women's liberation. Although Wills states that they did not play any active role in society, it is true that they would be models for breaking the social rules and standing out for the traditionally assigned roles. Most of them were wives to members of the Beat Generation, like Carolyn Cassady (married to Neal Cassady), Edie Parker (Kerouac's first wife) or Hettie Jones (Leroy Jones' wife). Nevertheless, they played an important role in the development of the group, like Hettie Jones, who helped Leroy Jones and other Beats publish under Totem Press.

Maybe some of the most famous women Beats were the roommates Edie Parker and Joan Vollmer. It was in their apartment in 118th Street in New York where they held many of the meetings of the members of the Beat Generation, which were later portrayed by Kerouac in

his writings. Edie Parker also became Kerouac's wife, although their marriage lasted for one year only. Vollmer was recognized as one of the main propellers of the circle of artists, due to her intelligent and powerful nature. In many of the memoirs and works written by the members she appears as the one who held the conversations during whole nights with Ginsberg, Kerouac or her husband Burroughs. However, she suffered a great physical detriment due to her addiction to Benzedrine and had a rather tragic end, when Burroughs shot her, a moment which implied the beginning of Burroughs' career as a novelist.

Regarded as perhaps the most prolific and most Beat of the women Beats, Diane di Prima did lead a life which equated that of her male counterparts in the Beat Generation. Her best remembered book was *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, which dealt with her coming of age:

Memoirs of a Beatnik is a biographical novelette depicting a seventeen-year old Di Prima's coming of age in the midst of the 1950s Beat revolution. In this account, emphasis is placed on the ever relinquishing sexual oppression that was felt by American youth. Di Prima discusses both sexual encounters with men and women; [...] Di Prima here is confronting, within a literary exercise, her experiences as a young woman who fought for self-realisation and freedom; allowing herself to express and fulfil her sexual desires without fear of social persecution from an American mainstream based on oppression (McRae, 2011: para. 9).

Diane di Prima embodied the concept of Beatnik in woman, as she denied and broke all the possible obstacles society could impose. Nevertheless, her work has fallen into oblivion as well as her figure as a female Beat writer.

Then, the 50s were not the best moment for women to progress in their social claims, as there was not still a generalized feeling of rebelliousness among the feminine population in America, as they were still subject to the ideology of conformism and pursuing therefore life as homemakers⁶. However, the beginning of the decade of the 60s saw the advent of feminist movements, thanks to a new feeling of social movement, provoked especially by rise of the Black Movement, after Rosa Park's incident in 1955. It was then in the 60s that women saw the potential of a feminist movement:

Thus, out of the 1950s emerged a revived feminism that challenged in different ways the 'script' of domestic ideology, being written in the decade [...] Such impositions of gender 'scripts' had to be interrogated and challenged by activists, writers and, ultimately, in the lives of ordinary people. [...] It

⁶ 'But what happened when the war [*sc.* World War II] ended? Both men and women had heeded their country's call to duty to bring it to a successful conclusion. Yet men were rewarded for their efforts and women punished for theirs. The returning soldiers were given the G.I. Bill and other veterans benefits, as well as their jobs back and a disproportionate share of the new ones created by the war economy. Women, on the other hand, saw their child care centers dismantled and their training programs cease. They were fired or demoted in droves and often found it difficult to enter colleges flooded with those matriculating on government money. Is it any wonder that they heard the message that their place was in the home? Where else could they go?' (Freeman, 1971: para. 36).

has, therefore, always been a characteristic of the excluded and marginalised, like women and homosexuals, that they sought to express their experience in their voice (Campbell & Kean, 2012: 228).

This movement became systematic at the end of the decade, with the formation of feminist organizations, such as NOW (National Organization of Women) and other small groups, that started an extensive protest movement with activities and cultural productions aimed to educate women outside the influence of the male-dominated mainstream discourses. In fact, NOW was founded by Betty Friedan, who became an icon for female liberation in 1963 thanks to her work *The Feminine Mystique*, which can be summarized by saying that it was ‘A quick best seller, the book stimulated many women to question the status quo and some women to suggest to Friedan that an organization be formed to do something about it’ (Freeman, 1999: para. 38).

This precisely turns out to be the feeling that the authors of both our selected novels share with the rest of the feminist movement and the society of women in America in the 60s. Women need to create an identity completely separate from the idea that they depend upon a male figure, and female feminist artists respond to the call by producing an art that relies on a new discourse of self-empowerment and independence. Although our works do not belong to the most active years of the second wave of feminism, they are countercultural pieces of art that synthesize the previous feeling, as well as they ground the path of the feminist movements, and anticipate the future movement.

3. Analysis

In this point of our work, we will proceed with the analysis of the main themes in our texts of study, *The Group* and *The Bell Jar* in order to draw similarities between both as well as demonstrate how these novels talked about controversial topics in their time.

3.1 McCarthy’s *The Group*

Mary McCarthy (1912-1989) was an influential American author and critic whose literary production found its climax during the 60s. Her first work, *The Company She Keeps* (1942), was absolutely welcomed by the critique and earned her a reputation of frankness. However, McCarthy’s ultimate success came with the publication of our work of analysis, *The Group* in 1963, which remained a best seller for two years, as we have mentioned before. *The Group* bitterly narrates the coming of age of some graduates of Vassar College with the disappointments about life this process includes. The women of this novel –in the most of the

cases— life their lives challenging the standards of a society they feel imposed by their parents’ generation:

Published in 1963, it arrived smack in the middle of a major upheaval in American society. John F. Kennedy had just been assassinated, the hippies were preaching free love, and the country was four years into the Vietnam War. The myths of the peaceful, family-oriented 1950s, when happy homemakers wearing aprons and kitten heels greeted their white-collar husbands at the door with a cocktail, were beginning to unravel. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan had just come out, inspired by the results of a questionnaire Friedan had distributed to two hundred of her fellow classmates during a fifteenth-year college reunion at Smith. The results showed that many women were unhappy with their lives and the narrow parameters of marriage and motherhood, which Friedan called ‘the problem that has no name.’ The timing for *The Group* couldn’t have been more perfect [...] the seven heroines of *The Group* also suffer from ‘the problem that has no name’ (Bushnell, 2009: vi).

The genre of the *Bildungsroman* perfectly suits this novel in which the lives of some women are followed since they leave college. Throughout the novel, the reader will become witness of the problems that affect a whole generation of women: the balance between the traditional and the new role of women in society, sexual freedom, contraception, marriage and motherhood. However, all these questions are discussed and become entwined with economic and political ideologies, which are always present in the narration:

A feminist and highly political person, McCarthy believed that novels should do much more than entertain. [...] McCarthy felt that the classic novel ‘grew up and grew strong upon ideas and arguments provoked by public issues, politics, religion – the questions of Free Trade, Empire, women, reform and so forth. It was assumed that a serious novel would deal with such questions in their bearing upon themes of power, money, sex and class’ (Bushnell, 2009: viii).

The novel starts in June, 1933 with the wedding of one of the protagonist, Kay Leiland Strong⁷, who marries Harald Petersen⁸, a stage manager trying to become playwright. Kay is – surprisingly, because of her independent character– the first of the girls who gets married. The ceremony itself epitomizes the generational change that it is about to begin as it is not at all a traditional one:

[T]hey had never been to a wedding quite like this one before, to which invitations had been issued orally by the bride herself, without the intervention of a relation or any older person, friend of the family. There was to be no honeymoon, they had heard, because Harald (that was the way he spelled it –the old Scandinavian way) was working as an assistant stage manager for a theatrical production and had to be at the theatre as usual this evening to call ‘half hour’ for the actors. This seemed to them very exciting and of course it justified the oddities of the wedding (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 2).

⁷ It is interesting to point out the ironical election of the second name. Kay is thought to be a very decisive and strong woman by the rest of the girls. However, through the development of the chapters we will see how Kay’s personality is destroyed by her husband and her imposed traditional role of the perfect wife. Therefore, to give Kay the second name of ‘Strong’ is not but a literary technique to show the quality that character is lacking.

⁸ The name of this character has been seen as an allusion to McCarthy’s first husband, Harald Johnsrud, and so, it is a mark of the autobiographical nature of this novel.

Kay does not want to follow the steps of her mother generation and her relationship with Harald is her way to demonstrate it. After this moment, Kay starts a merchandising career working in Macy's as she wants to have economic independence and feel useful in the renovation of America:

And elsewhere in the class, in the wider circle of Kay's friends, they could point out girls of perfectly good background who were going into business, anthropology, medicine, not because they had to, but because they knew they had something to contribute to our emergent America (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 11).

However, Harald does not achieve success in his career and gets frustrated. This frustration can be psychologically analyzed as the failure to fulfill the social role of man as a breadwinner⁹. This situation causes arguments in the couple and creates confrontations that lead to irreconcilable and distant positions. Furthermore, it marks the breakdown of the balance of power between sexes:

'I don't blame you, dear Kay,' he said gravely, 'for comparing yourself to me as a breadwinner. God knows you have a right to.' 'But I *wasn't* comparing myself to you!' Kay raised her head in outrage. 'I was just making conversation.' Harald smiled sadly. 'I was not blaming you,' he repeated. 'Harald! Please believe me!' She seized his hand, 'The thought of a comparison never entered my mind! It couldn't. I know you're a genius and that I'm just a B-average person. That's why I can coast along in life and you can't. And I haven't helped you enough: I know it (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 99).

Although Kay is described as a 'hard-driving, authoritative young women' (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 3), she humiliates herself to calm Harald down by praising his inexistent abilities and imposing upon herself the stereotype of the 'second sex', as Candace Bushnell said imitating Simon de Beauvoir's famous title:

Giving the attention paid to relations between the sexes, it would be tempting to call *The Group* a forerunner of today's chick lit. It's not. Although McCarthy's women struggle with finding 'good' men, this is merely window-dressing for a larger conflict. As Vassar graduates, the women of *The Group* believe they will change the world. What they discover is that not only can they not change the world, but their survival still depends on their acceptance of being 'the second sex' (Bushnell, 2009: p. viii).

⁹ In post-1945 America there was a 'new outburst of domestic ideology, a vigorous revival of traditional ideas of woman's place' (Woloch 1994: 493) and yet, at the same time, there were increased demands for women in the workplace too. This suggest what Nancy Woloch calls the 'split character' of the age (ibid.), with its return to notions of domesticity as the core of women's experience and fulfillment, in conflict with the pull of the labour market. One of the implications of this was a fear among males that their 'masculinity' was under threat. [...] this definition of masculinity was concerned with employment, 'bread-winning', protection and authority, all of which appeared under fire from the potential encroachments of women into these areas (Campbell & Kean, 2012: 225).

Kay's marriage will continue after this moment but not without complications when Harald gets finally fired. Moreover, Kay's ideas about marriage and love are reduced to ashes little by little while Harald shows he is not the man she thought he was:

'You mean somebody wanted to bugger you? Who? The director?' she gasped. 'The other way round, I believe. He assured me that he had a luscious ass.' 'When? This afternoon?' Kay was torn between horror and curiosity. 'Flits have always been attracted to me' – he had told her that last summer (there had been two who were like that in the company), and then it had made her excited and sort of envious. [...] 'But the director – did *he* try again?' Harald admitted that he had. One night late, he had reached for Harald's crotch. 'And what happened?' Harald shrugged. 'Erection is fairly automatic in the normal male, you know.' Kay turned pale. 'Oh, Harald! You encouraged him! (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 101).

This moment in the novel is important as it shows the hypocrisy behind Harald's personality. Kay's husband gets sexually aroused by the touch of another man and gives no importance to that detail but when he knows about Lakey's (Kay's friend and another member of the Vassar Club) homosexuality in Kay's funeral, he attacks her for her sexual condition:

'You're rotten,' he said. 'Completely rotten. Vicious. Did you corrupt the whole group? What a pretty picture!' Lakey was content; she had forced this dreadful man at last to be truthful; the fact that he revealed a hatred of 'abnormality' was only to be expected. 'What a filthy Lesbian trick,' he said. 'Not to fight openly but to poison the rapier!' Lakey did not point out to him that he had poisoned himself. Her conscience was clear (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 436-437).

Harald is unfaithful to Kay on many occasions, and he abuses her and makes her think she is mad in order to confine her into a mental institution after having an argument. Harald realizes he cannot manipulate his wife because she wants to be no longer submissive and he takes her into a mental hospital in order to restore his masculine authority. There, Kay is received by Polly Andrews, another member of the old Vassar College, who supports her. However, Kay's freedom to leave the institution is once again restricted as she cannot go home until Harald gives his permission. Society is like a dike for Kay's outburst of women liberation even when her husband gives permission to the psychiatrists to release her:

She reminded herself that she was free to leave. It was her own choice that she was staying. Unlike the other patients, she had never for a minute been out of her mind. But as she advanced to the dining room, a terrible doubt possessed her. They were using psychology on her: it was not her own choice, and she was not free, and Harald was not sorry –the psychiatrist had coached him, that was all (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 384).

Nevertheless, Harald's masculine power has been critically damaged at this point and will not recover. From that moment on, Kay steers the wheels of her own life first by divorcing

Harald and finally, by committing suicide¹⁰. Kay's suicide symbolically represents the death of the traditional, wifely and obedient women as well as her superiority and utmost triumph over Harald, as it is suggested in this quotation:

'She killed herself of course,' stated Harald. 'Why?' said Lakey calmly. 'Sheer competitiveness,' he answered. 'For years I've been trying to kill myself, ever since I've known her.' [...] 'She decided to show me how to do it. *She*¹¹ could do it better. On the first try.' He waited. 'You don't believe me, do you, you inscrutable idol. You're right. I've never seriously tried to kill myself. It's always been a fake. [...] 'And she,' he said, '*she* had the gall to kill herself and fake a death-by-accident' (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 432-433).

Another great theme is sex out of marriage. The world opens a huge variety of experiences to the women in the novel who have just ended their college years. However, sex experiences do not signify an escape from fear, doubts and problems which pertain to a generation divided between traditional mores and new social claims for liberation. Thus, Dottie Renfrew –although first paralyzed by fear– lives her first affair with a married man, Dick, and rationalizes the sexual encounter that is going to take place with the excuse of a future marriage:

She (*sc.* Dottie Renfrew) and Mother had talked it over and agreed that if you were in love and engaged to a nice young man you perhaps ought to have relations once to make sure of a happy adjustment. [...] Not believing in divorce, Dottie thought it very important to arrange that side of marriage properly; defloration [...] frightened her. Kay had had an awful time with Harald; five times, she insisted, before she was penetrated, and this in spite of basketball and a great deal of riding out West (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 25).

The possibility of Dick's leaving his wife gives Dottie certain relief but after having sex, he remarks upon his lack of intention to divorce his wife: 'Remember: no monkey business; no falling in love. Honor bright.' (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 57). It is through this relationship that Dottie faces contraception. She is the one, despite her embarrassment, who goes to the doctor to get a pessary in order to please her lover. However, she cannot help being nervous and curious about contraception and asks for advice to a married friend, Kay:

Kay repeated to Dottie what Harald had said of the etiquette of contraception, which, as he explained it, was like any other etiquette – the code of manners rising out of social realities. You had to look at it in terms of economics. No man of honor [...] would expect a girl to put up the doctor's fee, plus the price of the pessary and the jelly and the douche bag unless he planned to sleep with her long enough for her to recover her investment. Of that, Dottie could rest assured (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 60-61).

¹⁰ Kay's death is debated by the rest of the characters in the novel. Although most of them hold it was not a suicide but an accident –they say she fall of the window while looking at the sky searching for warplanes–, some others, as her ex-husband, assure it was a carefully planned suicide.

¹¹ The emphasis McCarthy puts on the pronoun 'she' reinforces our analysis, as focuses on Kay's courage to break with her life against Harald's numerous fake attempts.

Again we see how contraceptives methods are socially linked to a long-lasting relationship and not to simple affairs. Neither society nor Dottie –who finally leaves Dick and marries a wealthy widower in spite of her feelings– are prepared for the sexual revolution that were to come.

The sense of shame when dealing with sex is inevitable in these women who try to free themselves from the burden of the female passive role in sexual relationships. Masturbation therefore becomes a sort of secret action:

Libby had a little secret; she sometimes made love to herself, on the bath mat, after having her tub. She always felt awful afterward sort of shaken and depleted and wondering what people would think if they could see her, especially when she took herself what she called ‘Over the Top’ (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 256).

Or something shameful that needs to be denied:

‘Have you ever done it with yourself?’ Dottie shook her head violently; the suggestion wounded her. ‘In your dreams?’ Dottie reluctantly nodded. ‘A little. Not the whole thing.’ ‘Rich erotic fantasies of a Chestnut Street virgin,’ remarked Dick, stretching. He got up and went to the chest of drawers and took out two pairs of pajamas and tossed one of them to Dottie. ‘Put them on now and go to the bathroom. Tonight’s lesson is concluded’ (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 44).

In any case, the sexual life of the most of the women in *The Group* differs greatly from their mother’s generation. Sex was not something pleasurable for their mothers but a conjugal duty and so they transmitted it to their daughters¹². This is case, among others, of Norine’s mother. Norine is caught by Helena having an affair with Kay’s husband, Harald. When she talks to Helena, she excuses her actions by confessing her own husband suffers from erectile dysfunction¹³. At first, Norine thought that not having sex the first weeks was something ‘normal’:

‘A couple of weeks after Commencement. I was a raw virgin. I never had a date till I knew Put. So when we went to this hotel, in the Pennsylvania coal fields, I didn’t catch on right away. Especially since my mother, who hates sex like all her generation, told me that a gentleman never penetrated his bride on the first night. I thought that for once Mother must be right. We’d neck till we were both pretty excited, and then everything would stop, and he’d turn over and go to sleep’ (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 147).

However, even when Norine asks a doctor for help, society again imposes its oppressive vision about female sexuality in the sense that sex is regarded as a mere key for reproduction or, in any case, as an act only pleasurable for men. This vision denies women in their

¹² It is true, however, that we have some exceptions. For example, Dottie’s mother agrees with her daughter in the fact that having sex before marriage was essential for a proper matrimonial adjustment. Absolutely, we see in Mrs Renfrew a forerunner of the next generation.

¹³ It is interesting to notice that the husband, Putnam Blake, is only capable of becoming sexually aroused with ‘fallen women’. This fact can be analyzed as the necessity to feel morally superior to women in order to reassure his masculinity.

physiological nature and proposes women as social constructions. Women, then, can be afforded a new meaning according to the requirements of the dominant discourses. In this sense, the possibility for women to have sexual impulses is utterly neglected:

‘Have you tried a doctor?’ Norine laughed darkly. ‘Two. Put wouldn’t go, so I went. The first one asked me whether I wanted to have children. He was an old-fashioned neurologist that my mother knew about. When I said no, I didn’t, he practically booted me out of the office. He told me I should consider myself lucky that my husband *didn’t* want intercourse. Sex wasn’t necessary for a woman, he said.’ ‘Good Heavens!’ said Helena. ‘Yes!’ Nodded Norine (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 148).

Marriage is one of the themes *par excellence* of *The Group*. Almost any of the girls escape from marriage. Those who try to make an independent living, as Libby MacAusland or Polly Andrews, are harshly criticized –if not pressured– by the rest of society. According to this, Polly admits:

‘When are you going to get married?’ was what everyone immediately wanted to know when they saw a girl and a man in love (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 288).

In the case of Libby, matrimony is the only answer to fulfill her desire to success in the publishing career. She tries to make a living through publishing but she is obliged to start in reading proof only for being a woman:

‘Publishing’s a man’s business. Book publishing, that is. Name me a woman, outside of Blanche Knopf, who married Alfred, who’s come to the top in book publishing. You find them copy editing o reading proof. [...] Publishing’s a man’s business, unless you marry into it. Marry a publisher, Miss MacAusland, and be his hostess’ (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 229).

Men’s presence in women’s life is considerable in this novel. Nevertheless, their relation with women is almost always mediated through violence. Violence is an effective way to exert control over them and make them subjects to society and patriarchy. Under this view, we found great examples in the figure of Harald and his relationship with Kay:

‘She (*sc.* Kay) was thick-skinned,’ he said. ‘It amused me to hurt her. To get some kind of response out of her. And after I’d hurt her I felt tenderness for her [...]’ (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 435).

The masculine power can also be reassured by abusing or raping women as it is the case of Nils with Libby. Libby’s innocence makes her think he stops from raping her because of his moral code but the fact is Nils does not found interesting to rape a virgin as it does not represent any great deed in terms of masculine authority:

‘Are you a virgin?’ he said suddenly, stopping right in the middle of his fell design. Libby nodded speechlessly. Her only hope, she now felt, was to throw herself on his mercies. ‘Oh, what a bore!’ he said, half relaxing his hold. ‘What a bore you are, Elizabeth!’ [...] His code as an aristocrat had made him stop then. It was the code that was a bore to him. He wanted to rape her and go berserk like the old Vikings. At least that would have been something dramatic and conclusive. She would have lost her honor. But she would have found out what it was like when a man did it to you (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 255-256).

The way women confront motherhood is topic of much interest in the novel. While Priss feels obliged –by her husband, Sloan, an authoritative pediatrician– to breast-feed her baby even if she does not agree, Norine –finally divorced from Put and married again with a Jewish banker– prefers feeding her baby by bottle. Although visually scandalized by Norine’s behavior, we can analyze in Priss a subtle envy of Norine’s courage to freely express herself and her capacity to make important decisions on her own:

‘I hope you’ll be luckier than I’ve been,’ she said sadly to Norine. ‘Have you started toilet training yet? Sloan has a theory that we waited too long. If you begin early enough, he says, there’s no reason a baby should be harder to train than an animal.’ Norine shook her head. She did not plan to train Ichabod. He needed the fun of playing with his own excrements, just as he needed sucking. [...] She did not plan to wean Ichabod either – that is, from the bottle. He would wean himself when he was Stephen’s age, and, if he did not, *tant pis*.

‘Where in the world did you get such ideas?’ Not, Priss was certain, from a reputable pediatrician (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 394-395).

Norine’s ideas represent the model of the feminist forerunner and this produces both detachment and envy from a great part of the rest of women in society.

Finally, ideas on politics are exposed throughout the novel, framed within the generational change which is now already a fact. This change, as Roszak’s *The Making of a Counterculture* proposes, is propelled by a new, younger generation represented by the women of *The Group*:

And elsewhere in the class, in the wider circle of Kay’s friends, they could point out girls of perfectly good background who were going into business, anthropology, medicine, not because they had to, but because they knew they had something to contribute to our emergent America. The group was not afraid of being radical either; they could see the good Roosevelt was doing, despite what Mother and Dad said; they were not taken in by party labels and thought the Democrats should be given a chance to show what they had up their sleeve. [...] The worst fate, they utterly agreed, would be to become like Mother and Dad, stuffy and frightened (McCarthy, [1963] 2009: 11).

Here and there we come across with socialists, Trotskyites, etc. Mostly female characters –although we can also include men–. Within the novel, they discuss politic issues making the motto ‘The personal is the political’ something essential as we can evidence in *American Cultural Studies: an Introduction to American Culture*: ‘Women since first wave feminism had begun to connect their personal experience to the wider world of politics, and by the 1960s it had become sloganized as “the personal is the political”’ (Campbell & Kean, 2012: 229).

3.2 Plath’s *The Bell Jar*

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) became from the 60s onwards a very influential figure in American letters thanks to her literary works and her life, which ended in suicide in 1963, the year in

which *The Bell Jar* was published. *The Bell Jar* in a way synthesized the anxieties and the problems of a complete generation:

Published in 1963, the same year as Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Plath's novel is an example of 'self-conscious subjectivity' in which her own life is a raw material through which to explore a 'split' self in a split age. Here the central character, Esther Greenwood, is divided between what she is 'supposed to be' (Plath 1972: 2) according to the gender rules of America in the 1950s, and what she wants to be within herself (Campbell & Kean, 2012: 229).

The text is presented in the form of a *Bildungsroman*, which cannot help being somewhat ironic, as Greenwood's progress in the world is characterised by a spiritual decay and her fall into depression. However, the novel responds to that literary genre by developing the life of Esther Greenwood, a student who initiates the novel in New York thanks to a scholarship.

The novel begins in 1953, in summer, when the Rosenbergs were executed. From the beginning, politics appear in the narration as the main medium through which population can be controlled. This execution produced a strong shock in American society:

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers – goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. 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. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world (Plath, [1963] 2005: 1).

Esther Greenwood's attitude towards the execution reflects the submission which the American government imposed on individuals, by making them suffer a vicarious death. The abusive exposure to the media produces on Greenwood the impression that there are eyes watching her, showing how politics meddle in private affairs. The ubiquitous presence of the execution makes the citizen fear the unavoidable power the government and society have to know absolutely everything. Then the fear of death appears uncannily inside the individual's mind, as it happens to Esther Greenwood, which soon associates the execution of the Rosenbergs with the first time she saw a cadaver, remarking that she 'felt as though I were carrying that cadaver's head' (Plath, [1963] 2005: 1).

Plath's criticism subtly goes beyond until it reaches a point where it could be assumed that Greenwood feels guilty herself, which triggers the connection with the rest of the novel:

I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue (Plath, [1963] 2005: 2).

The main conflict in the novel, which is the protagonist's inner struggle, is affected by various external aspects. Then, the tumultuous politics of the years of the repression against Communists in America become essential to understand that, even not being a Communist, Greenwood's instability makes her feel a persecution. In this sense, Greenwood embodies the anxiety which women and other collectives felt due to their claims. Furthermore, Greenwood feels pity for the Rosenbergs, a pity that will not be shared by some of her mates:

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' (Plath, [1963] 2005: 96).

Electrocution appears as a motif that creates a parallelism between Greenwood and the Rosenbergs¹⁴, underlining again how she feels some sort of proximity to the fact of being an object of persecution. Then, when Greenwood moves to Doctor Gordon's hospital and undergoes shock treatment, she stops feeling the Rosenbergs' death as vicarious and starts living her own death:

I shut my eyes.
There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath.
Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant.
I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done (Plath, [1963] 2005: 138).

The narration shows Esther Greenwood as a victim and completely convinced of her innocence, wondering about the possible crime she might have committed. Greenwood, as an Everywoman, becomes the scapegoat, or rather the sacrificial victim, for the unconventional woman. It is important to remark that this first shock treatment experience is carried out by a male doctor. Near the end of the book, Greenwood is treated again under Doctor Nolan's directions. This female doctor exchanges some words with Greenwood, who tells her about her experience with doctor Gordon:

I told Doctor Nolan about the machine, and the blue flashes, and the jolting and the noise. While I was telling her she went very still.
'That was a mistake,' she said then. 'It's not supposed to be like that.'
I stared at her.

¹⁴ 'Plath's novel begins in June 1953, on the day of Rosenbergs were executed for being suspected Soviet spies, and clearly parallels her own 'shock treatment' with their deaths in the electric chair. Women's roles and sexuality were policed and controlled to ensure social order and anyone not conforming was forced into a hidden life.' (Campbell & Kean, 2012: 235)

'If it's done properly,' Doctor Nolan said, 'it's like going to sleep' (Plath, [1963] 2005: 182).

The difference between the shock treatments mark the recovery of Greenwood's mental health. Being carried out by a woman with success indicated ultimately how males impose on women their authority. Greenwood's personality split (which we will develop later) is that of two ideologies opposed. Doctor Gordon's attacks, therefore, during the shock treatment were aimed to the part of her personality that aligned towards unconventionality, whereas Doctor Nolan's shock treatment eliminates the struggle by annulling the bell jar, that is, the smothering pressure society imposes on her.

It is important, then, to appreciate how politics and male authority are related, as they naturally cooperate in the novel, by means of parallel experiences. Plath criticises then the male roles in oppression as well as in repression. This hetero-patriarchal persecution against Greenwood, manifested in the psychiatric treatments¹⁵, is triggered due to her having unconventional ideas about the feminine and the traditional womanly duties.

Feeling different from most the women she knows, Esther Greenwood's identity is devastated by the struggle between two main forces. In the one hand, Greenwood completely recognises how the ideal of a woman should be: how a woman must behave, what expectations from life she must have and which is the limit of her liberty:

I tried to imagine what it would be like if Constantin were my husband.

It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curlers after he'd left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he'd expect a big dinner, and I'd spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted (Plath, [1963] 2005: 80).

On the other hand, Greenwood rejects the idea that a woman has to naturally be born to get married, have children and be completely submissive to a husband:

This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's, but I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself (Plath, [1963] 2005: 80).

Esther Greenwood is then divided between these two aspects of her personality that are unable to coexist. However, she decides and chooses not to follow the traditional roles,

¹⁵ We do not consider gratuitous the parallelism with the fact that Esther Greenwood goes to a mental hospital and the famous concept of the 'madwoman' popularised in Britain during Victorian times. One of the most conventional techniques towards the annulation of women is depriving her from reason. Then, famous works like Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* or Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (which contributed to the creation of the stereotype of the 'madwoman in the attic' as Gilbert and Gubar masterly pointed out) exemplify this technique we have mentioned and added it to the Western, hetero-patriarchal imaginary.

producing the main events of the novel and creating the atmosphere of continuous danger, as well as negative reactions from men. She utterly rejects the tenets of the feminine representation according to the heteropatriarchy, and even rejects the women that follow these standards, although in some way she pities them:

I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state (Plath, [1963] 2005: 81).

Buddy Willard's remark, which sounds menacing, joins the list of abusive behaviours from men that want to deprive Esther Greenwood of independence. Apart from criticising the idea of a woman serving a husband, the narration questions societal structures.

Greenwood repeatedly rejects the idea of being an obedient, submissive wife to a husband, but also reflects on the job possibilities for women, disappointingly finding that most of the jobs available for women imply being under a man's command. She feels surrounded by this male authority and cannot stand it, as it will require her to be content with a job under her academic qualification.

But an English major who knew shorthand was something else again. Everybody would want to meet her. She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter.

The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters (Plath, [1963] 2005: 72).

We see again that academic knowledge in women has no use unless they have some other 'useful' ability that can yield to the expectations of a male boss. Greenwood embodies the hopes of the young, coming-of-age woman that pursues a satisfactory occupation in a satisfactory workplace. She believes in being she herself the boss, without the seemingly inevitable step of being under control by a man.

Nevertheless, her vision of the world is not necessarily shared by the rest of woman around her. This is an excuse for the narration to linger on different types of women, which are commonly divided in two: those that comply with the standards set by the heteropatriarchy and those that want to stand out of it. Greenwood's work in a fashion magazine after the consecution of a scholarship helps the protagonist see how the society of women is not homogenous in their desire towards liberation:

This hotel – the Amazon – was for women only, and they were mostly girls of my age with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men couldn't get at them and deceive them; and they were all going to posh secretarial school like Katy Gibbs, where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class, or they had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries

to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other (Plath, [1963] 2005: 4).

The narration's judgement is very harsh against these women. However, it was common among the women who wanted feminine freedom to direct their strongest criticism not against men who behaved according to the patriarchy but against women. It came from the thought that it is impossible to conceive that a slave could enjoy slavery, precisely as Greenwood has been pointing out in our previous quotations.

Maybe the only woman that escapes her criticism is Doreen. This young woman is characterised as different from the rest of the women that enjoy the scholarship in New York. Her characterisation responds to that of a strong woman with a great self-consciousness about her intelligence, possibilities and body.

Doreen singled me out right away. She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others, and she really was wonderfully funny. She used to sit next to me at the conference table, and when the visiting celebrities were talking she'd whisper witty sarcastic remarks to me under her breath (Plath, [1963] 2005: 4-5).

Doreen also triggers in Greenwood some reaction that could be classified as a sexual response, with which we will deal later. Coming back to our point, Esther Greenwood's mental disorder due to the social pressure she feels needs to let its energies escape, being it by means of the most repeated motif in the novel. Suicide becomes the only way Greenwood can escape the dictatorship of society, the imposed control on her behaviour, mores, future expectations and self-identity.

Chapter Thirteen is devoted to her desperate attempts to kill herself. However, she fails at every one of them, even in the last moment she is rescued from inside the cellar of her house after swallowing a bottle of pills. Greenwood tries to drown in the sea, tries to hang herself, tries to cut her veins and tries the pills, all of them unsuccessfully. She rationalises her lack of success in killing herself the following way:

But each time I would get the cord so tight I could feel a rushing in my ears and a flush of blood in my face my hands would weaken and let go, and I would be all right again.

Then I saw that my body had all sorts of little tricks, such as making my hands go limp at the crucial second, which would save it, time and again, whereas if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash.

I would simply have to ambush it with whatever sense I had left, or it would trap me in its stupid cage for fifty years without any sense at all (Plath, [1963] 2005: 152-153).

Greenwood's division of identity shows that her mind and body are governed by different organisms. Whereas her mind belongs to her, her body belongs to the government, to society, and prevents her from escaping. Then the mind, the only safe place for her ideas,

becomes imprisoned by the body, which tries to nullify the consecution of her wishes and plans, that belong to a sphere which is not tolerated by the body's government.

Furthermore, we can analyse Greenwood's struggle against herself as the way the American individual feels regarding the possibilities his/her society offers. The unconventional woman is imprisoned by a social structure that does not allow her to pursue an independent and self-made future. In *The Bell Jar* it is codified as showing an individual deprived from the control of her own body, whose drives differ from her mind's drive to a certain extent. Suicide, as we have said, becomes the key towards escaping from society.

Her suicidal drives also symbolically represent Greenwood's wishes for eliminating from herself the part of her that is not governed by her independent will. Destroying the body liberates her from the society's control and therefore breaks the status quo. This idea states, therefore, that women must symbolically start their liberation by killing their other, submissive half.

The last of these most important themes in the novel turns out to be sexuality. Whereas Esther Greenwood strives for a sexuality of her own, and actually there are many scenes in which she dates men (most of them unknown to her), she finds the experience rather unappealing, as male figures always appear characterised by a violent authority. The first of the men in the novel, Buddy Willard, produces in her a sense of attraction and repulse and, as we have seen in the extracts, he seems to find a mean delight in watching her hurt and her expectations of independence crushed.

'I'm going up,' I said. 'I'm going to do it again.'

'No, you're not.'

A queer, satisfied expression came over Buddy's face.

'No, you're not,' he repeated with a final smile. 'Your leg's broken in two places. You'll be stuck in a cast for months' (Plath, [1963] 2005: 94).

The next situation in which a male figure tries to impose his authority comes represented by Marco, an unknown man to whom she is matched in a date, being her symbolically bought by a diamond stickpin. Greenwood identifies him as a woman-hater:

I could tell Marco was a woman-hater, because in spite of all the models and TV starlets in the room that night he paid attention to nobody but me. Not out of kindness or even curiosity, but because I'd happened to be dealt to him, like a playing card in a pack of identical cards.

[...]

I began to see why woman-haters could make such fools of women. Women-haters were like gods, invulnerable and chock-full of power. They descended, and then they disappeared. You could never catch one (Plath, [1963] 2005: 102-103).

The narration then shows Greenwood in a situation of clear disadvantage, depicting the traditional passivity of women in sexual relationships. She appears as a submissive, easy to fool woman, whose power to prevent a man from exerting his is rather diminished. However, the narration makes a twist and Greenwood becomes empowered, fighting Marco, who tries to rape her:

‘Slut!’

The dust cleared, and I had a full view of the battle.

I began to writhe and bite.

Marco weighed me to the earth.

‘Slut!’

I gouged at his leg with the sharp heel of my shoe. He turned, fumbling for the hurt.

Then I fisted my fingers together and smashed them at his nose. It was like hitting the steel plate of a battleship. Marco sat up. I began to cry (Plath, [1963] 2005: 105).

It is important to appreciate how the vocabulary used by the narration emphasises on the war semantic field, with words such as ‘battle’, ‘smash’, ‘battleship’. Some sort of heroic tone appears in the depiction of Greenwood’s process towards freeing herself from the power of Marco. Women, therefore, are encouraged to fight against sexual predators, both metonymically represented by Esther Greenwood and Marco.

Furthermore, her relationship to men achieves a culminating point in her relationship with Irwin, another male character in the book. It is with Irwin that Esther Greenwood loses her virginity. However, when it happens, she starts bleeding, which at first she assumes as usual:

Then the stories of blood-stained bridal sheets and capsules of red ink bestowed on already deflowered brides floated back to me. I wondered how much I would bleed, and lay down, nursing the towel. It occurred to me that the blood was my answer. I couldn’t possibly be a virgin any more. I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition (Plath, [1963] 2005: 219).

Greenwood appears ingenuous and even childish in her manner of rationalising her loss of virginity and first sexual intercourse. Nevertheless, what she considers to be the success in her rite of passage becomes a real problem. She cannot stop bleeding from her vagina and needs to go to hospital, otherwise she would die due to the profuse bleeding. The readers then must assume that she has been wounded. By being ‘part of a great tradition’ she has inflicted herself the fatal wound of the submission to the patriarchy. The narration shows the bleeding as being ‘one in a million’ (Plath, [1963] 2005: 223), and it symbolically represents the death of the woman, the complete submission to men sexually, compromising their health with reproduction. The womb, symbol of fertility and the woman herself, bleeds after the interaction with the man, losing its innocence and paradisiacal state.

Another final aspect which turns out to be interesting in the theme of sexuality in *The Bell Jar* is Greenwood's feelings towards Doreen. There is a fascination from Esther Greenwood that limits with sexual attraction, as she pays attention to rather sexualised aspects of her friend:

That was another thing – the rest of us had starched cotton summer nighties and quilted housecoats, or maybe terry-towel robes that doubled as beachcoats, but Doreen wore these full-length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through, and dressing-gowns the colour of sin, that stuck to her by some kind of electricity. She had an interesting, slightly sweaty smell that reminded me of those scallopy leaves of sweet fern you break off and crush between your fingers for the musk of them (Plath, [1963] 2005: 5).

Her fascination comes from the fact that Doreen represents the liberated woman she would desperately like to be. Nevertheless, in her initial adoring behaviour there is some component of homosexual attraction perfectly comparable to Sal Paradise's attitude towards Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's *On the Road*. Both are the weaker part of a duo and therefore show a tendency towards feeling attracted to the strongest of the two. Greenwood's inner struggle finally manifests in relation to Doreen, and she chooses to stop seeing her because of her influence, which she ultimately considers harmful.

Comparison

After analysing *The Group* and *The Bell Jar* every reader must now be aware of the many themes and points these two works have in common. Published both in the same year, 1963, the authors share almost identical backgrounds and similar ideologies that are collected in their works. Thus, these novels do not only coincide in the genre, the *Bildungsroman*, but also in the various topics and motifs they develop.

The problems carried by the split women suffered between their traditional role and the new, unconventional one is obvious in Esther Greenwood and the group of women in McCarthy's novel, especially in Kay's figure. Both Esther and Kay see in suicide the only solution to end up with this split, killing the hetero-patriarchal imposed vision of the wifely woman. The difference between them is that Kay will be the only to achieve this freedom through self-destruction at the end.

In both novels men are presented as obnoxious figures. The relationship between them and women is always violent and authoritative and masculine characters in both novels use rape as means of restoring their masculine power over women. However, the reaction of women will vary, while Greenwood faces these attacks in most of the cases, the women in *The Group* would react in a most submissive way.

Another thing they have in common is the visibility of women's incursion in workplaces and the still dominant presence of men within this area. This is the case for Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* and Libby MacAusland in *The Group*, among many others.

The similarities between the character of Dorine and Norine that are presented as outsiders, brave women who free themselves from the chains of tradition.

Finally, the problems related to women sexuality are openly discussed in these novels and they both share similar visions. The passive role of women when dealing with sex is a fact and it is presented, moreover, as an imposition both from society and men. Defloration or the loss of virginity is seen as a violent rite of passage in these novels. Esther Greenwood affirms after having her first sexual relationship that she 'felt part of a great tradition' while for Libby losing her virginity would have supposed that 'She would have lost her honor'. Both of them see in the defloration the surrender to the patriarchy's ideas about pureness and sex related to a woman's value.

4. Conclusion

The Group and *The Bell Jar* represent, along with other works such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, the turn of the tide that began in 1963 and continued, reaching its climax, during the last years of the 60s and the 70s onwards, until today. This turn of the tide consisted mainly of women claiming their right to be regarded in society the same way men were. Feminism therefore needed works like that of McCarthy's and that of Plath's to assert its power, not only within social and political spheres, but also in the cultural ones. The counterculture movement, in which the second wave of feminism appears, constituted a well formed change in the cultural politics in America, through which they could appeal to the public and produce a bigger shift in the whole country. We therefore consider it necessary to remark that both novels helped creating a new imaginary for women in search of a new reality untied from the bonds of the traditional heteropatriarchy. In spite of the fact that to the modern reader the themes of these novels may not sound strange or countercultural, to talk about sex, marriage and divorce, masturbation and so forth was not common or socially acceptable at the time of their publication.

In that sense, we have also to thank feminism and feminist studies for the possibility of reexamining texts that, otherwise, would have been left behind, or simply marginalized from literary studies. It is commonly assumed that the Beat Generation was a masculine movement, although there were women who participated in the cultural production. However, female

figures always tended to vanish when we came across traditional literary studies, and this has been the case of many of the female Beats and many of the women writers not only from the twentieth-century but also from the rest of centuries (excepting obviously writers such as Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters or Emily Dickinson, mainly studied due to their influence on other great writers or aesthetic movements). It is therefore the task of feminist studies to draw new attention onto older texts, revitalizing their content which, as we have seen, does not only apply to the times they were composed in.

Precisely this is the wind that guides our sails. Our aim with this project was to draw the modern reader's attention to pieces of text that run the risk of being forgotten, even when their power to evoke contemporary times comes so evidently into our minds. Maybe it is not the case of Sylvia Plath, whose powerful poetry and figure have helped towards her perpetuation as a literary eminence, but Mary McCarthy has not been as lucky as Plath. In our bibliographical research, McCarthy's criticism has been reduced to the political, leaving out works like *The Group*. Moreover, Mary McCarthy has not become a widely read writer in our country, being rather rare to find translations of her books in the principal national booksellers.

Our objective was also to pose another question in relation to our novels. After reading these texts, we think that the main task of the reader must be to interrogate him or herself whether 'the problem that has no name' (as Betty Friedan calls it), which is represented in these novels, has been solved nowadays. The American counterculture represents a turning point in the cultural and social politics in the 60s, but their target was the same feminist organizations as well as antiracist or LGBTBI organizations have currently. Violence against women is still quite present in the Western countries as well as a widespread reality in poor or religious fundamentalist communities. At this moment the reader realizes that Esther Greenwood or the Vassar College group do not embody women from a certain period, but a social problem that has dwelt within our societies since long ago.

Finally, we would like to remark the infinite possibilities the feminist counterculture offers for research. Our analysis, although intentionally broad, cannot help leaving behind other themes, motifs and aspects that are equally interesting and important in order to understand both the novels and the movement behind them. Moreover, there are many other novels such as Andrea Dworkin's *Morning Hair* (1968) or Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) that deal with the feminine situation in the 60s and the 70s, which are within the domain of the feminist movement. Feminist literature, just as any other kind of literature, offers a set of teachings that are up to the readers to accept or reject.

5. Bibliography

Bushnell, C., 2009. "Introduction". In: *The Group*. London: Virago, pp. v-ix.

Campbell, N. & Kean, A., 2012. *American Cultural Studies: an Introduction to American Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Freeman, J., 1971. "The Women's Liberation Movement: its origins, structures and ideas".

[Online]

Available at: <http://www.jofreeman.com/feminism/liberationmov.htm>

[Accessed 04 May 2016].

Freeman, J., 1999. "On the Origins of Social Movements". [Online]

Available at: <http://www.jofreeman.com/socialmovements/origins.htm#Top>

[Accessed 04 May 2016].

Gair, C., 2008. *The Beat Generation A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld .

Gray, R., 2004. *A History of American Literature*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Holton, R., 2004. "'The Sordid Hipsters of America': Beat Culture and the Folds of Heterogeneity". In: J. Skerl, ed. *Reconstructing the Beats*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 11-26.

Jones, M. A., 1995. *The Limits of Liberty: American History 1607-1992*. New York: Oxford University Press.

May, E. T., 2002. "The end of 'Containment': the collapse of Cold War Culture and the prelude to the Vietnam Era at home". In: P. Marín Madrazo, ed. *Visiones contemporáneas de la cultura y la literatura norteamericana de los sesenta*. Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla, Secretariado de Publicaciones, pp. 15-29.

McCarthy, M., 2009. *The Group*. London: Virago.

McRae, L., 2011. "Poetess and the Patriarch". [Online]

Available at: <http://www.beatdom.com/poetess-and-patriarch/>

[Accessed 04 May 2016].

Mortenson, E., 2010. *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence*. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.

Plath, S., 2005. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber and Faber.

Roszak, T., 1969. *The making of a counterculture: reflections on a technocratic society and its youthful opposition*. New York: Anchor Books.

Wills, D. S., 2008. "Women of the Beat Generation". [Online]

Available at: <http://www.beatdom.com/women-of-the-beat-generation/>

[Accessed 04 May 2016].