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COMING-OF-AGE IN AMERICAN FICTION

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Anotace

Diplomová práce Coming-of-age in American Fiction se zabývá motivem dospívání v americké literatuře. Předmětem teoretické části je nastínění a vymezení termínu a následné zkoumání narativních strategií a témat typických pro tento specifický žánr. Blíže se zaměříme především na tři klíčová témata, kterými jsou identita, sexualita a smrt. V praktické části práce budou tato hlavní témata a jejich užití následně zkoumána ve vybraných dílech americké literatury, a to v románu Sylvie Plathové *The Bell Jar* a románu Jeffreyho Eugenidese *The Virgin Suicides*.

Annotation

The Master's Thesis deals with the theme of coming-of-age in American literature. The aim of the theoretical part is to provide theoretical framework and the subsequent examination of common narrative strategies and themes characteristic of this specific genre. We will focus more closely on the three key themes of identity, sexuality and death. In the practical part of this thesis these main themes and their use will be examined in selected novels of American literature; Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides.*

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Introduction

Coming-of-age is undeniably one of the major themes in literature, encompassing a diverse range of representation of the coming-of-age experience, treatment of the adolescence, personal development and change. Although the coming-of-age narratives are conditioned by the traditions and conventions of the Bildungsroman, they, at the same time, "establish their individuality by transgressing or subverting the conventions of their genre" (Millard 1).

When we think of coming of age in American literature, it is very likely that what comes immediately to our mind is *The Catcher in the Rye*. Since its publishing in 1951, J.D Salinger's quintessential novel has gained the status of a classic and is considered "the American gold standard" (Tolchin 31). Holden's voice has solidified the prominent position of coming-of-age narratives in American literature, and "by evoking the speech and exploring the experiences of a young person, often focusing on personal crisis, [*The Catcher]* has become the model for many later texts of adolescence" (Graham 94). Subsequently, it has changed the way these narratives distinguished themselves from the Bildungsroman tradition. Similarly as "*The Catcher in the Rye* was a novel that seemed to bring Huck's voice into the twentieth century" (Millard 14), Holden' demeanor, struggle, emotional plight, dichotomy of his rebellion and the ambiguity of his progress have resonated through an array of coming-of-age protagonists. Though some critics believe that "Salinger's fiction no longer attracts the critical attention that it once did" (Salzman 8), it nevertheless still remains "the novel against which all other texts about adolescence are judged" (Graham 93). This is the case of the two selected and analyzed novels, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*.

The Bell Jar is by many referred to as *The Catcher*'s counterpart, often "thought of, and spoken of, as [its] woman's version" (McCann vii). *The Virgin Suicides* has been labeled as "*The Catcher in Rye* of our times" (Observer 93), or as John Banville expressed: "a catcher in the rye for the Nineties" (qtd. in Lesher 78). Though the London Review of Books describes *The Virgin Suicides* as a "fervent, richly-textured prose [that] is funny, self-mocking, yet desperately serious and sad" (Lesher 78). The same might be said about both *The Catcher* or *The Bell Jar*.

The novels are successive in their origin, while also dealing with the era antecedent to their publication. *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951, depicting the 1940s. *The Bell Jar* was originally published under a pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963, in Plath's name in 1967, and finally in 1971 in the United States, depicting the 1950s. Lastly, *The Virgin Suicides* was published in 1993, while depicting the events that took place during the 1970s. This undeniably solidifies the genre's wide reach of impact, meaning that the coming-of-age narratives are valued for their relatability, regardless of the time they were published or set in. Accordingly, it is stated that *The Bell Jar* had a "great cultural significance for the generation that first read it in the 1970s" (Dunkle 64). Despite its "seemingly dated setting, the book bec[a]me for the young of the early seventies what *The Catcher in the Rye* was to their counterparts of the fifties" (Perloff 508). Though it is obvious that the narratives are conditioned by their time period, they are not a mere "period pieces" (Bloom 7). Rather, speaking about *The Bell Jar*, Perloff also believes it to be "the archetypal novel that mirrors, in however distorted a form, [reader's] own personal experience, their sense of what Irving Howe calls "the general human condition" (508). Consequently, coming-of-age narratives transcend time, because they are personal for those who try to navigate themselves through adolescence as well as for those who have come to look back and reflect on their past experience.

In the first section of the thesis, I will attempt to provide a theoretical framework regarding the genre's origin and development, and, simultaneously, establish its key narrative strategies that create a core of coming of age narratives. I will explicate their mechanics using *The Catcher in the Rye* as a case study and relate them to the both selected novels. Consequently, in the second section of the thesis, I will conduct extensive analyses of *The Bell Jar* and *The Virgin Suicides*, focusing on the seminal themes of identity, sexuality and death.

1. Theoretical Framework and Narrative Strategies

In terms of literary tradition, coming-of-age narratives have roots in the Bildungsroman novel. This connection cannot be refuted as they share the same thematic focus, that is, depicting a maturation journey and a personal development of a young protagonist. Though the Bildungsroman "has been widely adopted as a term in literary criticism to characterize the generic conventions of any novel of youthful development" (Millard 2), the precise interpretation of that term, like the conventions of the genre, is "endlessly disputed and contested" (Millard 3). For example, in order to prevent applying the term too broadly, Jerome Buckley established principle elements every Bildungsroman must include, which are: "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a philosophy of life" (18).

Many critics argue that over the years, the traditional idea of the Bildungsroman has started to impose limits on the modern and contemporary fiction (Millard, Šnircová, Rishoi, White), which is "removed both historically and culturally from the term's origin" (Millard 3). Its shortcomings are caused by it is traditionally linked with the development and maturation of the white, male, middle-class heroes. This focus is criticized by many as a limiting perspective to the "rising need to consider gender, class, ethnicity, race and sexuality in literary representations of maturation . . ." (Šnircová 1), because all major scholars of Bildungsroman such as Buckley, Dilthey, or Moretti continually exclude female development from their writings on the genre.

To quickly address this issue, the female position in the traditional Bildungsroman is restrained, because the trajectory of woman's journey and maturation was "often synonymous with marriage" (Waxman 318), narrowing her experience to the limiting internal domestic reality (Waxman 319). Thus, she cannot fit the mold intended for the male hero because "the plot prototype simply does not reflect the development of female protagonists until well into the twentieth century" (Rishoi 59). The term coming-of-age is thus perceived as inclusive to the experiences of both genders. (Wohlmann 46). Both *The Bell Jar* and *The Virgin Suicides* deal with the journey of female characters, their identity formation, and how they relate to society. Based on the examples provided

by these novels, we can observe that the thematic focus, as well as the narrative strategy, operates on a similar basis as those concerning the male character. As we have prefaced, Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood is by many considered a female version of Holden Caulfield, this by itself confirms that despite the differences ascribe to them due to their gender, their narratives still share commonalities. Accordingly, *The Virgin Suicides* deals with both male and female perspective, and we can observe how their experience differs yet at the same time, it is in its essence quite similar.

Moreover, in relation to the Bildungsroman, Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is often referenced when dealing with the narrative structure. While drawing on comparisons from mythology, folklore and other tales, Campbell asserts that there is a universalized quality of the story's hero, as he believes that "beneath its varieties of costumes" it is essentially the same one. Campbell thus proposes a unified pattern of the rites of passage through the stages of *separation - initiation - return*, representing "the standard path of the mythological adventure" (28). It is apparent that the narratives naturally differ or diverge at one point or another, which is typically recognized especially in the male and female variants. Nevertheless, there is still an underlying transitional pattern, applicable to both male and female protagonists. We can notice this tripartite pattern of the protagonist's journey to be frequently re-used in majority of coming-of-age narratives. This symbolic scheme then grants them a sense universality, reflecting the already mentioned notion of general human condition, which ultimately enables the recipients to identify with and relate to the narrative. Later on, we will reexamine this pattern and its stages in order to explore their shift in concept and how they are thematized in the selected novels.

1.1 Decline

The opening paragraph of *The Catcher in the Rye* tells us much about the shift from the typical format of the Bildungsroman.

> If you really wanna hear it about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like . . . and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you wanna know the truth. (Salinger 1)

Firstly, the novel does not follow the protagonist's life from birth through childhood and adolescence into adulthood. Holden quite explicitly renounces “that David Copperfield kind of crap” (1), because he is not interested in telling us his “whole goddam autobiography or anything” (1), while poignantly using the Dickens’s novel as an example of the typical trajectory of the Bildungsroman genre. Instead, the scope of narration gets narrowed: “I'll just tell you about this *madman stuff* that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy” (1 emphasis mine). The narrative thus recounts some liminal part of the protagonist's life, typically following his or her downward spiral. The narrator focuses on the period of crisis, usually reaching some point of breakdown that can essentially signal an impending breakthrough. Accordingly, the opening lines of both *The Bell Jar*: “It was a QUEER, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs….” (Plath 1), and that of *The Virgin Suicides:* “On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide” (Eugenides 1), give forth the aura of calamity and frames the narratives to a concrete point of protagonist's development, signaling a trauma. Notably, this gradual succession is manifested through the pattern of decline. Instead of developing upward, passing the prescribed milestones or moving up the ladder, the protagonist’s journey propels in descending quality. This is, as I have already proposed in the Symbolism in *The Catcher in the Rye*, manifested through Holden’s emotional decline. Because the reality is limiting, one becomes, consequently, emotionally alienated and finally usually faces complete physical isolation. The stasis can be understood as a direct response of being trapped in the middle, the space in between. Accordingly, Holden cannot move backward, because he is no longer a child while he is also reluctant to go forward, namely because he perceives both innocence and experience as mutually exclusive; childhood as something idealized and adulthood as something hypocritical. The same method of mutual exclusivity is the basis of conflict in *The Bell Jar*, due to which Esther becomes paralyzed and unable to transgress her position. *The Virgin Suicides,* then explores the declining lives of the Lisbon sisters to their deaths, as well as the narrators’ struggles to transgress the events of their past.

As Gwendolyn Haevens proposes, Holden “disrupts expectations of his social and psychological development to digress into illogical yet personally meaningful

descriptions and thoughts" (Haevens 26). The plot, thus focuses, rather than on action,on the psychological turmoil and introspection. Among the characteristics and features traditionally attributed to the Bildungsroman are the focus on the human potential, orientation towards a goal, social mobility, self-development, and subsequent integration into society. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, we see Holden persistently balking at the prescribed line of progression. He is aware of the consensus: "Life is a game that one plays according to the rules" (Salinger 8), and so through the self-sabotage, a form of a subversive act, he "attempts to escape . . . the natural action sequence of his socially and psychologically scripted role" (Haevens 116). When his sister Phoebe scolds him for his aimlessness, she requests: "Name something you'd like to be. Like a scientist. Or a lawyer or something" (Salinger 172). Instead, Holden slips into his catcher fantasy, an idealized self-appointed role of sheltering innocence by preventing children to fall. What might be interesting to point out is, that preoccupation with innocence is also a significant aspect of *The Bell Jar* and *The Virgin Suicides.*

From the narrative perspective, the linearity is further disrupted by Holden's tendency to digress. These disruptions bring tension to the narrative, creating suspense, though for some rather tedious. His digressions should not be perceived negatively, for it, in fact, serves a straightforward purpose. All the seemingly random thoughts and remarks are, however-, fundamental for grasping of Holden's personality, and they tell us much about the nature of his emotional turmoil. The digression is thus translated to his maturation journey in his attempts to avoid it or, at least, to halt its progression. Above all, Holden's fondness for digression indicates his urge to progress on his own terms, rather than following the presupposed script.

In addition, the chronology is challenged by default because the first-person retrospective narrative enables the narrator to retell his past experiences nonlinearly through jump-cutting, since the narrator "has in mind the whole of the past-time story" (Marks 367). Consequently, it sets up the two timelines, that of the narrator's past (the character of the narrative) and the narrator's present. We will further examine this narrative device of temporal distance later on while discussing the narrator-reader bond. In short, the narrator "not only has he played a role in the past events of which he speaks, but he plays another and crucial role in the very act of speaking" (Marks 336).

1.2 Binary

Symbolic structure largely depends on the tension of binary oppositions. This is apparent from the concept of coming-of-age itself, as it depicts a protagonist on the threshold, in between two polarities, usually those of childhood and adulthood. Similarly, age itself can be understood as a "binary construction of youth versus old age" (Hartung 46). The narratives are built upon several general pairings, such as innocence and experience, life and death, genuine and artificial. There are also many story-specific binaries, for example in the case of *The Catcher*, the most significant being catching and falling. The binary is often further exposed through generational conflicts, the self versus the other, desires versus the expectations and so on, all of which poses a difficulty for crossing the threshold. The conflict is thus both internal and external, as Franco Moretti believes the Bildungsroman to be based on contradictory developments such as "individuality and socialization, autonomy and normality, interiority and objectification" (16). They are important because they create tension, and also their dichotomy reflects protagonists' inner turmoil and conflicted nature because often times, they are unable to see past it.

As it has been prefaced, the core aspect of the traditional Bildungsroman is the tension between the individual and society. The emphasis on development and the meaning of maturation here lies in the protagonists' struggle to first establish their identity and then become a member of society. Moretti considers this a socialization. The core of his belief dwells in the synthesis of personal growth and acceptance of established social obligations. However, from this also springs the "conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the demands of socialization" (Moretti 15). In accordance, White proposes that the modern novelists "may question the very assumption upon which the Bildungsroman rests" (12) which is "the possibility of developing a coherent and harmonious self within existing social contexts" (White 13).

Though there are undeniable differences between the male and female experience, it is important to understand that these are established by society as such. While one might propose that Holden is favored by default because he pertains to the notion of normative male development, we see Holden out of sync with the prescribed narrative. Rishoi draws on this by explaining that the "[m]odel males are defined by

solitary individualism" (71) and Holden "is not a perfect example of [such] paradigm" (70), because even though "his background is privileged, he sees himself as marginal" (66).

Having the basis in the Bildungsroman genre, the coming-of-age narratives are accordingly "intrinsically contradictory" (Moretti 6). It is difficult for Holden to overcome the dichotomy between him and society when he does not understand the dichotomy of his self. Trowbridge brilliantly sums up this disconnect, explaining that it is:

> the story of the quest, a search for truth in a world that has been dominated by falsity, the search for personal integrity by a hero who constantly falls short of his own ideal, who in fact, participates in the very falsity he is trying to escape. (Trowbridge 682)

While discussing the notion of freedom, Moretti explains that "the culture of modern individuality has been from the start a combination of the two extremes: unthinkable without the one or the other" (66). Similarly, while we are presented with a variety of binaries throughout the narratives, they essentially grow continuously ambiguous. Ultimately, as Yasuhiro Takeuchi concludes, *The Catcher*'s resolution lies "in its blurring of the binary oppositions through which we come to understand Holden" (Takeuchi 321). The contradictory nature largely built upon the binaries constitutes the inherent ambiguity of the protagonist's reintegration – the return to society. At the same time, this conflict is also considered a standard for evaluating protagonist maturation.

1.3 Ambiguity

Consequently, *The Catcher*'s ending is thus considered inconclusive due to its unclear status of Holden's maturation. The last scene of Holden's recollection that takes place at the carousel seems to be a turning point of his journey. As he is watching his sister Phoebe trying to grab the gold ring, he fears that she might fall (an obvious nod to the metaphorical fall off the cliff into the abyss of adulthood). Therein he realizes, that halting such progress is futile: "If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them" (Salinger 211). Despite his self-appointed catcher identity, he recognizes that it is necessary to let children undergo the negative experiences and take

risks, which “symbolizes his willingness to leave behind his unrealistic ideal and acceptance of his own coming-of-age” (Šojdelová 49). I previously discerned this episode as “reconciliation” for it marks his potential, gradual return - reintegration - to society by acknowledging the progression.

However, this result is complicated by the final chapter that is not a part of his recollection, and he ends with a simple statement: “That's all I'm going to tell about” (Salinger 213) This epilogue occurs sometime after the events in Holden’s most recent period, the narrative present. Many people, including the critics, see it as refuting of the hopefulness of the carousel scene because we learn that he has suffered a breakdown and is now hospitalized, displaying a similar attitude and resentment at applying for a school. Holden’s parting words are tinted with regret:

> I'm sorry I told so many people about it. About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about. . . Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody. (214)

Due to these points, many deem Holden’s journey as inconclusive as there seems to be no final transition, his maturation thus seems unsuccessful. Such dissatisfaction rests upon the fact that the “[t]raditionally fine plots are . . . teleological-goal-oriented towards emotionally satisfying endings” (Haevens 22). This mixture of positive and negative prospects once again displays the ever-present binary and results in the ambiguity many are skeptical of. Both *The Bell Jar* and *The Virgin Suicides* display similar open-endedness and uncertainty. In fact, *The Bell Jar* literally ends with Esther “[p]ausing, for a brief breath, on the threshold” (Plath 234), as she steps into the room to find out whether her mental state is considered stable. Adding to that, the nature of her recovery is also suspected to be specious. *The Virgin Suicides,* then ends on a jarring note, with the narrators’ designating the suicides as “simple selfishness” (242), recognizing the search for answers as futile while, at the same, after all those years way into their adulthood, failing to reach any self-reflection.

On that account, it is relevant to note here that the concept of “coming-of-age” itself proposes ambiguity. To sum up, “coming-of-age” is commonly believed to be a transformative moment in a person’s life, usually adolescent. In her study of the genre, Barbara White opts for the term novel of adolescence, narrowing the focus strictly on the

protagonist in their teenage years. Though this a fair way to avoid the problem with the definition, it is nevertheless a limiting approach. With time there is an increasing "trend in the Bildungsroman of the early 21st-century for characters to come of age in their twenties" (Millard 5). Therefore, coming-of-age does not necessarily have to be restricted only to adolescence. Furthermore, the dictionary, for example, interprets it to denote “the attainment of prominence, respectability, recognition, or maturity” or “the time when a person becomes an adult” ("coming-of-age"). The ambiguity of the term coincides with the notion of adult status, which itself cannot be easily defined (Millard 5) and is also “culturally contingent” (Wohlmann 46). In addition, Waters proposes that “the transition from adolescence to adulthood has in years become more complicated, uncertain, and extended than ever before” (1). Maturation has thus become not so swiftly defined process, notably due to the diminishing of the “traditional markers of the transition to adulthood” (Waters 1). This is apparent from the selected novels. *The Bell Jar*’s Esther Greenwood could be considered a young adult, being nineteen in the narrative past and older in the narrative present. Similarly, though the narrators of *The Virgins Suicides* are recounting the events of their teenage years, they are now in their late adulthood. This again brings us back to the aforementioned temporal distance. Though the gap between these two timelines in both *The Bell Jar* and *The Virgin Suicides* varies in duration, the former being at least a year, the latter being several decades, the unresolved issues or trauma from the narrators' formative years affect their present, no matter how distant it is to their past.

An important aspect of the “coming-of-age” is, by all means, the notion of age itself, for ageing is “a universal process and a synonym of development through time” (Hartung 46). The process is the key aspect, proposing that one can “come-of-age” regardless of age. Consequently, I believe, that even though the narratives refute the expected conclusion, it is a mistake to simply deem them unsuccessful. It is inessential to focus only on the two polarizing qualities of the outcome, discerning them either as successful or unsuccessful, because what matter is the process itself. The narratives are bound to be open-ended, inconclusive, as Millard puts it, “the genre might be said to give an account of a process that is necessarily incomplete” (5). There can hardly be a single moment of revelation resulting in a visible transformation, for the narrative as

presented by the protagonist is limited by the form, while the process itself stretches beyond.

1.4. The Triad - Themes through the Pattern

So far, we have explored some of the integral narrative strategies common to many of the coming-of-age stories, and the selected novels in particular. We have established the scope of the narration, focus on the emotional turmoil with the crisis generating from an unresolved trauma, the tension operating in the binary structure, and finally the inherent ambiguity of the genre and the notion of maturity. Adding to that, as we have prefaced at the beginning, there is an established pattern of this maturation journey that moves through the stages of *separation - initiation - return.* This grants the narratives a sense of universality, even though the pattern necessarily unfolds under different circumstances. Campbell descries the pattern as "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (Campbell 33). Accordingly, when dealing with adolescent initiation, Hugh Agee also references a similar pattern of "separation, transition, and incorporation" (1022). It is clear, then, that the pattern presupposes an outcome of this journey, which, as we have demonstrated, is in the modern coming-of-age narratives problematized.

When we think about the most prominent themes that are essential to the genre, identity, sexuality, and death are ultimately at its core. The first two are indisputable. The formation of identity and self-realization are integral to the development. Sexual awakening and sexual maturation marks both biological and psychological development and play an important role in constituting identity, especially throughout the adolescent years or young adulthood. Death, on the other hand, might appear somewhat peculiar, mainly due to the fact that we examine a hero who is only entering a productive portion of his or her life. On the contrary, it is in fact the ever-present leitmotif, both literal and symbolic.

Symbolically, these dominant themes of identity, sexuality and death can be linked to the three referenced stages of *separation - initiation - return.* Therefore, I would like to reconsider these stages in relation to the triad of the established core themes and provide a brief outline by summing up the key elements of each stage in

relation to Bildungsroman theory and its reconceptualization in coming-of-age narratives, with *The Catcher in the Rye* as a case study. In a later section of the thesis focusing on the analysis of the two selected novels, we will explore in detail how these three key themes are treated and developed.

1.4.1 Separation and Identity

The stage of separation is usually understood as the beginning of the transition. Campbell later calls it a 'departure', which is described as "the call to adventure" (45) into a "zone unknown" (53). Jerome Buckley defines it as a departure from the familiar setting into the foreign one in order to undergo a series of trials, learn from them and affirm one's identity (20). The hero sets out to the city "with bewilderment and naiveté", which is "both the agent of liberation and a source of corruption" that is even more "disenchant[ing] . . . than any dissatisfaction with the narrowness of provincial life" (20). This nod to the city journey is present in both *The Catcher* and *The Bell Jar*, with New York City being the backdrop for a substantial portion of the story, relating it to the protagonist successive breakdown. *The Virgin Suicides*, on the other hand, reverts this city journey tradition as is takes place exclusively in the suburbs. There is, however, a point of departure outside the text. The narrators return back home, to the suburbs, in order to retell their story, which is tainted with the same disenchantment.

The separation in *The Catcher* is, however, not marked by his departure to New York, it is already pronounced in the precedent Pencey Prep section. We see Holden purposefully separating himself from his peers and superiors as he sees no avail of being a part of the surrounding hypocritical community. At the same time, he is continually separating himself from acknowledging his own shortcomings and problems. Consequently, there is a need to re-establish their identity by separation from the rest, while also deliberately from oneself. This is echoed by his catcher persona, which is essentially built upon idealism and dichotomy of what is and what should be.

Furthermore, Holden judges his identity through the binary conception of his Pencey Prep roommates, the unsocial and pathetic Ackley and the outgoing and handsome Stradlater. The two further differ in the level of their sexual experience. Yet, they are also akin to the same selfish and indifferent attitudes, which make them both

undesirable, extreme variants of masculinity Holden is unwilling to adopt. However, while he detests them, he also "shares several similar traits with both of them" (Šojdelová 36). We will explore that in *The Bell Jar*, Esther shares very similar trajectory of such identity separation as seen, for example, by the dichotomy of Stradlater and Ackley that is reprised through Esther's fellow interns Betsy and Doreen. *The Virgin Suicides,* then explores another blurring of the lines between the two opposing counterparts, which is portrayed by the male narrator's projection into the Lisbon sisters.

In order to deal with the feelings of insufficient identity, the protagonists often disguise themselves. We see Holden purposefully disguise his identity, pretending to be someone else, be it Rudolf Schmid with a brain tumor (Salinger 58), or Jim Steele after a complicated operation (73). We can again notice the subtle linking of identity and death. Here, the alternate identities are associated with dying, which can be understood as a form of escapism, potentially offering a possibility for rebirth. These adopted roles are again unsuccessful because they are based on pretense.

In Holden's final stage of isolation, he plans to move west, to live in a secluded cabin in the woods, pretending to be deaf-mute. This decline is also further manifested by the escapist desires. On this note, Millard explains that "[t]he American answer to a project in serious decline is to flee, to escape, and to begin again elsewhere" (82), just as we witness Holden "flee the insufficient environment when the tension in the former place heightens" (Šojdelová 20). Esther relieves this tension by escaping through her alter ego Elly Higgenbottom, while also introducing the separation between the mind and body. The roleplaying is then similarly explored in *The Virgin Suicides*, for example, when the narrators adopt the identities of detectives, but also when they separate themselves from the individuality by adopting plural, unified voice as a form of corroboration.

Similarly to Holden's fantasies of going west and living in a secluded cabin, Esther too daydreams about fleeing to Chicago, from where she imagines her alter ego Elly to be. The narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* try to run away with the Lisbon sisters by the end of the novel, picturing "the pure, free desolation of back roads we didn't even know yet" (Eugenides 212), while the girls conduct a terminal escape by their suicides.

What Budick writes about *The Bell Jar* can be then applied universally, as she remarks that these "repeated escapes fail to yield insight and self-knowledge" (205), and so such "self-deceptive escape. . . provides no redress to [the] present situation" (206). The search for one's identity and place is thus conducted through fleeing, leaving them in the in a paralyzed state.

1.4.2 Initiation and Sexuality

The stage of initiation is generally described as a "learning situation" (Agee 1022). This is usually conceptualized as a sexual awakening: "It is in this phase that an adolescent protagonist is frequently introduced to sexuality" (1022), through which one "acquires a knowledge of the privileges and responsibilities (or burdens) of adulthood" (1022). Initiation of one's sexuality is a leading milestone of coming-of-age because it marks the transition between childhood and adulthood and thus molds one's identity. Sexuality is also the main point of divergence of the male and female experience, which, as put by Campbell, defines "woman as receptive dreamer, man as active warrior" (Nicholson 189); such dichotomy in agency is explored in the novels. It affects protagonists' self-realization and it is indicative of their neurosis, notably when they fail to fulfill their prescribed roles. Affirming the pattern of descent, initiation, as a sexual act is throughout the novels delayed or problematized, which reinforces a state of paralysis.

In Holden's case, the concept of sexuality is contrasted by his catcher fantasy, that is the idealization of childhood innocence, which is in jeopardy when confronted with the corrupt world of adulthood. His understanding of sexuality is thus translated to the neurosis surrounding it. Pitted between his inner beliefs and outer expectations, Holden often explains his sexual inability: "I can never get really sexy...with a girl I don't like a lot. I mean I have to like her a lot!" (Salinger 148), and assesses it to be a bad thing saying: "Boy, it really screws up my sex life something awful" (Salinger 148). He views such decisions as failure, similarly as he reports that he stops when not given consent: "The trouble with me is, I stop. Most guys don't. I can't help it" (Salinger 92). His decisions are by no means flaws, but he judges them based on the established societal scenario of the time. On this note, Linda Wagner-Martin explains that, by a

general consensus, male sexual awakening is understood as an "another step toward maturity", acquiring positive connotations (65). We see, however, how Holden feels the pressure of not fulfilling it. Consequently, even though Holden consciously disrupts the prescribed script, he simultaneously also acts to its favor by trying to fulfill it, adopting the "get it over with" approach by unsuccessfully trying to have sex with a prostitute (Salinger 95), to resolve the tension.

Sexuality is met with conflicted responses of repulsion and fascination. When confronted with images of sexual nature, Holden finds them both appalling and appealing: "The trouble was, that kind of junk is sort of fascinating to watch, even if you don't want it to be" (62). Such approach will be, again, referenced later in the following analyses as 'learning by watching', exhibiting the observer/bystander role. Overall, this duality again reinforces the underlying binary structure, while also suggests its blurring. Furthermore, Holden "perceives sexuality and sexual aspects as something violating and focuses on its pervasions from which he wants to shelter and savior the innocence" (Šojdelová 18). Violation of purity is notably a recurring motif through both analyzed novels. In terms of the female experience, further explored later, innocence becomes fetishized. To again draw an example from *The Catcher*, this duality can be seen in idolized innocence of Jane Gallagher and "phony" yet sexually attractive Sally Haynes. The female sexual initiation takes on a negative connotation and results in "a complete change of status" (Wagner-Martin 66). Virginity serves as a mark of value and when lost unwisely "it is the stuff of ostracism, madness, and suicide for a female, however" (66), which will be at length examined in the both *The Bell Jar* and *The Virgin Suicides*. Consequently, there is an underlying link between sexuality and death, mainly given by the ever-present fixation with purity and the imagery of its violation, due to which the search for "innocence becomes a morbid project" (Millard 82)

1.4.3 Return and Death

In terms of the pattern of the hero's journey, the stage of return is supposed to mark the protagonist's "return and reintegration with society . . . [as] the justification of the long retreat . . ." (Campbell 34). According to Buckley, the hero returns home, to the beginning, but with new confidence as an independent individual (278). Agee then

highlights its figurative nature, liking it to a ritual "in a sense that the novice dies in the old life (childhood) only to be reborn later in the incorporation phase into a new life (adulthood)" (1022). However, the protagonists hardly ever exhibit such newfound confidence. It is important to point out here, that though such linear progression of stage passing is inherent to the genre, by the introduction of the death-rebirth duality the hero's journey proposes a circular pattern, emphasizing a continuous process. Narrative structure operates on a fairly similar basis. Therefore, the inconclusive ending is the plausible way for the narrative framing. The return can be quite conveniently linked with death due to several connections.

Firstly, coming-of-age narratives often utilize the theme of death as an important concept one must learn to come to terms with. Death is thus introduced explicitly as a passing of a relative, a friend, an acquaintance. In other words, someone's passing and the bereavement usually have some significance in the protagonist's journey and often function as the source trauma. In *The Catcher*, it is the premature death of Holden's younger brother Allie of leukemia that heavily affects his own maturation. Though it is not at the forefront, Esther in *The Bell Jar* is affected by her father's death, the memory which is in the text contrasted with her own suicide attempt, but also by the death of Joan, her symbolic double. On the other hand, the deaths of the Lisbon girls are explicit traumas for both the narrators, the sisters (death of the first affecting the rest), as well as the community. In addition, it is also important to mention that at some point in all the discussed novels, protagonists identify with the deceased. As I have assessed: "Holden's death is however only spiritual, representing the death of a stage of his life and presumably rebirth into the more mature self" (Šojdelová 50).

Secondly, Holden perceives maturing as the death of childhood, the metaphorical fall over the cliff implying the death of innocence. Death proffers an end of one phase and a start of the other, reconceptualized as a rebirth alluding to progress — descending to death in order to ascend through rebirth. At the same time, the theme of death is along the journey also utilized as a heightened form of stagnation, a fleeing mechanism that would conveniently halt the necessity of progression. Holden often thinks about his mortality, imagines himself dying, being shot, or jumping out of the window. It is ultimately a form of escapism as the fatality of death would grant him the unchangeable

state for which he is yearning. In addition, it compliments the successive decline, and functions as the utmost form of isolation, where it is often perceived as a calming prospect. In *The Catcher*, dying comes to signify an act of preserving, an ultimate manifestation of stasis. Holden is so fond of the Museum of Natural History because it encapsulates its artefacts and shields them from the outside. He enjoys the stifling space of its tombs, stating: "I sort of liked it, in a way. It was so nice and peaceful" (Salinger 204). Similarly, the mummies Holden admires are "the extreme case of immutability, a flawless example of preservation" (Šojdelová 46). Therefore, isolation is the prospect of both active fleeing and static encapsulation.

Having considered these aspects regarding death, we can notice the contrasting tendencies; those of stasis, inability to leap forward and permanence, as well as an act of agency, reconceptualized as a rebirth. In the following analyses, we will explore that death is, notably for the female hero, devised as an act of agency, often underlined by the lack of agency in terms of their sexuality. This is especially the aspect of *The Bell Jar*, reprised in *The Virgin Suicides*, where the need for the agency is supplanted by death as the only possible way of acquiring autonomy. *The Bell Jar* explores to a great extent the idea of self-deconstruction and subsequent self-reconstruction, whereas *The Virgin Suicides* further heightens the status of death as both permanent and decisive act.

1.5 Confession: Narrator-Reader Bond

To conclude the mapping of the hero's journey, we need to address one of the most substantial assets of the coming-of-age narrative, the narrator. The first-person narration gives forth a narrator with a distinct voice, retelling their own story, wherein the private becomes public. The narrators are speaking directly to the readers. This solidifies the implied connection between them, which is the one "where the reader takes on the role of the confidant" (Going 101). Furthermore, it is important to recognize the very act of narration as another stage of the journey.

When reading *The Catcher*, one soon notices that despite Holden's escalating alienation he is looking for a connection. He wants somebody who would listen, a desire proclaimed by the start of the very first sentence: "[i]f you really want to hear about it . . . " (Salinger 1), which, among other things, "symbolically manifest Holden's uncertainty

and need for reassurance" (Šojdelová 51). A similar need can be recognized in both *The Bell Jar* and *The Virgin Suicides*.

Karen R. Tolchin proposes that what distinguishes the American coming-of-age texts is their "heightened level of self-exposure," and that they also "exceed European models in the depth of its entrance into the self" (10). It is precisely the credibility of the voices that resonates the most with the readers and give forth the overall intensity of the personal emotional plight. Tolchin develops this idea of "reckless exposure" (11), and proposes that this narrative technique results in a twofold, conflicting, reception, which results in readers "applaud[ing] the courage of both character and author in exposing what might (and often does) make them appear ugly, petty, and absurd" (7). Holden is often accused of contradictory attitudes, dichotomy in the statements, of being fickle and exhibiting the same "phony" behavior he denounces. Either way, such a tone of urgency proffers significant emotional openness, which necessarily blurs the line between reliability and relatability.

Due to their psychological depth and need of self-expression, coming-of-age narratives employ a confessional tone. Therefore, when dealing with coming-of-age novels, it is necessary to take into account their confessional nature. The scope of narration, as we have previously established, then coincides with Peter M. Axthelm's belief, that the protagonist of a confessional novel is "present[ed] at some point of his life, examining his past as well his innermost thoughts, in an effort to achieve some form of perception" (2). Similarly, Holden sets off his narration, deliberately focusing on the state of crisis leading up to his breakdown, which seems to be an effort to uncover its basis. The narration is thus a way for the protagonists to make sense of themselves, a means of self-realization.

The aforementioned retrospective storytelling provides an essential layer to the coming-of-age narrative, which has, in effect, therapeutic quality. In terms of time, it creates a complex temporal distance between the protagonist and the narrator. In other words: "the narrator's confession concern the activities, thoughts and feelings of a central protagonist who is separated from that narrator by time, age and experience - a separation between the narrating and the narrated 'I'" (Radstone 36), which can be further distinguished as a present narrator and a past character.

Consequently, the “relationship of absolute identity between the two is unlikely”, because the separation enables “the narrator to confess earlier activities, thoughts and feelings” (Radstone 36). Furthermore, both coming-of-age and the confessional narratives share the emphasis on the underlying ritualistic aspect of these transformative processes, referencing the rite of passage through separation, initiation, and return. The confession produces a *self-transformation*; Axthelm asserts that the act of confession is a way of establishing “new principles of order and meaning” inside oneself (97), as well as a form of return; Terence Doody has argued that the “[c]onfession is always an act of community and the speaker’s intention to realize himself in community . . . ” (4).

Confession is, therefore, not just a “means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualized technique for producing truth” for it, in consequence, “constructs rather than reflects some pre-textual truth” (Gill 4). This is reflected in both *The Bell Jar* and *The Virgin Suicides*, the former being a precisely crafted narrative of its protagonist, and the latter being a therapeutic construction. The very act of narration is thus the final component of the hero’s journey. The confession produces the transformation that essentially stands outside the text. Susannah Radstone calls this transformation a “becomingness”, which is “descib[ed] and perform[ed] by the act of confession”, while “together with the reader’s positioning as recipient of the confession not only foregrounds becomingness, but grants to the reader a central role in the process (Radstone 36-37).

Interestingly, Bildungsroman has been also regarded as a novel of formation not only of its protagonist, but also of its reader as “[r]eading too is intended to be a formative process” (Moretti 56), and has “the immediate social function” (Martini 18), which is “seen in the encouragement of the cultivation of the reader through a presentation of a character’s *Bildung*” (Kociatkiewicz 11). Justyna Kociatkiewicz further summarizes the Bildungsroman didactic nature:

> The novel is to show to the reader the pitfalls of youth together with the most approved ways of avoiding these pitfalls; it is to suggest that the protagonist’s unique experience is at the same time typical, that his or her individual problems are in fact universal - and so are the solutions to

> these problems. In other word, Bildungsroman teaches the reader how to grow up. (11)

Though the journey is similar for most, it is, however, not about avoiding the pitfalls, as well as there are no uniformed instructions on how to grow up. As we have already discussed, *The Cather*'s ending is often perceived as inconclusive because from the standpoint of a formative development it is considered unfulfilled. I believe that the ambiguity is the key to connection because it emphasizes the relatable process rather than a restrictive objective. Finally, Holden is advised to share his struggles:

> You're by no means alone . . . [m]any, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them--if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. (Salinger 189)

The open endings are a realistic depiction of the process, and the ambiguity is thus more valuable than a totalizing verdict and final formation, for the process itself is in its nature bound to be incomplete, continuously under transformation.

They relate, we relate; “It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement” (189).

2. *The Bell Jar* - Sylvia Plath

In terms of interpretation, *The Bell Jar* has always been a complicating reading because its main character, Esther Greenwood, is so often fully identified with Sylvia Plath herself. Her novel is heavily based on real-life experiences, and so it is usually referred to as autobiographical fiction. Plath she herself spoke of it as "an autobiographical apprentice work which [she] had to write in order to free [herself] from the past" (Ames 12). However, having considered this, it is neither necessary nor desirable to draw on any further connections with Plath's life. Without any doubt, *The Bell Jar* exhibits the essential features of the coming-of-age narrative, depicting a personal journey while exploring the triad of the key themes of identity, sexuality and death to the fullest, and through their analyses, we can observe how the pattern of *separation - initiation - return* is played out and reimagined.

The novel retells the life events of then nineteen-year-old Esther, spanning from the summer of 1953 and chronicling six tumultuous months of her life. Starting out as a promising magazine intern in the New York City, Esther returns home for the summer overwhelmed with feelings of failure as she struggles with her identity and desires, culminating into depression and suicide attempts and the consequent stay at the mental asylum. Though we must acknowledge the social climate of the time and its relation to woman's experience, as it is going to be referenced throughout the subsequent analysis, it is important to emphasize, that it is a narrative about a person's crisis, undergoing psychological turmoil. Although it captures the era of the 1950s, it is still widely applicable and relatable today.

As we have established, the pattern of the journey progresses through decline, manifested through Esther's emotional downward spiral. So much so that, for example, Linda Wagner-Martin speaks about the novel as "unbildungsroman" (McCann 9). The turmoil rests on breaking the structures down for them to be, ideally, rebuilt stronger. Restoration is a necessary part of the construction, and Esther must deconstruct herself to build herself up. The tension between the individual versus society is especially substantial in the novel, and it also exhibits the conflicting nature. Accordingly, "Esther

is in conflict with the explicit ideology of her time but her ideas and criticism of herself, as when she describes her inadequacies in the female realm, also emerge from that ideology" (Smith 43). There is also the inherent ambiguity of her transformation; if she breaks down due to the inability to conform, does it mean that her recovery is an act of conforming? Lynda K. Bundtzen notes that "[i]n spite of . . . her rebirth, there are many instabilities" (153). The ending is thus by many, considered unsatisfactory in its openness, as both Esther's self-image and the nature of her reintegration to society is largely uncertain. As it has been prefaced, such judgment is often based solely on the Plath's own fate, who committed suicide only one month after the novel's publication. Critics have, however, observed several instances due which is the novel's conclusion (or lack thereof) is considered ambiguous.

At the end of the novel, we see Esther on both literal and proverbial threshold. There is no regained confidence upon the anticipated return. Instead, she remarks:

> I had hoped, at my departure, I would feel sure and knowledgeable about everything that lay ahead after all, I had been 'analyzed.' Instead, all I could see were question marks. (Plath 243)

Because it is a retrospective narrative, we have to take into account and examine the temporal distance. Though we do not know exactly how much time has passed, we can estimate that the life events of the nineteen-year-old Esther are at least one year apart from Esther's narrative. While we know that she successfully lives on after her departure from the asylum, we do not know much about her life post the release. The only hints we might glimpse about her current state are the few comments she manages to make. The only explicit information we get about her present is shared in the first chapter, where we learn that Esther now has a baby:

> I still have the make-up kit they gave me . . . I got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to us. For a long time afterward I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with. (Plath)

This remark has been the source of many debates. One of those is a disconnect between the past and present attitudes. First, it is ambiguous whether the fact she is now a mother is a sign of conforming to the prescribed "proper role as a wife and mother" (Hoogland 288). Second, while in New York, Esther is treated to those "piles and piles of free bonuses" such as "passes to fashion shows and hair styling appointments", as well makeup giveaways, which are connected to the standardized outer beauty (Plath 3). We learn that these items became a source of anxiety as they had to be at some point hid away, but now make her later feel content. The ambiguity thus lies in the very basis of Esther's recovery. It is worth noting that electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), which is at first considered as a form of punishment, is later, under the control of Dr. Nolan, considered a "purging" experience, as the "darkness wiped me out like chalk on a blackboard" (205), leaving her "at peace" (206). This leaves us wondering whether it is a self-fashioned renewal that offers the protagonist hope or whether her new beginning is conditioned by the treatment.

Moreover, the temporal distance is important because the division of the narrator (present Esther) and character (past Esther) can offer us an insight into her state and the proposed balance. Esther, the narrator, does not comment on this disconnection and narrates the events from the perspective of the past Esther. Similarly, the present Esther is, in fact, uncertain, whether she is cured "or understands the mysterious cause of her illness to the degree that she can feel confident that she will not become depressed again" (Haevens 81). Rishoi believes that the "coming-of-age narratives construct these oppositional subjectivities only in retrospect" and so "the act of writing one's coming-of-age experience is also the act of ordering the conflicts and confusions-even chaos" (8). Esther's narrative has thus confessional quality, while it is also challenging in terms of order. Though the novel consists of three dominant parts; the New York City section, back home and the mental institution section, which are presented in chronological succession, the linearity is however constantly interrupted. Rather than systematically ordering the conflicts, the narrative is presented through fragmented events. Numerous flashback and jump-cutting both in time and space echo the feelings of confusion and instability.

Furthermore, the detachment and matter-of-factly tone come across as black humor, which only highlights the seriousness of the issue. The style of her narration, namely the peculiar separation from the past and present Esther also propels questions such as the one articulated by Janet McCann, who ask whether the novel is "a case study, simply observed by the case" (4). Nevertheless, such narrative detachment recreates Esther's former state, while the comical element enables her to "distance her younger disturbed self from the story that had previously defined her" (Haevens 84). Thus, by her recollecting the tumultuous events, she is able to transgress them, making her confession a constituent part of the transformative experience.

On this note, Gwendolyn Haevens brilliantly proposes in her analysis of the narrative structure, that Esther's narrative is, in fact, her precisely crafted artistic effort, a novel. Significantly, Esther recounts her failed attempt to write a novel in hopes to reassure herself of her abilities. She tries to write about "[her]self, only in disguise," from a perspective of an "another, distanced mind" to imagine herself as an actor. However, after two sentences, Esther cannot continue, because she cannot imagine Elaine's, the imagined protagonist's, future just as she cannot imagine her own:

> I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires . . . and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth. (Plath 143)

Writing is an integral part of Esther's identity and the turmoil stems, among other things, from the collapsing ambition to become an accomplished writer. Heavens links this with Esther's dilemma of "proper script", that means the idealized trajectory a female is propelled to undertake, pitting against each other artistic and domestic (58). The sheer paralysis slowly, but surely, takes over as her personal desires clash with the social expectations, which are ultimately at odds with each other (echoing the issue of mutual exclusivity as it will be explicated further later on). This prevents her from envisioning her future because it compromises her desire of being a writer. Due to her fears of not being able to write professionally accompanied by her insecurities and feeling inadequate, she is later physically incapable of writing. However, Haevens believes that Esther, as a narrator, deliberately orders her narrative in such manner and implores a distinct technique in order to accurately capture her past predicament. We can thus

propose that her narrative is Esther's way to transgress the script. In other words, her narrative, a "comic novelistic text" (84), "accommodates a more absurd and disjunctive collection of life events and experiences" (93), as she "tries to create a freer interpretation of her life than through the scripts of success and of psychological normality which she concomitantly negotiates" (84).

I propose that the element of confession is the final component of the narrative structure, the final piece of the pattern. Consequently, "[b]y understanding her narrativized understanding of new beginnings in her life . . . she is in the position to reevaluate her past and create a new future-a new narrative identity for herself" (Haevens 73). With the omission of the classical developmental form or a scrip, she can create a "more open-ended" narrative (Haevens 84).

So even when Esther seems free in the end, outside there still exist the same norms and expectations as there were at the beginning. As Barbara White points out: "[g]rowth means waking up to limitations" (11), and so she must acknowledge and see through the limitations society inflicts upon her in order to be able to move past them.

2.1 Identity

The theme of identity lies in the very core of *The Bell Jar*, as we become witnesses of Esther's impending existential crisis. Based on what we have already looked upon, *The Bell Jar* is, as Tim Kendall professes, "a novel about the searching for and shedding of identity" (53). Throughout the narrative, Plath incorporates several important symbolic devices through which Esther's inner turmoil and the issues of identity get manifested. Influenced by the rhetoric of the fashion magazines, both the writer and her heroine being chosen as the guest editors at the fashion magazine Mademoiselle, the symbols Plath incorporates into her text are often derived from the beauty culture. These are notably clothing and mirrors, both of which we will explore further later on. First and foremost, these items are closely connected with the female experience and especially what it means to be a woman, an essential concern for Esther's development and understanding of her own identity.

Esther's identity is shaped; (constructed and deconstructed) by the two conflicting determinants, that of 'the self' and 'the other'. In other words, she becomes

stuck in between her own desires and expectations of herself, and the desires and expectations of others. What more, both of these poles are heavily affected by the embedded beliefs and ossified conformist mentality of the 1950s American society. Thus, concerning one's identity, and especially female, the world of the 1950s plays an important role and is in effect very limiting. Linda Wagner-Martin speaks of *The Bell Jar* accordingly: "One important theme is that a woman character cannot be seen as 'individual'; she is always a part of her culture" (The Bell Jar 29). These limits and strict divisions are virtually everywhere around Esther, echoed by magazines, television, all female hotels, career options; in a society, where the woman is portrayed as an "object of seduction and not as achiever" (McCann 11). Esther becomes increasingly imprisoned both by her social role and by her own desires, "sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in [her] own sour air" (Plath 178). This tension is further reinforced by the fact that Esther becomes the other to herself as a symptom of her inevitable mental breakdown, alienating her not only from the outside world but also from herself. As a consequence, Esther is caught between the inconsolable binaries of virginity/sexuality, motherhood/career, practical/artistic, which results in her inability to move forward. The sheer paralysis slowly, but surely, takes over as her personal desires clash with the social expectations, which are ultimately at odds with each other.

As we come to know Esther, she is a perfectionist, an overachiever, excellent student, and yet, at the same time, in the midst of her lifetime opportunity, which she achieved through her hard work, she speaks about herself and the experience in the following way:

> A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car. Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. (Plath 2)

From the very beginning, we see Esther overwhelmed with vexatious emotions. While she knows she should feel happy and grateful for the opportunity of having been selected alongside with eleven other young college girls from all over America and is

“apprenticed to the best editor on any intellectual fashion magazine” (29), she cannot bring herself to embrace her situation fully. She feels misplaced, like a foreigner in her surroundings, not in control of her situation.

Furthermore, in contrast to the girls “with wealthy parents” (4), she is constantly reminded of her unfavorable financial situation. While they “make [her] sick”, she is also flooded with jealousy. Impressed by their clothes with a matching pocket-book covers, Esther’s wardrobe consists of a “sad array of queerly cut forty-dollar dresses” (100), which she can only afford because of her scholarship money. It is important to note here that although Esther is attracted to the “elaborate decadence” (4), the purchase of the dresses is not a question of vanity, but rather an attempt to adjust her appearance in order to blend in. Esther thus adopts a strategy of mimicking others to blur out her shortcomings. She is “supposed to be having the time of my life” (2), but instead, she is plagued with feelings of emptiness, disenchantment, and ineptitude.

Alienated in the big city, Esther quickly realizes her inexperience with the world. On multiple occasions, Esther appears to be uncertain of her social skills. We caught her in a situation in which she does not feel comfortable and is not sure how to behave. She does not want to make a fool of herself by not being sure what drink to order, so instead she skips a meal to avoid the awkwardness of insufficient tipping. This is even more striking because we are continually being reminded of Esther’s academic achievements and abilities. Such instances are yet another evidence of the clash of self with the outside world. Further contrasted with the setting of the New York City to which she comes from a small town, Janet McCann draws on this clash, stating that “[Esther] is discovering that her small countable achievements are worth little in the wider world” (10). All her life, Esther has strived to be an exceptional student and believed that her determination will secure her a promising career and professional life. However, when advised by Jay Cee: “You need to offer something more than the run-of-the-mill person. You better learn some languages” (Plath 26), Esther flushed by a sense of utter inadequacy, realizing that success at school does not necessarily translate to the rest of her life. It is quite interesting to note here that Plath structures Esther’s growing self-doubt effectively as she directly juxtaposes Esther’s present shortcomings with her past accomplishments. In addition to this, while feeling like she is “unmasked”, she recalls:

“I don't know just why my successful evasion of chemistry should have floated into my mind” (35). It is the reemerging guilt that makes Esther completely disregard her achievements: “I felt dreadfully inadequate. The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn't thought about it” (72). Consequently, the more she continuously doubts herself, the more aimless she becomes.

In order to relieve herself of all the pressures, Esther tends to disguise her identity by changing her name, her alias being Elly Higginbottom from Chicago. She first uses this fake name when she introduces herself to a man at the party, believing that this way “anything I said or did that night…associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston” (11). What seems to be a playful game at first subsequently gains growing significance and points us to the damage. Not only we learn her real name in the third chapter, after approximately thirty pages, but Doreen also repeatedly refers to her by this fake name even in private when nobody can hear them. According to Smith. Esther’s search for an “accommodating identity has been so dependent on fantasy and imitation that she has no original self that stands as distinct from her false selves” (45). Elly is the escapist persona, demonstrating further layers of separation. She can seemingly be herself while stripped of her roots, family, education, name:

> In Chicago, people would take me for what I was. I would be simple Elly Higgenbottom, the orphan. People would love me for my sweet, quiet nature. They wouldn't be after me to read books and write long papers on the twins in James Joyce. And one day I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway. (127- 128)

This can be ultimately translated into Esther’s oppressive fear of disappointment, which stems from numerous social and personal pressures. She wishes to be able to fail without reproach, and free herself from the expectations of her family, teachers, seniors, peers, and society as such, but also from her own constraints. Because she is not comfortable in her own skin, Esther desires to be validated from the outside sources and seeks approval, since she feels increasingly insecure about her abilities and her gender role. However, what she creates, her fictional self, ultimately conforms to the general 1950s consensus and the motherly femininity Esther is so afraid of.

Interestingly, we can see that Esther's interest of imagining a viable partner can be linked back to her need of approval and validation, and therefore it is more about fulfilling the social norm rather than the desire for romance. Esther realized this after she receives an invitation to the Yale Junior Prom from Buddy and is showered "with amazement and respect" (Plath 56). It becomes apparent that the reason of Esther's excitement is that she gains a social recognition, the approval she so longs for:

> Things changed in the house after that. The seniors on my floor started speaking to me and every now and then . . . and nobody made any more nasty loud remarks outside my door about people wasting their golden college days with their noses stuck in a book. (56-57)

When Buddy later proposes that they would date, Esther is "dying to get back to college and tell everybody" (58). She fulfills the socially prompted woman role, which makes her feel both socially accomplished and, by extension, also affirmed her identity. At the same time, Esther realizes her inner disconnect with the feminine mystique. Though attaining a husband would then be seen as a goal, at the same time, it poses a great threat to Esther's ambitions, as the two are perceived to be mutually exclusive. According to the same premise, Esther is suppressing practical suggestions of her mother to learn shorthand in fear it would make her artistic, arguing: "I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters" (73).

Esther sees her life "branching out before [her] like the green fig tree" (73). It is this recurring symbol of the fig tree that deals with the idea of mutual exclusivity and depicts Esther's indecision, or rather, the pressure of making choices without repercussions.

> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. . . .I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (73).

Each fig represents different aspiration, a possible prospect of the promising future, be it “a husband and a happy home and children”, “famous poet”, “brilliant professor”, “Ee Gee, the amazing editor” (73). For Esther, it is extremely challenging to choose one ‘fig’ over the over because, throughout her journey, she is constantly being reminded that the outcomes of her decisions will be irrefutable. For example, Esther recalls Buddy Willard, “saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore” (81). The same discouragement also comes from the opposing pole when Esther tells an older female poet she “might well get married and have a pack of children someday” (210), to which she exclaims, in horror: “But what about your career?” (211). Through the prism of 1950s society, it is made perfectly clear to Esther, that there simply cannot be a balance between these two conflicting aspirations, because choosing one would mean the renunciation of the other. Esther’s indecision is thus not merely an exhibitions of irresoluteness, but rather a pending identity crisis; the crisis that has its roots in the exhausting search for a ‘proper’ or ‘ideal’ type of femininity. She tries to mimic those around her, or in other words, she is presented with multiple portrayals of women she can eventually imitate, as she feels utterly incompetent.

The women throughout the novel represent some extreme version of femininity. On the one hand, we have the women who represent motherhood, such as Esther’s mother, Dodo Conway or a Mrs. Tomolillo. On the other, we have the ones that stand for career and professional life, such as Jay Cee, Philomena Giune or Dr. Nolan The problem is, that their personalities are strictly defined and constricted by these dichotomies, “so contained and so distorted by the various lenses through which they are perceived” (Smith 35). Not only are “[t]he woman’s autonomous identity and perception of self . . . in conflict with the stereotype of the dominant male society” (Ghasemi 58), but Esther herself is unable to see past these divisions and judges them according to the same stereotypes. Because they are deprived of their complexities, Esther cannot fully recognize herself in any.

Plath pays attention to the clothes, as Esther frequently describes people while focusing on their wardrobe. Clothes are thus also closely linked with Esther’s apprehension of identity, echoing the notion ‘You are what you wear’. Relating this to

the coming-of-age narratives, "the paths toward maturity along which heroines navigate are so often paved with cloth" (Stetz 65), because the clothing is one of the means they "learn and perform their culture's standards of femininity" (Pelt 13). April Pelt explores to a great extent the significance of clothing in her study, arguing that "Esther is unable to fashion a viable personal and professional self that encompasses elements of the multiple "feminine" identities available to white, middle-class, heterosexual women, not because of her mental illness, but rather because these identities and their various wardrobes 'clash' with one another" (13).

Doreen and Betsy, her fellow magazine guest editors, represent precisely this issue as they are commonly perceived as having the opposing 'bad girl' and 'good girl' identities. Esther finds Doreen extremely intriguing, having never met someone like that before. She is "wonderfully funny" (Plath 4), sarcastic, carefree, rebelling, her bright white hair is like "a cotton candy fluff" and her blue eyes "like transparent agate marbles" (4). She is also flirty and mysterious, wearing "full-length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through, and dressing-gowns the color of sin" (5). Doreen's fashion sense of the quintessential Southern femme fatale fascinates Esther. Betsy, on the other hand, looks like "they imported [her] straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile" (6), beautiful and elegant, an image of an 'all-American' wholesome girl. Through the prism of the 1950s society, she is a pin-up girl of the ideal, healthy femininity.

Esther openly acknowledges she identifies, to some extent, with Doreen: "Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a voice speaking straight out of my own bones" (Plath 7). Although we see, that Esther is far more attracted to her: "[B]eing with Doreen made me forget my worries. I felt wise and cynical as all hell" (7), after the night out Esther spends with Doreen and her lover Lenny during which she is a silent witness of their combative sexual foreplay, she as if wants to shut out the femininity Doreen represents. Consequently, Esther believes that Doreen brings out the "bad girl" behavior in her, as she is hesitant and afraid to connect with her sexual self. While Betsy is perceived as the opposing force, swaying Esther the other way, "always asking me to do things with her and the other girls as if she were trying to save me in some way" (6). In an effort to banish Doreen from her system, she leaves her outside of her room,

declaring: “Doreen’s body lying there in the pool of vomit like an ugly, concrete testimony to my own dirty nature” (19, emphasis mine), and symbolically pledges her allegiance to the ’good girl’: “Deep down I would be loyal to Betsy...I resembled [her] at heart” (21).

Puzzled by this inner plurality, Esther’s sense of identity is therefore subverted and compromised by such binary stereotypization because she identifies with either of the traits that are pitted against each other. Due to this discrepancy, she is simultaneously attracted and dismissive of both of them. Instead of attending a fur show with Betsy, or going to Coney Island with Doreen, confused and tired, Esther opts for separating herself from either of their presence. Though “for a minute [she] was tempted” in an effort of withdrawing from either model, she confesses that all she wanted, “was lie in bed as long as I wanted to and then go to Central Park and spend the day lying in the grass, the longest grass I could find in that bald, duck-ponded wilderness”, echoing Holden’s wanderings of alienation (27).

Esther’s New York clothes “seemed to have a separate, mulish identity of their own” (100). The night before Esther is about to leave New York City, we see her tossing entirety of her wardrobe down from the hotel roof. This episode is by many critics interpreted as Esther stripping herself of “her possible selves” (McCann 5), seeing the clothing as “anthropomorphized” and “charged with selfhood” (St. Clair 131), an act that can be read as a refusal of “her culture’s standards of femininity” (Leach 36) and also a figurative suicide. Furthermore, the clothes remind her of the falsified identity, “suggesting that her expensive new wardrobe fails to eliminate the anxieties about her lower-middle-class upbringing” (Pelt 15), and contributes to the increasingly predominant self-doubt: “I just can't face these clothes when I come back” (Plath 100).

Just like the figs representing various types of femininity, those can be then associated with “their corresponding wardrobes” (Pelt 15). According to the common societal consensus, they cannot be worn simultaneously and are therefore also mutually exclusive, same at the potential paths. Interestingly enough, Ester finds the clothing of both the successful professional women like Jay Cee or Philomena Guinea equally repulsive as those of maternal family women like her mother of Mrs. Willard.

For Esther, no model is fitting, neither the model of femininity nor clothing. As we witness her wardrobe scattering, fluttering to all directions, her identity from now on begins to shatter, imitating the clothes' descent to the "dark heart" of the city. (Plath 107) Paradoxically enough, Esther forgets to save something to wear for her journey back home and so Betsy trades her a blouse and a skirt. Dressed in Betsy's clothes, she also takes on her image, referring to herself with Betsy's nickname, "Pollyanna Cowgirl" (108). Upon her arrival, she does not live up to its characterization of someone who is constantly or excessively optimistic ("Pollyanna"). We can see that they fit the suburban setting, her new clothes, borrowed identity, is failing her.

It is virtually impossible for Ester to navigate herself through the simultaneously appealing and appalling perspectives, which by extension represents the troubling dichotomies of coming-of-age, standing on the threshold, unable to move forward. She is unable to fit into any of the existing paradigms. Due to this irreconcilable inner plurality, Esther is not only alienating herself from the society, but above all from herself, which is manifested through the growing dichotomy between her body and mind. The pattern of decline is manifested by Esther's gradual fragmentation, which "is presented through images: she sees herself as an absence rather than a presence in critical situations, fails to recognize her own image, and sees others as body parts" (McCann 5).

There is a vast array of instances that demonstrate this separation of the mind and the body. Here are some examples of such disconnect: "my voice sounded strange and hollow in my ears" (Plath 118), and other times she is aware of the noises, but she cannot hear them (17). Moreover, she later further reflexes on hearing her voice, as if separated from her own. When asked about her plan for the future, her reply is: "I don't really know," I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock…the minute I said it, I knew it was true" (30).

Through the separation from her body, she assumes a position as an observer of herself as an object, reacting on her reactions. This divide also relates to her physical body, as her hand "retreated and fell limb" (114), or when she does not realize her leg is broken (94). She inspects herself as an alien object: "It was a sleeve of my own bathrobe I was looking at, and my left hand lay pale as a cod at the end of it" (42).

A mirror is a prominent symbolic tool throughout the novel. In relation to the body/mind separation, it reflects her divided self. It is a "silver hole" framed with an edge, "where [a] face would show" (23). Esther then loses herself, in this the proverbial rabbit hole, in which things are foreign, insidious, not what they seem to be. She continuously fails to recognize her own image in the mirrors and other reflective objects to a point she completely dissociates herself from her own image: "The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian" (108), and later, "I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course" (17). As Séllei further explains recalling Foucault: "The objectivization of the body image that comes about as a result of "dividing practices" . . . correlates the total disintegration and alienation of the body" (143). This culminates after her suicide attempt when she cannot identify her reflection in the mirror, an episode which will be explored further in other section.

Although it is neither the aim nor necessary to delve into the Psychoanalytic criticism, when dealing with the symbol of the mirror it is appropriate to mention Jacques Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage". Therein, the child first recognizes own image in a mirror, which "gives the child a unitary body image, an identity of its own" as the child "recognizes its reflection in the mirror as 'me'" (Birkle 94). This is something Esther struggles with. In order to recollect herself after crying, she tries to adjust her makeup and sees a dubious image inside her side mirror: "The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell after a prolonged beating" (Plath 98). She says "the face" (18), not 'my' face. Esther seems to deny that the unfavorable reflections are her own. There is a discrepancy between the reflected image of herself and the idealized version of femininity standardized by the magazines and advertisements. The trouble of the self and the other then results in the fact that because the self (Esther) is, according to Laing, "unable to feel [her] existence confirmed by others, [she] cannot affirm it for [herself]" (qtd. in Ostriker 359). She is dependent on recognition from others, the recognition that is ultimately conditioned by the acceptance of the societal norms and the feminine mystique. In addition, Esther's "bodily and mental disintegration is a response to symbolic, discursive systems, this could well be interpreted as "escape," "flight," or "the space-off," and by denying the

body image created by the dominant discourse-it could also be regarded as a subversive act . . .” (Séllei 144).

At the beginning of the novel, Ester mentions a “warped” mirror, in which the face “looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury” (18). The mercury ball reappears again by the end during Esther’s hospital stay. When she breaks a thermometer, she secretly manages to retrieve one ball and smiles: “If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself, and if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again” (176). For Esther, the unstable mercury ball is, as Teresa de Lauretis brilliantly points out, “the symbol of unity, or better of the reintegration of the many [selves] into one [self]” (131). In conclusion, Esther is scolded for her indecision caused by her desire “to be everything” (76), but in its essence, identity, in Lacanian terms, “is necessarily an alienated state - something crucial for functioning in the world, but also radically unstable” (Luepnitz 225). Esther’s identity is, thus, just like the mercury ball, the unstable sum of its parts.

2.2 Sexuality

Throughout the novel, we see Esther struggle with her sexuality in a number of ways. Sexual awakening is necessary for her self-recognition because it plays a vital role in the gradual fragmentation and the divide between mind and body. The theme of sexuality, then deals with the double standard, and, conclusively, with the virginity, violation, and the motherhood.

The issue of sexuality is closely related to what has been in established by the context of 1950s America and the female predicament. There is a strong affinity between the male a female perspective and ultimately by what the society allows them to do and what is expected from them. Esther comes of age in an era where “women were encouraged to be sexually passive, dominated by men, and nurturing mothers” (Dunkle 69), and were “explicitly told that happiness could only be achieved through the enactment of a biological imperative” (Smith 34). Esther is confronted with these matters regarding sexuality thought the article called "In Defense of Chastity" (Plath 76). The article discourages young women from losing their virginity to any other than their husband and compelling them to maintain their chastity, which is necessary to maintain

in order to be respected and desired. Finally, the premarital sex could likely end in unwanted pregnancy, and so one would "really be in a pickle" (77). Nevertheless, Esther is warned that there may be temptations along the way:

> Of course they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men and they would end up by making her life miserable. (77)

Sexual initiation is thus conditioned by societally fetishized virginity and preoccupation with innocence. Esther's dissociation from her body echoes the inability of appropriating the forbidden knowledge of the body as sexual. The sexualized body is then, however, restricted either to be dominated by men or as a means for reproduction. Consequently, these two aspects closely link female sexuality to marriage and motherhood. Such control and rules of female sexuality become a means of commodification and a marker of her worth. Paradoxically, it is women who are active participants, judges, and even mediators of other women's sexuality as well as its understanding. Esther's mother explains that "this was something a girl didn't know about till it was too late, so she had to take the advice of people who were already experts, like a married woman" (76-77). Although her mother's advice and set of beliefs are all well-meant, it is the hereditary belief system that molds Esther's understanding of sexuality and by extension marriage.

Many of the similar maxims regarding marriage are also put forth by others around her, notably Buddy Willard. Esther remembers his statements such as: "What a man is an arrow into the future and what a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from" (67). These maxims are essentially taken over from his mother, "illustrating that, in the end, the stereotypes of society must be passed on by women as well as by men" (Bridgford 83). Esther, however, wants to "shoot off in all directions [her]self" (Plath 79), and, as a defense, seems to replace one polarizing role with another. This is caused by the fact that she sees marriage and its obligations through the already established notion of mutual exclusivity. To be bound by marriage and subsequently by a child (body) is a threat to her intellectual and artistic life (mind) and it is thus a threat to her identity. Buddy Willard makes this explicitly clear when he, a matter-of-factly, proposes

to her: “How would you like to be Mrs. Buddy Willard?” (88), designating her with his name and, consequently, stripping off her personality. Constantine, the simultaneous interpreter, would be a viable partner for Esther, but the minute she considers marrying him, her mind is flooded with the obligations of being a wife, including the endless circle of cooking, washing up and cleaning and finally “[falling] into bed, utterly exhausted…just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night” (80). Because Esther has seen or knows of many instances of such domestic obedience from practice, she considers her fears of marriage as justified.

Throughout her life, Esther is constantly confronted with the importance of sexual purity:

> When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue. Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another. (77)

Sexual awakening in terms of the loss of virginity is not only a transforming force that manifests on the inside, but in case of women, it profoundly affects how she is perceived from the outside. In other words, because the public domain substantially determines female sexuality, it generates a divide in Esther as something intricately private is influenced and judged by the public. This notion of honoring the virginal and punishing the sexual corresponds with a movie Esther and Betsy go to see, the football romance in Technicolor. It again depicts these social conventions, pitting against each other these two archetypes of femininity, as it stars “a nice blond girl . . . and a sexy black-haired girl” (38), blatantly echoing the preconceived notions of the time. Although Esther realizes it is an “awful movie” and suspects its result, it nevertheless still molds her subconscious attitudes towards this dualistic approach to a female identity. This again refers back to the already established notion of the ‘proper’ femininity and the stereotypical division of female identity to the “bad girl” and the “good girl” persona, as

exemplified by Doreen and Betsy. Such institutionalized division not only halts her sexual initiation but also makes her partake in the stereotype.

Moreover, Esther can predict the movie's ending: "Finally I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to wind up with nobody because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along . . ." (39). A similar discrepancy between male and female sexuality of double standard gets further manifested by the "In Defense of chastity" article: "The best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren't pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex" (77). To be a wife, and subsequently, a mother essentially means to be deprived of her own sexuality. This is supported by the statement of Esther's potential lover, declaring that "if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business" (75), believing he is doing his future wife a favor.

Esther too has expectations of others, and values the idea purity herself: "It might be nice to be pure and then to marry a pure man, but what if he suddenly confessed he wasn't pure after we were married . . ." (77). Accordingly, Buddy plays a dominant role figure regarding Esther's understanding of sexuality. The concept of innocence implodes on Esther the moment she learns that Buddy, though posing as inexperienced, is not, in fact, a virgin. What it comes down to is that Esther does not emphasize the loss of his virginity, rather she utterly detests everything about the double standard: "Actually, it wasn't the idea of Buddy sleeping with somebody that bothered me . . . What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress" (67). It is possible for Buddy to be sexually active outside of marriage, whereas it is expected of Esther to remain virginal. The dichotomy lies in the fact that the double standard allows Buddy to pose as pure and be sexual while women can either be good or bad, but nothing in between. Kim Bridgford proposes that "Esther's difficulty is that she would like to have the freedom to have the experiences of someone like Doreen while still being perceived as a Betsy" (86), which is essentially the same dichotomy she sees in Buddy Willard.

The preoccupation with innocence and its violation then culminates in the dichotomy of personal desires and public judgment: "Ever since I'd learned about the

corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighted like a millstone around my neck" (Plath 218). As we have already established, female virginity is indeed a decisive milestone, and there is no turning back because it alters the way she is going to be perceived as it affects her reputation and value. It is essentially not something that would enrich her life, but rather compromise it. By default, her sexuality is under control that comes both from the outside as well from the inside through self-policing.

Esther's alternate identity of Elly Higgenbottom from Chicago can be understood as a middle ground between the two extremes. This middle position is however by no means a manifestation of evenness but rather of a state of stasis. Though Elly, for the most part, remains to be present and curious, she is mainly passive, learning by watching, and she explicitly reminds herself of this role: "I am an observer" (100). Although Elly is associated with sexually charged events, it still provides a way to dissociate herself from the possible "bad girl" behavior. It is worth mentioning, that when she and Doreen get picked up by Lenny, a womanizing DJ, on the way to the city, it is actually Esther, who follows through with his proposals. Though it is clear, that Doreen and Lenny are about to be even more intimate later that night, Esther agrees to go with them to his apartment as Doreen's chaperon, who is afraid she "wouldn't have a chance if he tried anything funny" (14). We can, however, argue, that the main reason is to feed her curiosity of having a "terribly hard time trying to imagine people in bed together" (6), without negative repercussions. She herself cannot be active so she can at least learn by means of looking at the forbidden: "I thought I'd string along with Doreen. I wanted to see as much as I could (12). Throughout this episode, she assumes a position of the audience, "*cross-legged* on one of the beds and try[ing] to look *devout* and *impassive* like some businessmen I once *saw watching* an Algerian belly dancer" (15, emphasis mine), which again references Esther's misleading strategy of imitating others in unfamiliar and thus uncomfortable situations. She becomes increasingly ill-at-ease as the affair begins to escalate: "There is something demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other" (15).

Though the pressure of maintaining her purity weighs on her as she wants to free herself from the pressure, we can notice Esther's ingrained obsession with innocence and transfixion with the idea of purity. To cleanse herself, she indulges in long baths:

"All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure", equating it to what "religious people feel about holy water" and afterward feeling "pure and sweet as a new baby" (19).

Sexuality is, therefore depicted as an external force not only paralyzing the mind but directly affecting the female body. She feels dominated in the relationship: "When I was with [Buddy] I had to work to keep my head above the water" (53). This is further reinforced when the threats of mutual exclusivity come at her from all directions, and she inevitably starts to believe "that when you were married and had children, it was like being brainwashed", left feeling "numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (81).

The power struggle then culminates into violence during the Marco episode, which is the final straw that essentially pushes Esther over the edge, and marks the renunciation of her New York selves. Marco's power directly affects her, grabbing her arm so tightly that "a thumbprint purpled into view . . . and four, faint matching prints" (101), He undermines her sense of identity, ordering her cocktails she feels obliged to drink and pressures her to dance the tango with him: "I had to choose between following him onto the floor or having my arm torn off" (102). He further physically denies her any form of agency as he "maneuvere[s] her" around, "jerks [her] up" (102) and orders her: "pretend you are drowning" (103). This frantic dance resembles Doreen's combative dance with Lenny, and him "trashing her legs", and her "screeching", "trying to bite", while her breasts are exposed (16). Finally, the Marco episode ends with physical violence bordering on an attempted rape. Once again, the violation of purity is manifested through Esther's dress getting tainted with the mud he throws her into (104). When she protests, he exclaims: "Your dress is black and the dirt is black as well" (104), and as he "weight[s her] to the earth" and calling her slut (105). In other words, because he already sees her as tainted. We may also add that dress actually belongs to Doreen, which links Esther with the sexualized femininity, it as if entitles him to follow through in further violation.

Esther's dismay by homosexuality is quite interesting. She is appalled by Joan's hinted lesbianism, partly because it is difficult for her to visualize it: "Whenever I

thought about men and men, and women and women, I could never really imagine what they would be actually doing" (210), and partly because she does not understand the appeal: "'What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?" (210). Although it might be strictly a matter of sexual preference, this aversion is also socially conditioned as "[i]ts rules of courtship and sex have not been commodified" and women are thus supposed to rival for man's attention (Leonard 321). In other words, a woman who is unable to or refrains from attracting a man is failing her female role. Esther, who "otherwise is struggling against the gender constraints of her culture, is exhibiting her own societal prejudice" (Bridgford 87). Dr. Nolan responds to Esther's inquiries with a single word: "tenderness" (Plath 210). Interestingly, this shocks Esther because as we have pointed out, all of her sexual encounters with men are based on some level of dominance, which often manifests itself through violence. The tenderness is also even further contrasted with the massive hemorrhage upon Esther's loss of virginity: While fearing that "[p]erhaps Irwin had injured [her] in some awful way" (221), she still feels to be "part of the tradition", recalling women in the Victorian novels, dying "palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth" (221). What Garry M. Leonard poignantly proposes is, that while the homosexual experience of the two women embracing makes her "want to puke" (Plath 209), the overtone of violence in the heterosexual experience is considered as a standard, normalized (Leonard 321).

Esther is ridden with the idea, that sexual intercourse resulting in the loss of her virginity will in some significant way manifest itself outwardly, altering her appearance: "I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line" (Plath 77). Interestingly, from the male perspective, the first sexual experience is also seen as an act of initiation, rather than an act of desire. For example, Eric also admits that his first sexual experience was an act out of peer pressure with a prostitute, "boring as going to the toilet" (79), Buddy's approach seems also very clinical and impersonal, undressing in front of Esther, asking: "Have you ever seen a man?" (64), and also prompting her: "Now let me see you" (65). When Esther opts for the 'get it over with' approach, in order to free herself from its burden, her approach is also cold, calculated, and though giving her a sense of agency, it feels depersonalized. At the same

time, however, sexual initiation also poses a significant threat to personal liberties through a scare of pregnancy.

Finally, pregnancy and childbirth then conclude the direct effect sexuality has on the body. Pregnancy not only makes her even more afraid of being sexually active, it furthermore reinforces her doubts about marriage and fears of being taken as a hostage: “I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line” (212). It is thus no coincidence that the images of pregnant women and babies are planted throughout the whole novel, such as the variety of baby faces staring at her while she “leaf[s] nervously through the issue of Baby Talk” (212), the images of twins in her thesis on Finnegans Wake, the time she volunteers at the maternity ward. Above all, one image in particular endlessly haunts her; the dead baby in the jar, depicting a physical manifestation of the metaphorical bell jar.

Witnessing childbirth is extremely traumatic for Esther and undeniably heightens her fear of pregnancy. She is perplexed by its violent nature and even likens it to a torture scene, filled with “unhuman whooing noise”, perceiving the pregnant body as “an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs” (61). Esther is also appalled by the fact that the woman giving birth “would go straight home and start another baby because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been” (62). This leads us to an interesting point here. Rather than arguing this to be perceived as an oppression of women, a claim that Esther proposes herself, it is essentially an experience where body and mind are not connected, which is caused by the technique of tricking/modifying the body to relieve/fool the mind or vice versa. In addition, contraception works similarly; it modifies the body to relieve the mind. This, however, ultimately helps Esther connect her mind and body.

Motivated by the conversation with Dr. Nolan, we see Esther visiting her physician to be fit for what appears to be a diaphragm. This decision is crucial for Esther’s life, and it is a steppingstone for both of her sexual and personal freedom. At the same, she is still stirred with the sense of guilt and shame as she feels the eyes of the women in the waiting room, “pregnant or with babies”, on her “flat, virgin stomach” (211). Rather than to risk her mother “opening the bill and seeing what it was for” she pays in cash with the money from Philomena Guinea’s, her “get-well present” to Esther

(212). The term “get-well present” holds a level of symbolic merit (212) as Esther herself declares: “[She] was buying me freedom” (212). By modifying her body with the contraception, she relieves her mind, for now, she is able to let go of her fears of being further bounding by the possible motherhood. It seems that the mind and body, along with the discrepancies of her femininity, are this time united, as Esther expresses her state: “I was my own woman” (213).

No longer afraid of pregnancy, Esther finally decides to lose her virginity, once and for all with Irwin, a mathematics professor, whom she casually knows from university, mediating an initiation rite. The fact that she instigates her sexual initiation is of major importance. Not only she is able to transgress the social and generational taboos, but she is also reclaiming agency, rather than staying in a passive position. This, therefore, breaks her cycle of paralysis and inability to move forward. At the same time, as it has been already proposed, although she carefully chooses Irwin “so [she] can respect him” (218), the whole process is emotionally detached, calculated and rational, resembling a bit the discussed cold approach of the men in Esther’s life. “I wanted somebody I didn’t know and wouldn’t go on knowing - a kind of impersonal, priestlike official, as in the tales of tribal rites” (218).

This transition does not come easy as Esther’s sexual initiation results in an extensive hemorrhage, an exaggerated version of natural bleeding. Her idea of “tribal rites” (218) is manifested in symbolic bloodletting, soaking the towel wet and “black with blood” (219). With bleeding symbolizing mythical evidence of chastity; its massive exaggeration almost seems like a mockery. The only person at her assistance at that time is Joan, who tries to summon the help of any possible doctor. All men fail Esther, Irwin drops her off unconcerned by her pain, and the doctors they reach out to dismiss their calls for help, occupied by being at country clubs, at the seaside, in churches, on yachts, with their mistresses and wives (222). We can moreover argue, that the profound blood loss and the overall graphic nature link this back to the sexual violence and the violence Esther inflicts upon herself through her suicide attempts, which manifests herein at their utmost fashion, recalling the recurring theme of death.

It is safe to say that this ordeal has puzzled many critics of Plath and though it is debated, its significance is usually only hinted at. Similarly, as the many opposing

principles that construct the heart of *The Bell Jar*, Esther's "one in a million" (223) reaction to her defloration, alongside with her decision to lose her virginity, sparks opposing interpretation, that, one might add, are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Either way, sexual initiation is an important moment in Esther's journey, be it understood as an act of cleansing or as a punishment for her rebellion against societal norms. Some believe that due to the cultural context "losing her virginity can hardly be interpreted as a subversive act" (Séllei 145), because it "lack[s] [female] sexuality, eroticism, and desire" (145), and doubts that it brings Esther the claimed "possibility of sexual experience, and freedom" (Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* 44). Whether is Esther's claim: "I was perfectly free" (Plath 232), legitimate or not, it still gives her a sense of autonomy, and means for reconciling the divide between her body and mind. As Ted Hughes proposes, it is a performance of initiation:

> Her decisive act (the 'positive replay of her 'negative' suicide) takes the form of a sanguinary defloration, carefully stage-managed by the heroine, which liberates her authentic self into independence. (qtd in Kendal 114)

2.3 Death

Death is *The Bell Jar's* leitmotif interwoven through the entire novel from start to finish, and it manifests itself quite dominantly in Esther's suicidal crisis and as the result of her spiralling depression. It infests her entire narrative and language, as "even in metaphor, death is never far behind" (Straubb 32). Following a pattern of descent into disintegration, Esther must first come undone in order to come back, Means of transformation where symbolic death spawns "life-enhancing return" (Campbell 33) through rebirth.

Esther's act of casting her entire wardrobe off her roof, likening the experience to "scattering a loved one's ashes" (Plath 107). As we have already mentioned, this event is often understood as Esther's symbolic death, an act of renouncing her New York identities, and foreshadowing of her scattered self. Also, its framing lets us believe that she is going to jump down herself:

> I crept to the edge of the parapet. The parapet reached almost to my shoulders, so I dragged a folding chair from the stack against

> the wall, opened it, and climbed onto the precarious seat. A stiff breeze lifted the hair from my head. At my feet, the city doused its lights in sleep, its buildings blackened, as if for a funeral. It was my last night. (106-107)

This usage of death related metaphors, images, and similes is quite prominent throughout the entire novel. Such a strategy makes the narrative darker in tone, and it also in a great way adds to the stifling feeling of anxiety, depression, and paralysis. For illustrations, here are just some of the instances referencing death. Esther says that: "My drink was wet and depressing . . . it tasted more and more like dead water" (Plath 15), "A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything, like death" (109), a peanut "tasted dead" (131), the torn sheet of music is "splayed . . . like a dead bird" (139), face is "dead white" (158), the asylum gets "quiet as death" (223), she "hung on to Doctor Nolan's arm like death" (204). She feels "frozen stiff" (201), chill grippes her "with a mortal ache" (147), and her mind "slipped from the noose of the thought and swung" in empty air (207).

Death is visibly present throughout the entire novel and symbolically emerges within its first sentence:

> It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, . . . 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. (1)

It is an ominous foreshadowing of the evens to come when she is soon about to find out, how does it feel to have unanesthetized electroshock therapy. Esther name is most likely drawn from the full name of Esther Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg and as Ashe suggests: "the similarity of the names draws a direct parallel between Esther and a woman many Americans believed had suffered a terrible injustice" (216). Another thing that connects her ordeal with the Rosenbergs, as Smith rightfully points out, is the fact she perceives this treatment as a punishment (36): "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done" (Plath 138), and subsequently, tries to prepare for another one, feeling like a "person coolly resigned to execution" (203).

Those feelings are similar to those after her return home when Esther's depression starts to take a dark turn. Already overwhelmed and insecure by her inadequacies, the news that she did not make the cut for a writers' summer program worsens her self-loathing to the point of complete capitulation, as we hear her inner saboteur saying: "You better count me out" (114). Her paralysis is then heightened by the fact that she essentially equates the suburbia with failure. Having never spent the summer at home, when Esther is approaching the familiar part of her neighborhood, she feels it is "very important not to be recognized" (110). Returning home is for Esther like being escorted in "prison van" to a place that is like a "escape-proof cage" (110), under a constant surveillance, surrounded by the vignettes of domestic life including Dodo Conway, "a woman with a grotesque, protruding stomach" (111), and the mother of six (114). The more she tries to turn her attention towards something, the less eligible she believes to be. We see her slowly giving up on everything: "I had nothing to look forward to" (113).

In words of Allison Wilkins which can be applied to this situation: "If the ability to choose is a life-sustaining activity, then the inability to choose results in the decaying of life" (39). Along these lines, her paralysis makes her lose her interests to succeed and results in nihilism: "everything people did seemed so silly, because they only died in the end" (Plath 124). She is disinterested in self-maintenance, passes on bathing, washing her hair or changing the clothes, still hanging on Betty's green skirt and white blouse, which becomes almost her uniform.

As Esther's depression deepens and the grip over her now shattering identity lessens, the dichotomy between the body and mind goes further off the deep end. After the rapid decline of her mental health, Esther's depression makes her lose her core abilities. She cannot sleep, claiming she has not slept for twenty-one nights. She cannot read or write: "my hand made big, jerky letters like those of a child" (125). This is especially unnerving for Esther because as a literature student, reading and writing are the direct expressions of her identity, and it also intensifies the isolation.

Esther confesses that the only thing she can concentrate her mind on are the stories about mad people, presumably because she relates to them in one way or another. Due to lack of treatment from Dr. Gordon, she reads "the abnormal psychology

textbooks" (153), in an effort to understand and help herself. Consequently, Esther indulges herself in reading 'the scandal sheets', "full of the local murders and suicides and beatings and robbings" (131). Mr. George Pollucii, a man from the article, "SUICIDE SAVED FROM 7-STORY LEDGE!", In order to learn about the man's suicidal crisis, Esther studies his face as if "he had something important to tell [her]" , believing that there might be something "written on his face" (131). This again echoes Esther's modus operandi of imitating others to cope with the alienation and the search for viable identity. The more depressed she becomes, the more she feels like she has virtually nothing in common with people around her as she cannot restrict herself to an extreme version of femininity. The only people she can almost fully identify with are the dead ones, the utterly isolated. To comprehend her own image, she takes a photo of herself and compares it with the photograph under the title "STARLET SUCCUMBS AFTER 68-HOUR COMA" (140). She brings this snapshot of her face "next to the smudgy photograph of the dead girl" (140-141), analyzes the two and concludes: "It matched" (141). The mouth and nose are the same, while the eyes are different: "The eyes in the snapshot were open, and those in the newspaper photograph were closed", believing that if they were to be "thumbed wide" they would "look at her with the same dead, black, vacant expression as the eyes in the snapshot" (141). At this point, we can see that she is completely dissociated from her image, referencing her photo with no possessive pronouns.

Alternately, death would provide her ultimate release from identity and its burdens. Thus, Esther becomes preoccupied with thoughts of death and suicide: "The thought I might kill myself formed in my mind as coolly as a knife or a flower" (Plath 92). Esther's body sabotages her during the times she is trying to lay it to rest. This again shows the referenced dichotomy between her body and mind. For example, as she is about the cut her wrists, she bewails:

> The skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it...It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin . . .but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, a whole lot harder to get at. (142)

Although she thoroughly plans her suicide attempts, she is somehow always failing. Because she is not good at tying knots and the ceilings available to her are not fit for

hanging, she instead tries to strangle herself, and naturally, her “hands go limp at the crucial second” (153). Another attempt is just as unsuccessful; as she tries to drown herself, fanning herself down, “the water [spats her] up into the sun . . .each time popp[ing] up like a cork” (154). During all of these instances, she is fully determined and often in an erudite manner explains, what spoiled her attempt. Esther believes that her body “had all sorts of little tricks” that would “save it, time and again, whereas if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash” (153). It is quite interesting that Esther sees her suicide attempts as the power struggle of her will over her body, giving it a separate, sabotaging, volition. For example, Esther makes a point of not swimming “as far as the rock, because my body would take that excuse to climb out and lie in the sun, gathering strength to swim back” (154), and she would 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” (153). Rosi Smith explains that Esther

> apprehends death as a simple, unpolluted truth, incorruptible by fantasy and expectation. It offers her a realm where she can act rather than observe and where results are clear-cut; there can be no doubt as to her success or failure, no external judgment of her worth. (52)

Furthermore, she becomes “the center of activity and those who have other expectations of her are distanced and marginalized” (Smith 52). In other words, planning and conducting these attempts gives Esther a sense of agency she has been lacking. What more, to Esther’s dismay, it makes her and her numb body to feel again, and in these moments of defiance unites them as a whole: “I could feel a rushing in my ears and a flush of blood in my face” (Plath 152) and the pressure “on my eardrums and my heart” (154).

Esther’s final suicide attempts display an important symbolic framing. Esther gives herself an ultimatum of finally killing herself when she runs out of money. The last thing she buys is a black raincoat in which she visits her father’s grave for the first time since his death when she was nine years old, which might serve as a catalyst. Next day, she decides to follow through with her plan. Dressed in the raincoat, which feels “like [her] own sweet shadow” (163), she crawls into the “secret, earth-bottomed crevice” (162) under the house, where she tries to overdose on her mother’s pills.

Underneath there, she describes how the “earth seemed friendly” (162), “the dark felt thick as velvet” (163), and the “cobwebs touched [her] face with the softness of moths” (163). In such an extremely enclosed and stifling environment, she feels pleasant and serene, contempt with herself.

This scenario can be directly contrasted with Esther’s compulsion of bathing, which as it has been explored earlier in terms of sexuality, performs an act of cleansing. Similarly, when she visits her father’s grave, Esther makes this association, observing: “a grave was rimmed with marble, like an oblong bathtub full of dirt” (159-160). She emerges into the water in a similar manner: “you lower yourself, inch by inch, till the water's up to your neck” (18). She is overpowered by the feeling of safe encasement of the bathtub, which is at the same time visually stifling, as she recalls it being “coffin-shaped” (18). It gives off a feeling of paralysis, for her position limits her scope of view to only what she sees above herself, and she remembers “the ceiling over every bathtub [she]’ve stretched out in” (18), as if she is laying in the open casket. Encapsulated by soothing water, she “[feels her]self growing pure again” (19), and everyone and everything around her is dissolving, such isolations then serves as a means of escaping and separating herself from the even more oppressive situation. When she steps out, wraps herself “in one of the big, soft white hotel bath towels,” feeling “pure and sweet as a new baby” (19).

At this point, we can see the dichotomy related to the notion of isolation as there seem to be two contrasting, yet complementary variants. There is the isolation which is constricting, unpleasant and caused by the pressing environment governed by social conventions, as a whole manifested by the ‘bell jar’ phenomenon, thus experienced psychologically. Then, as a direct response, there is the deliberate isolation, soothing and sought out, expressed physically. For example, the reason why Esther feels safe in the room is that as she later realizes “there were no windows” (122). Her psychological bell jar is similar to the physically jarred baby. Both are isolated, deprived of life: “To the person in *The Bell Jar*, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream” (227).

This leads us to the fact that these two contrasting scenes have one common denominator, which is the imagery of pregnancy and birth. The image of Esther in hot

water recalls a baby, content in the uterus, flowing in a amniotic fluid, while the image of Esther crawling through the narrow passages under her family house in hopes of dying, seems like a desire to regain and maintain the innocence of a newborn child, secured in a womb.

Through the systematic patterning of dichotomies, we can see the contrasting of life a death marks their congruency, asserting that this struggle “translates into fantasies of transformation, of escape from constriction and engulfment, and of flight, where casting off outgrown selves and overused masks lead to naked renewal” (Bronfen 64). Consequently, Esther’s figural death marks the symbolic rebirth. For better illustration, the event that comes immediately after her suicide attempt is quoted in full length:

> I felt the darkness, but nothing else. . . Someone was moaning. Then a great, hard weight smashed against my cheek like a stone wall and the moaning stopped. . . . A cool wind rushed by. I was being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel into the earth. Then the wind stopped. There was a rumbling, as of many voices, protesting and disagreeing in the distance. Then the voices stopped. A chisel cracked down on my eye, and a slit of light opened, like a mouth or a wound, till the darkness clamped shut on it again. I tried to roll away from the direction of the light, but hands wrapped round my limbs like mummy bands, and I couldn't move…. Then the chisel struck again, and the light leapt into my head, and through the thick, warm, furry dark, a voice cried, "Mother!" Air breathed and played over my face. (Plath 164-165)

This scene of Esther’s rescue can be read as a metaphorical birth, which in description resembles a course of actual labor, narrated from a perspective of a baby who is being delivered. Moreover, the narrated “I” is again divided in itself, as she cannot recognize the sounds she makes as hers. It is also after the admission into the hospital where we witness the last and utmost instance of Esther’s dissociation from the reflection in the mirror:

> It wasn't a mirror at all, but a picture. You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side

> of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow . . .I smiled. The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin. (168)

Posing as a ‘newborn baby’, she only very slowly begins to learn that the image is her own, recalling the Lacanian mirror stage. Esther subsequent shattering the mirror is both the reflection of the refusal of her image, but it can also be seen as an act through which she can “[regain] the power to claim rebirth and self-confirmation” (Ghasemi 62). In the asylum, Esther is again propelled to strive for more. In order to endure her stay there, she cannot be stagnant anymore because the hierarchy of the private hospital is based on moving up or down the ladder, based on the mental state and stage of recovery. To avoid further shock treatments, she must allow herself to be ambitious again. Esther hopes that the treatment “would help [her], step by step, to be [her]self again” similarly as the babies must go through “doing all the little tricky things it takes to grow up, step by step, into an anxious and unsettling world” (Plath 212).

In effect, as McGrath Smith remarks, all the mirrors “reflecting Esther’s image back, distorted, disappear entirely” (100), after Joan’s appearance in the asylum. She is considered to be Esther’s double. They have some things in common and are completely different in others. Both are ambitious, both have a romantic history with Buddy Willard, both end up in the same psychiatric asylum. Esther confesses: “In spite of the creepy feeling . . . Joan fascinated me . . . 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” (209-210). Joan then serves a purpose of the “sacrificial double” (Kendall 14), whose death plays a significant part in Esther’s recovery of her identity. Though Esther believes that “Joan was the beaming double of [her] old best self, specially designed to follow and torment [her]” (Plath 197), Joan significance lies in the fact that though Esther sees many similarities in her, she is also repelled by them, which subsequently makes her want to differ, making Joan her insidious mirror reflection.

Significantly, upon her arrival, Joan shows Esther “fistful of clippings” she is carrying around with her (191). They are the same kind of articles Esther has been so obsessed with. Only this time, their headlines such as: “SCHOLARSHIP GIRL

MISSING. MOTHER WORRIED", "SLEEPING PILLS FEARED MISSING WITH GIRL" and "GIRL FOUND ALIVE!", are obviously speaking about Esther herself (191). She is reduced to the same newspapers headlines. When Joan explains that Esther has inspired her to do to the same, we see the other (Joan), imitating herself (Esther). This reflection, we can argue, discourages Esther. It shows her that imitation is objectionable, and essentially drives her to distinguish herself by her own identity.

Consequently, more significant than the treatment itself are the two major events that have a substantial impact on Esther's recovery. These are her infamous loss of virginity, and Joan's suicide. The traumatic event of Esther's massive hemorrhage helps her realize the severity of dying. The damage is so significant that it exceeds everything she has attempted to this point, displayed with images of "black and dripping" towel (219), "warm seepage" (220) "feeling the blood drain from my face like in one spectacular flush" (220), "bloodstained feet" (221), "blood-wet clothes" (221). Interestingly, Ted Hughes called it "the 'positive' replay of her 'negative' suicide" (qtd in Kendal 114). We can even compare also side to side image of Esther's blood dripping to her shoes. First is the almost romanticized image of Esther trying to cut herself: "The blood gathered darkly, like fruit, and rolled down my ankle into the cup of my black patent leather shoe" (Plath 142). This is contrasted with the second, more acute and deglamorized image of Esther's involuntary bloodshed: "I wondered when Joan would notice the blood trickling down my legs and oozing, stickily, into each black patent leather shoe" (220).

In contrast to Esther's attempts to slow her heartbeat and die, in this case, she is "trying to slow the beating of my heart, as every beat pushed forth another gush of blood" (221), to stay alive. She is genuinely afraid she is "really dying" (221). Joan suicide, I believe, is the final repellent. Esther attending Joan's funeral serves her as a symbolic burial of her shadow self.

"I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.
I am, I am, I am" (233).

What has been earlier the mocking sound of her body, “boom[ing] like a dull motor” (152) while she tried to stifle it, is now “the repetitive beat of her heart [that] asserts both identity [I] and existence [am]” (Budick 218). Esther is reclaiming her body and mind, in “a ritual for being born twice -- patched, retreaded and approved for the road” (Plath 233). As we have already explored, though it seems like Esther’s journey ends on a positive note, it still poses many questions. Although *The Bell Jar* now “hang[s] suspended” (206), how can we know “that someday — at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere - the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?” (230).

And then there is the ambiguous ending, where we, alongside Esther, “paus[e], for a brief breath, on the threshold”, both literal and proverbial (234). She steps in, only we are, however, left behind. Though we know from the beginning that she has been able to regain control over her life, we do not know to what extent she has been reassembled in order to fit the societal norm. We can, however, hope, that she has been able to transcend the threats of the mutual exclusivity. Esther’s final outfit at least indicates so:

> My stocking seams were straight, my black shoes cracked, but polished, and my red wool suit flamboyant as my plans. Something old, something new . . . . (233)

3. *The Virgin Suicides* - Jeffrey Eugenides

Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and its successor *Middlesex* (2002) are both in their essence coming-of-age narratives. Both are dealing with male and female experience, though under fairly different circumstances, the later more cathartic in its transition than the former. That is, in *Middlesex*, after the succession of trails, the symbolic death of its protagonist Calliope is a representation of the rebirth of Cal; the metamorphosis is achieved. *The Virgins Suicides* challenges the notion of reaching successful maturation by the novel's very premise; the Lisbon sisters die, and so their development is forever halted. In order to find an explanation and deal with the trauma concerned with the lives and deaths of the Lisbon sisters, the text is a retrospective narrative of the boys and interpretation of their memories as they try to understand their lives and the Lisbon's suicides. What Eugenides does so well is to capture the mystery of the secluded sisters, as seen through the eyes of the neighboring boys. It's not necessarily the Lisbon girls' story, but rather the boys' story, and how the suicides affected them all the way into adulthood.

There are, again, many instances of binary structuring. The narrative positions the male and female perspectives as contrasting and defined. At the same, we see how the boundaries between them grow thin and become interdependent, reflecting each other, which is beautifully illustrated by their unsuccessful attempt at spying on the Lisbon sisters by looking at their windows: "We couldn't see in any better, and in fact the glass pane began to reflect our own gaping faces" (Eugenides 55). The events fracture the narrators and the whole community and create the looming binary of before and after. The decline is not only present in the journeys of both the girls and boys but also in the entire neighborhood. Eugenides creates a mythology around the declining neighborhood, a mesmerizing depiction of growing up in suburbia and isolation of adolescence, as he brilliantly captures the mystery of the Lisbon family, deteriorating house amidst the uncut lawn, and the stumps of the cut-down elm trees.

The conflict between the individual and society is further intensified by the setting, wherein we observe adolescents trying to establish their identities clashing with the uniformity of suburban community with the typical clean cut lawns and picket

fences. Moreover, this tension is made even more complex, because the individuals are presented and perceived themselves as a part of the homogenized group.

The temporal distance is, in this case, wider, for the narrator of *The Virgin Suicides* is now a full-grown adult who recounts and retells events that happened approximately twenty years earlier. “The novel thus becomes a monument to its narrator’s attempts to come to terms with his memory of adolescence” (Millard 74). The narrator gives away the course of events as we are confronted with the final suicide of the last Lisbon daughter:

> On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide-it was Mary this time, and sleeping pills, like Therese, the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing exactly where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement from which it was possible to tie a rope. (Eugenides 1)

The entire opening paragraph foreshadows the story’s downward spiral, progressing through decline, and it also sets the overall tone of the novel, being a curious mixture of the “the ominous and the humorous” (Kelly 80). The style of the narration dabbles in morbidity and cynicism, and the black humor fuses with detailed lyricism, as, for example, Cecilia impaled on the spike of the fence “seemed balanced on the pole like a gymnast” (Eugenides 28).

Eugenides purposefully and explicitly gives away the events to come, so that we know, the Lisbon girls’ deaths are inevitable. The need for reconstruction is supported by the novel’s structure itself. This is made even clearer by the second paragraph, where the narrator rewinds the story and stars from the first, in this case unsuccessful, suicide attempt of the youngest Lisbon daughter Cecilia that occurred thirteen months prior. As it turns out, this seems to be the starting point of the unfortunate events; or as the narrator puts it, it is: “when the trouble began” (Eugenides 1). What enfolds is thus the narrator’s recollection of those dramatic events, their subsequent exploration, fueled by the need to recover and decipher the circumstances and reasoning which led to them. The goal of finding the reasoning behind the suicides can never be reached. The ending is thus inherently inconclusive. By such narrative framing, Eugenides is able to illustrate the futile and quite impossible task of uncovering any meaning of the girls’ suicides and

simultaneously the frustrating inability of the grieving boys to "find the pieces to put them back together" (243). This is also supported by Millard, who explains that for the contemporary American coming-of-age novel is often essential the aetiological "search for origins" (74). Their journey of recounting the events thus serves also as the "historical explanation" (73). As he concludes, however, "almost every search ends in the full knowledge of the inadequacy of searches, every methodology results principally in an understanding of the limits of methodologies" (74). This is undeniably the case of *The Virgin Suicides* whose narrator not only reconstruct his memories, but he even assembles a vast array of physical evidence:

> We've tried to arrange the photographs chronologically, through the passage of so many years has made it difficult. A few are fuzzy but revealing nonetheless. Exhibit #1 shows the Lisbon house shortly before Cecelia's suicide attempt. (Eugenides 2-3)

They compile a vast and varied array of official reports, both legal and clinical, testimonies, interviews they conducted with other members of the community. Nevertheless, these exhibits and pieces of evidence do not turn out to be particularly revealing. What they do reveal, however, is the intensity of the male fascination, a major element of the novel that is going to be further explored later. Although the men possess the exhibits, these are essentially mementos, that in the long run, possess the men instead. Ultimately, this proclaimed evidence seems rather to fetishize the events rather than to be a means of finding some reasoning behind them. Millard poignantly argues that, "the novel is principally a depiction of a particular kind of adolescent male desire, one in which its unrivaled intensity is as morbid and pathological as the supposed causes of the deaths themselves" (80).

Moreover, there is a mixture of both delusion and disillusionment in their collaborative effort. Not only is their confession a means for ordering the event and making sense of them, but it also serves them as a secure construct, corroborative myth: "Actually, none of this might have been spoken. We've pieced it together through partial accounts, and can attest only to the general substance" (176). On this note, Hikaru Fujii reasons:

> Their narrative act is a practice of self, formed in the relationship with the enigmatic girls as their outside. The narrators, while pretending to be investigators of the case, need the mystery to remain unsolved, in order to maintain the past that grounds their current subjectivity. The outside, in fact, is always already appropriated as an integral part of their identity. . . . (Fujii 123)

On that note, it seems that *The Virgin Suicides* depicts more hopeless journey of the coming-of-age. Paradoxically, even though the Lisbon girls die and can hardly ever return as reborn and come-of-age, the ambiguity that plays off the circularity of death is that the Lisbon sisters become alive through narrators' obsession, making them more alive than the boys. In terms of the narrators, the ambiguity lies in the dichotomy of their final statement in the novel's epilogue. While they grow to understand that their hunt for answers has been foolish and believe that the girls made them "made us participate in their own madness", they at the same time cannot help themselves: "but [it mattered] only that we had loved them, and that they hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us" (243).

Ironically, the narrators in fact do undergo a type of a return by the end. There we see the now adult men sitting inside their old tree house, "with our thinning hair and soft bellies, calling [the girls] out of [the] rooms" (243). Eugenides creates a mythology of innocence, growing up and dangers of nostalgia. Though "the boys have become almost exactly what they deem the girls to be: self-concerned and blind" (Madsen 22), we can only hope that their therapeutic effort will help them come to terms with the fact that the crimes they have been investigating are their own lives. Once again the ambiguity can be a seen as a prefiguring of reaching a balance, just as the Lisbon girls' grandmother has related to them: "You never get over it . . . But you get to where it doesn't bother you so much" (139).

3.1 Identity

The concept of identity is quite complex throughout *The Virgin Suicides*, for both male and female counterparts are heavily interdependent, it is also a subject of temporal distance and the contrast of individuality with unified homogeneity. What is thus

significant is the plural pronoun 'we' frequently used by the narrator to such extent that we must recognize the narrative perspective to be the first-person plural. Although we learn several names of the boys, the narrator remains throughout the book unidentified. The story, and thus also the search for the origins, is recounted through the shared memory. We judge the events based on what was seen, heard and recollected by then a group of adolescent boys, who have over the course of 20 years become men.

These two planes of the narrative; young boys watching the girls and middle-aged men recounting the events, as Kelly concurs, further complicates the identification on the level of "conventional norms of narrative analysis" as well as the aforementioned "novel's combination of a singular sensibility and a plural grammar" (Kelly 81), that is, should we identify "narrator" or "narrators"? At the same time, should we refer to them as "boys" or "men"? This is an interesting point because the story is presented to us solely from the mental viewpoint of adulthood, recounting the feelings of their adolescent selves, which is probably the reason for the often cynical tone. Moreover, this shared voice gives us a sense of credibility and corroboration, which is, however, at the same time discredited by the obvious problematization of having the boys/men narrate, often in a biased and subjective manner, the story of the girls.

We read a deeply personal recollection of multiple consciousnesses. In striking contrast to the traditional first-person narrator of the coming-of-age narratives, there is no single "I" in the novel coming from the narrator's perspective. Moreover, the same way as are the narrators are homogenized into the collective narrative voice, the Lisbon girls – the objects of their inquiry, are also unified into one homogenized body of being. For example, they are perceived as "five replicas with the same blonde hair" (Eugenides 23). This inability to tell the girls apart becomes a running motif throughout the novel. As the story is about growing up, this underlines the significance of the theme of personal identity and its formation, which lies in its very core. One of the outcomes of this generalizations is the notion that Eugenides as if mythologizes adolescence. The plurality and the conspicuous homogeneity of both the girls and boys universalize their adolescent consciousness, creating a sort of archetype, as, for example, Francisco Collado-Rodríguez views the female principle weighing against the male principle of the narrative voice (36). In accordance, we can see that identity is explored through the

opposing, and to an extent limiting, concepts such as, 'young/old, individual/community, boy/girl, dead/alive, love/lust, and so on. Their correlation is, however, not build upon the mere binary opposition.

Here we can again see that the crucial element of the novel, its narrative structure, and the treatment of identity lies in the fact that the male and female counterparts heavily depend on each other. Adam Kelly categorizes this as an "observer-hero narrative" (77). Such narrative "captures this undecidability, with the hero's story incorporated into the narrative perspective of the observer at the same time as the observer feels himself to be merely an adjunct to the story of the hero" (77). Their identities, that is the boys' and the girls', are interdependent. The boys shape the girls' identities by their narrative perspective and treatment, and the girls ultimately shape the boys' identities through their (independent) actions.

The Lisbon suicides are the defining moment for the narrator. It marks the boys for life as it continues to play an important role when they are adults (hence the need for reconstruction). In other words, "observer-hero narratives make this inter-contamination manifest: in telling the story of the other's decision, the narrator also tells the story of the self as contaminated by that violent decision of the other (Kelly 79).

This interdependence is a key element of the novel because it enables us to see the development, influence, and consequences they have on each other. While the many feminist readings are entirely valid, such as the study of Debra Shostak who, unarguably, rightfully identifies the boys' objectivization of the girls, imploring the concept of "male gaze at the female" (810), Bilyana Vanyova Kostova emphasizes the shift and multiplicity of their roles. This speaks a great deal about their identities. Kostova makes a brilliant categorization, that the now middle-aged men "participates in the different traumatic events in a threefold way" (47), as men who become "*bystanders*, located between the categories of *perpetrator* and *victim*" (49, emphasis mine).

Though mainly describing the narrators, according to Kostova, these roles can subsequently be applied to all agents in the story (50). To quickly explicate these three layers, the role of bystanders is founded on normalcy, inactivity of the voyeuristic fascination. This infatuation then goes vile, turning the boys into the perpetrators, triggered by the pathological level of desire and objectivization of the girls, presumably

unconscious. They slowly, though not fully, realize they have acted as such due to “their deliberate negligence” (Kostova 50). The victim role subsequently coincides with this, both for their actions and inactions, and generates the mixed emotions of guilt and bereavement. Their direct involvement as the witnesses of the mass suicide traumatizes them and justifies their victim position. Alternatively, we can also see this as a role reversal, when the victimized girls, purposefully as a form of punishment become the perpetrators. For further clarification, we will refer back to these roles later on. In terms of the narrator’s identity, the concept of separation is significant here because it is translated to their role of bystanders. They are separated from the others due to their unresting preoccupation with the girls, which paradoxically separates them from themselves.

As has been stated, the girls are deprived of their personal voices by the narrative perspective; they are allowed very little autonomy, both by the boys and their parents and subsequently, by the whole community. Through the frequent homogenization, they are deprived of their individuality, and by extension, of their identities. The topos of suburbia also plays a significant role in the construction and shaping of one’s identity, “by repressing it and replacing it with boredom and conformity”, which “obliterate s individuality” (Kostova 50). Even, after their deaths, the TV reporters “often [mix] up the girls' names” (Eugenides 220), and tragically, even during their funeral they are not granted with individualized approach as Father Moody ”lose[s] track of which girl lay at which grave” and is therefore forced to “keep the eulogies sort of general" (234). They become the proverbial “congregation of angels” (23), and as their plaque says: “daughters of this community” (226). The fish flies, swarming the entire neighborhood functions as a symbolic counterpart of the Lisbon girls. Eugenides makes a great afford to establish this connection, particularly in order to point out the futility of both their lives and deaths:

> They only live twenty-four hours. They hatch, they reproduce, and then they croak. They don't even get to eat (2).

This commentary also symbolically characterizes the girls. It portrays their short lives and limited existence, and it also highlights the sexualized aspect of their identities. An

interesting parallel to this point emerges with Paul Baldino's racy riddle, “What smells like fish, is fun to eat, but isn't fish?” (54) and also the boys’ comment that it looked “as though Mrs. Lisbon had stopped cooking for the girls and they lived by foraging” (142).

Adolescence is a crucial period of life, not only for the child who is growing up but also for the parent. As it is clear from the hints we get, Mrs. Lisbon is unable to accept the womanhood of her daughters and allow them to make this transition. The typical parental protectiveness escalates not only to chronical overprotectiveness but to a rigorous entrapment. The girls are said to be “women in disguise” (40), and are presumably more mature than their parents allow them to be. This seems to be the case with the youngest Lisbon daughter, Cecilia. During the party that is thrown after her first suicide attempt, the narrator confesses they were “surprised by the maturity of her voice” (26).

Regarding their family situation, Mrs. Lisbon is for the most part characterized by the authority she holds over her daughters as the house is governed by "certain rules" that even Mr. Lisbon cannot easily surpass. Accordingly, her strict parenting, as well as her cold nature, takes its toll on the girls. She is controlling in terms of their behavior, appearance and social life. When they are to attend what turns out to be their first party outside the house, Mrs. Lisbon makes them wear “identical shapeless sacks” (114), and she “check[s] each daughter for signs of makeup” (6). After Lux violates the curfew, as a form of punishment for her misbehavior, she is forced to destroy her rock record collection. The overbearing protectiveness, however, reaches to the point that they are not even allowed to leave the house. Mrs. Lisbon retains this obsession with control over their bodies even after their deaths, as she is heard to say about Cecilia, lying in the coffin, “Couldn't they do something about her nails?” (36). She repeatedly replaces Therese’s hand falling off the stretcher, and she unsuccessfully commands it: “Stay” (213). Consequently: “Inside their house [the Lisbon girls are] prisoners; outside, lepers” (193). The girls’ separation is thus built upon their ostracization.

Bearing in mind that the girls are often perceived as a unity and not as a party of individuals, the Lisbon suicides are in a sense perceived as a single event put into fruition by Cecilia, meaning that after the first death, the girls are slowly being treated as

if they had also died. The aura of stigmatization lurks heavily over them, making it difficult for others to approach them due to the conscious fear of brushing over some sensitive subject. As an effect, the girls ostracize themselves and because they chose to stay in a group, "other girls found it difficult to talk to them, and many assumed they wanted to be left alone", which results in their further retreat (98).

Notwithstanding, the girls get invited to attend a homecoming dance, a plan orchestrated by Trip Fontaine. Although he is interested solely in Lux (and by this time their blossoming romance), in order to be allowed to take her out, he has to bring dates for the remaining Lisbon girls. They are again regarded with little individuality: "Whichever Lisbon girl a boy pinned became his date" (118). During the dance, the girls are cheerful and full of life, exhibiting normal teenage behavior, breaking free from the enclosed home environment. Still observing them from afar, the boys concur: "Never before had the Lisbon girls looked so cheerful, mixed so much, or talked so freely" (127), which Mary confirms by stating: "I'm having the best time of my life" (127). Even though their dates promise to call them after the dance, they never manage to do so. Similarly, as the ominous fish-flies, who "only live twenty-four hours" (2), the girls also get to live seemingly only for one day.

The relationship of the Lisbon girls and the neighboring boys and their entire dynamic is established on the terms of looking. The girls' identities are represented through the relation to the boys; their daydreams, ideas, thoughts, emotions, assumptions; how they see them or how they want them to be and not who they really are. Alternatively, through the observance of the girls, they form the boys' development. They learn and develop through the surveillance, a word that is used by the boys themselves, which encompasses this pathological obsession, as they educate themselves about female bodies. However, these bodies are later objectified, and their parts turn into fetishized objects, such as: "her rosy cervix" (150). The important fact is, that they are adolescents, who inevitably try to understand the other sex and learn about it by means of watching. We soon understand how misinformed they are based on the tales they excitedly share with each other such as: "Listen to this. When girls get to be about twelve or so . . . their tits bleed" (9). This is perceived and also obtained as forbidden

information, mostly because the boys are not allowed to watch the educational women's puberty video, or as they call it a "special film" (9). Yet finally, by observing the Lisbon girls, the boys are allowed the first-hand glimpse of the mystery of the female predicament. On one occasion, one of the boys, Peter Sissen, is invited to have dinner at the Lisbon house, which has been otherwise to this point inaccessible to any male. While going to use a bathroom which belongs to the girls, he gets to explore its otherwise surreptitious insides and, subsequently, he soon discovers the realities of the girls' 'insides'. Obligated to share this information, he hurries off to tell others that "Lux Lisbon was bleeding between the legs that very instant" (8). Inevitably, they are fascinated with the adolescent transitioning and the experience of female menstruation, which is demonstrated by the sheer fascination with the tampon, "still fresh from the insides of one of the Lisbon girls" (8). Disturbed by Lux, Sissen is about to retrieve it from the girls' bathroom, to prove to the rest of the boys that it is "a beautiful thing, . . . , like a modern painting or something" (8). Another boy, Paul Baldino, who is characterized by having a "gangster gut", proclaims that he is going to get inside of the house and see "more unthinkable" things (8), because as it is the case with the auditorium where he spied on the "special film", he had "snuck into other forbidden places in the past" (9). Although we might attribute this to a typical and harmless male boasting of wanting to up one another, they come from a place of sheer curiosity but also a violation. Eugenides here plants the seeds of the adolescent curiosity turning sour as the claim: "I'm going to watch those girls taking their shower" (8) taints this natural desire to explore, and turns it into a desire to exploit. Among the items that the boys retrieve and have in their possession is Cecilia's diary, through which we get a glimpse of some inner voice and thoughts. By its close study, the boys are learning about the female perspective, though not necessarily about them as individuals:

> We knew the pain of winter wind rushing up your skirt and the ache of keeping your knees together in class. . .We felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy, and how you ended up knowing which colors went together. (40)

They care for the intimate parts that deal with the universal ideas of womanhood and its sensibilities. Similarly, as the telescope they set up, "it [brings them] so close [they]

couldn't see a thing" (198). Therefore, they soon get "tired hearing about what they ate" (39), because those passages do not sufficiently stimulate their needs. They live off of the isolated accounts, through which they "came to hold collective memories of times [they] hadn't experienced" (39). This makes them feel as if they were an actual part of the girls' lives and strengthen their self-deceptive illusions. If they could look past their infatuation, they would realize the girls are in fact normal teenagers, who aren't "all that different from [their] sisters" (118-119). Yet, their faces appear to them to be "indecently revealed, as though [they] were used to seeing women in veils" (5). The perspective of homogeneity is also put forth by Cecilia herself and acquired by the boys:

> . . . Cecilia writes of her sisters and herself as a *single entity*. It's often difficult to identify which sister she's talking about, and many strange sentences conjure in the reader's mind an image of a *mythical creature* with ten legs and five heads . . . (39, emphasis mine)

Though they see the girls as their doubles: "We knew that the girls were our twins, that we all existed in space like animals with identical skins" (40), there seems to be, however, a disconnect between them, because although the girls are the ones being watched, the boys believe that: "they knew everything about us though we couldn't fathom them at all" for they supposedly possess a higher knowledge, understanding "love and even death" (40).

On one occasion, during the infamous Cecilia's party, the first-hand contact with the Lisbon girls makes the boys realize, that they "were all different people" (23). Suddenly, their characteristic features come forth, such as Bonnie's "sharp nose of a nun", Therese's "cheeks and eyes of a cow", Mary's "widow's peak and fuzz above her upper lip" (23). In stark contrast, Lux, who "radiated health and mischief" (24), is set apart from the rest through objectification, as she is "the only one who accorded with [the boys'] image of the Lisbon girls" (24), being perceived as "a mythical creature" (39). All in all, Lux is perceived as the ultimate woman.

3.2 Sexuality

Sexuality as a means of initiation is again depicted as the state in between, build upon the dichotomy of virginal and sexual. The result of sexual initiation is (in case of

Trip Fontaine), described as "the sense of having graduated to the next stage of life" (73). Though they are often characterized as mature for they age, we see that the girls' transformation into womanhood is continuously hindered. The Lisbon sisters' initiation is caught between a state of idealized and childhood innocence and threatening sexualized femininity, culminating in a dubious idealization of purity mixed with its fetization. In terms of the narrators, their sexuality is heavily affected by the girls, again referencing the established reciprocal relationship. In order to uncover the mystique of female experience, the boys' interest, as it has been established, is sexualized. It creeps through the masterful choice of the words that show us their lascivious desire and the span of their concern as they excite themselves with Peter Sissen's

> stories of image of bedrooms filled with crumpled panties, of stuffed animals hugged to death by the passion of the girls, of a crucifix draped with a brassiere, of gauzy chambers of canopied beds, and of the effluvia of so many young girls becoming women together in the same cramped space (7).

It is through these stories that we the see the magnified aspects of intimacy and invasion of the personal space. Moreover, this passage brilliantly encapsulates the fascination with state of being on the threshold between childhood and adulthood as well as the contrasting aspects of sacred, pure, virginal, with profane, sexualized, daunting. When we take all of this into account, we can see the dichotomy of the female perception as the Lisbon girls are simultaneously perceived as both pure and sexualized.

This is even apparent in the 'virginal' aspect. The two Lisbon sisters that in connection to these dualities stand out are undeniably Cecilia and Lux. Cecilia is heavily linked to the Virgin Mary, the archetypal virgin, as she holds her "laminated picture . . . against her budding chest" (2) during her suicide attempt. We are presented with the image of Cecilia in her white wedding dress, her lips painted red with a crayon, which "gave her face a deranged harlot look" (24). Again, the combination of pure and sexualized is echoed through a tint of childhood induced by the idea of the crayon, resulting with Cecilia in her virginal wedding dress violated by being impaled on the fence spike.

In contrast, Lux is the only sister of whose sexual activity we are sure of. Also, most of the sexual desire is projected onto her. Even though the girls are dressed in the virginal "shapeless sacks" (114), we find out that Lux's "baggy dress . . . only increased [Trips desire]", because he could feel "how slim she was under all those drapes" (126). Lux's sexuality further dehumanizes her as both animal and angel, sacred and profane. Her sexuality is regarded as an animalistic force. When she comes back to Trip's car in order to kiss him, because of her passionate demeanor she is likened to "a creature with a hundred mouths", a "starved animal", who "started sucking the marrow from his bones" (82). Moreover, her genitalia is likened to "the ravenous mouth of the animal leashed below her waist", disingenuously singled out further separated into two counterparts, as Trip recounts the "two beasts" (82); "one above, snuffling and biting him, and one below, struggling to get out of its damp cage" (82). Notwithstanding, he is taken aback by "her mythic mutability that allowed her to possess three or four arms at once" (83) which left him "more dead than alive" , and serving us with further contrast, he speaks of it "as one might of a religious experience, a visitation or vision" (82).

What becomes quite clear is that these binaries are extremely limiting and obtuse and ultimately do harm to both males and females. According to Millard, the universalized "we" speak for the male perspective and is the "depiction of male sexuality" (81). The mythologization stems from the fact that the girls are perceived as archetypal women, keepers of some sort of feminine mystery, or as Shostak puts it, "Eternal Females" (822). On this note, Millard argues, that the "women then, are the guardians of sexual knowledge, and it is by admitting boys to this knowledge that boys become men" (78). This notion is in the novel supported by the story of Trip Fontain's first sexual experience when he loses his virginity to a much older and divorced woman in Las Vegas during a family vacation, which he shares with boys. They apprehend this as "a wonderful initiation by a merciful mother" and conclude that "the night conveyed on Trip the mantle of a lover", further affirming the myth by the fact that specific sexual details "remained a secret" (Eugenides 68). Furthermore, the boys link this initiation with the memorabilia Trip has preserved and they recognize it explains why Trip "never took off the puka-shell necklace she'd given him" or "the travel poster over his bed showing a man soaring over Acapulco Bay" (67). Essentially, we can draw an

interesting parallel between Trip's and boys' mementos they accumulate. In accordance, one of the reasons is the need to commemorate their sexual awakening. What more, their aspiration for possession is extraordinarily fetishistic, exhibiting "an often prurient desire to objectify and commodify through the accumulation of tokens by which the girls can be known" (Millard 79). It is also important to note here, that their "most prized possessions" (Eugenides 150) is the gynecological exam documentation, which was shockingly, obtained by bribing.

Moreover, there are also consequences of the initiation, both in the term of its effects on the body as well at the social perception. Upon his sexual awakening, Trip's body and appearance drastically differ to that of the rest of the boys. They compared their own "cheese-colored skin to his", he has as "new deep voice sounding a foot above [their] heads" and his "musky scent" affects the girls "who, one by one, and then in groups, swooned" (68). Here, Eugenides explores the double standard attributed to the male versus female sexual awakening, with Lux Lisbon positioned in a stark contrast Trip Fontaine, her suitor and lover, who is subsequently being perceived as "so cool and aloof" (73), and is generally praised as ""Best-looking", "Best dressed", "Best Personality," and "Best Athlete""(69). While Trip "gave[s] off sense of having graduated to the next stage of life" (73), Lux's once "fructifying flesh" (6) now wastes away so much her "basins of her collarbones collected water" (143).

In massive contrast, Lux is as an outcome for loss of her virginity met with disdain and punishment on multiple levels. First, after she has sex with the Trip on the "soggy football field" (133) she is abandoned by him, despite his previously tireless pursuit. Years later he explains this by claiming that the act, he "just got sick of her right then" (134). Her idolize image is demystified and she suddenly does not portray anything special. Interestingly, she herself is right away aware of her transgression, based on the restrictions put upon her, as she is sobbing during the act: "I always screw things up. I always do" (133). Consequently, the second punishment comes from her mother, who, due to her violations of curfew, incarcerates Lux and the rest of the girls in the house. Notable episode of this imprisonment and another consequence of her being sexually active is the pregnancy scare, which in fact turns out to HPV diagnosis. To be able to keep the mater private and even manage to leave the house, she is forced to

pretend appendicitis and is consequently escorted from the house by paramedics. This is quite symbolic because the paramedics' appearance is usually connected to suicides. Lisbon girls are usually deceased while on the stretcher; this might give us yet another hint that sexuality is linked to death. Similarly, as with the boys' misinformation about the menstruation, we can see that Lux is also misinformed about the matters of the body. When she asked the doctor about the pregnancy test, she inquires him: "Do you really use a rabbit?" (149).

Lux's deterioration deepens, when she starts to have sexual encounters with random boys and men on the roof of the Lisbon house on a regular basis; (presumably the outcome of her being abandoned by Trip and her way of further desensitizing herself). Compared with Trip's favorable appearance, the men that partake on these sexual escapades recall her unappealing image, manifesting her decline: "the acidic taste of her saliva the taste of digestive fluids with nothing to do" (143). Sadly, they ignore the "signs of malnourishment or illness or grief (the small cold sores at the corners of her mouth, the patch of hair missing above her left ear)" (143). The animalistic and dehumanized parables again come forth, as none of those signals "detracted from Lux's overwhelming impression of being a carnal angel", pinning her lovers to the chimney "as if by two great, beating wings" (143). The fact that "she didn't seem to like it much" (143) or that "mak[ing] love on the roof in the winter suggested derangement, depression, self-destructiveness far in excess on any pleasure…" (144), does not discourage them from taking advantage of her miserable state, because they still approach her as the initiator, 'Eternal Female'. No matter their "fright" or "bafflement" they feel gratitude for the "overriding sense of Lux's measureless charity" (143), similar to the Trip's "merciful mother" (68).

Alternately, Lux also plays an important role in the boys' sexual initiation, which is based on the voyeuristic experience as they watch her during her escapades. Through her objectification, she becomes their symbolic teacher, from whom they claim "learned a great deal about the techniques of love" (141), even though, as they confess: "we didn't know the words to denote what we saw, we had to make up our own" such as "yodeling

in the canyon”, “groaning in the pit”, “slipping the turtle's head” and “chewing the stinkweed” (141).

Consequently, this attained knowledge is put to practice years later: “when we lost our own virginities, we resorted in our panic to pantomiming Lux's gyrations on the roof so long ago” (141). As Millard further argues, “the virgin deaths of the Lisbon sisters are a catastrophic and calamitous failure of knowledge” (Millard 78-9). The deaths and the events revolving around them takes place in the midst of their puberty, and so significantly, “[a]s an outcome, them being the direct witnesses of the suicides cuts short their sexual awakening” (Kostova 51). (It goes without saying that the same happens to girls’ sexual awakening is also as it conflates with their deaths). Due to the temporal distance in the narrative, we see that they are unable to disassociate the image of the girls from their deaths, traumatically imprinted to their perception. For example, Bonnie is said to be taller than her sisters, “mostly because of the length of her neck which would one day hang from the end of a rope (Eugenides 23). Later in life, they are incapable of eroticism at they admit that “it is always that pale wraith we make love to, always her feet snagged in the gutter, always her single blooming hand steadying itself against the chimney, no matter what our present lovers' feet and hands are doing” (142).

As a result, when they are “alone at night”, she creeps into their dream, as a “succubus” (142), “scarr[ing] [them] forever, making [them] happier with dreams than wives (164). In a sense then, due to their obsession with the past and nostalgia, their sexual lives do not undergo any growth. On that note, we can observe that they equate their detective tendencies and the ongoing plight of locating the girls’ “exact pain” with the “self-examination doctors urge us to make (we've reached that age)” (165). It is a necessary ploy that might uncover something malign:

> On a regular basis, we're forced to explore with clinical detachment our most private pouch and, pressing it, impress ourselves with its anatomical reality . . . We're asked to find in this dimly mapped place, amid naturally occurring clots and coils, upstart invaders. We never realized how many bumps we had until we went looking. And so we lie on our backs, probing, recoiling, probing again, and the seeds of death get lost in the mess God made us. (165)

We can clearly see that sex and sexuality is heavily interconnected with death, both theoretically and practically. In accordance with Kostova's categorization of the boys' playing the part of the perpetrators, Shostak argues that both physical and objectifying approach to the girls inevitably scars them as well, and this act of passive violence push them other the edge. (814). We try to find the plausible answers for why the girls had to die, similarly, as Dr. Hornicker attempts to find a motivation behind Lux's promiscuity, arguing that is a "commonplace reaction to emotional need" and that Lux "confused the sexual act with love" (Eugenides 84). This is nevertheless only a part of the whole picture. The other options of the motivation behind both promiscuity and suicide might very well be that they are an act of rebellion, of the agency, freeing oneself, punishing others or complying to the prescribed roles. Finding one true answer is therefore not only insufficient and futile, but also clinging to the type of 'totalizing mode of understanding', that is going to be discussed later, and what the book essentially warns against.

3.3.Death

Same as with the theme of identity, death plays a crucial role in *The Virgin Suicides*, as it is essentially the driving force behind everything else; the source of the trauma, object of inquiry. In terms of coming-of-age narratives, the theme of death often manifests itself as a form of stagnation; the inability or unwillingness to transgress and cross the threshold between childhood and adulthood. The Lisbon girls are encapsulated in time due to their suicides and throughout their life, they are not enabled to step into womanhood: "we just want to live, if anyone would let us" (132).

Furthermore, their deaths staple their mythologized status, starting off by Cecilia's suicides, which leaves a negative aura lingering over the remaining sisters. It affects the community, and the community affects the girls. In a sense, by their suicides, they comply with the image constricted upon them by others. In addition to this, suicide, the deliberate death, however, also gives its executor a sense of agency, hinted by the claim: "You would have killed yourself just to have something to do" (84). This is undeniably an important aspect for the Lisbon girls, as we see them being deprived of their autonomy. Cecilia's suicide, then could have been a way to individualized herself.

This individualization is suppressed, for her death is on multiple occasions completely disregarded. The local newspaper "neglected to run an article on the suicide attempt, because the editor, Mr. Baubee, felt such depressing information wouldn't fit between the front-page article on the Junior League Flower Show and the back-page photographs of grinning brides" (14). Apart from that, it is downplayed as an accident, starting practically right after the suicide: "It was an accident waiting to happen" (52). Bizarrely, the neighborhood starts to debate about "the dangerousness of the fence . . . she'd jumped on" (52), and in a dubious attempt to cover the tracks, they decide to take the fence down; an event which turns out to be a source of perfectly executed dark humor on Eugenides' part. This action can be construed as the community's coping mechanism and a sheer banalization of the event, resulting into a ridiculousness of the situation with the statements of the bystanders such as: "You couldn't get a policy to cover it . . . Our kids could jump on it, too" (52). After the clearance of the fence, the boys reminisce that "[e]veryone felt a lot better, as though the lake had been cleaned up, or the air, or the other side's bombs destroyed . . . even though they hadn't done anything . . . (52).

Eugenides explores how the death affects the whole community as well as individuals. Throughout *The Virgin Suicides*, the boys/men and the entire community try to reach some decisive reasoning behind the event: "Everyone had a theory as to why she had tried to kill herself " (17), with the point being that these opinions vary and also changes as "people read what they want to read into the event of the suicides" (Kelly 87). Because we do not have their actual voice or insight, we can never possibly reach any decisive answer to what pushed Cecilia, or respectively the rest of the Lisbon girls, over the edge, though we might assess some opinions about it. Eugenides here explores "a modern need to understand extreme events through totalizing modes of understanding" (Kelly 91). This is clear from the way the community disregards Cecilia's death by simple reasoning such as: "[h]er act was a cry for help" (Eugenides 18), "it was an act of aggression inspired by the repression of adolescent libidinal urges" (19), "that girl didn't want to die. . . She just wanted out of that house" (15).

As it is explored throughout the novel, even the psychologist changes his diagnosis of the cause of the deaths multiple times, settling on the "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder" as it is not unusual "for the sibling of an A.L.S. [adolescent lost to suicide] to

act out the suicidal behavior in an attempt to come to grips with their grief", which, according to the boys/men, "convinced many people because it simplified things" (152). Condoned as a chain of events inevitably bound to happen, Cecilia had "released an airborne virus which the other girls . . . had contracted" (153), a belief that coincides with the community's consensus that Cecilia is to blame: "Her suicide, from this perspective, was seen as a kind of disease infecting those close at hand" (152). The problem remains, that "no one cared how Cecilia had caught the virus in the first place . . . Transmission became explanation" (153). As a consequence, "the subject of the Lisbon girls [becomes] almost taboo" (239), and the remaining sisters are treated merely as alive as Cecilia.

In addition to this, "the Day of Grieving", perceived by many as "an obscure holiday" (100), is another extreme approach to Cecilia's suicide. As a strange twist on a suicide prevention campaign, it is established by the school a whole year after, partly as a form of acknowledgment of the tragedy and catalyst for the trauma. However, nobody addresses it directly, as the teachers "felt it inappropriate to single out the girls' tragedy", with the result that "the tragedy was diffused and universalized", and it felt like the participants "we were supposed to feel sorry for everything that ever happened, ever" (100). Ironically, boys recount that "none of the teachers insisted on [the Lisbon girls'] participating, with the result that all the healing was done by those of us without wounds" (101).

Adolescence is supposed to be a stage of blossoming. Accordingly, the girls are at first seen as the vibrant "bursting with their fructifying flesh" (6), counterparts of their "leached of color" (6) parents. Upon their incarceration in the house, they, however, appear "as feverish creatures, exhaling soupy breath, succumbing day by day in their isolated ward" (153). This again links them to the fish flies. In addition to what has been already said about them, they are also the omnipresent symbolic reminder of death, a bad omen, a sign of the deteriorating neighborhood. Their first appearance coincides with Cecilia's suicide, and a year later, when their next cycle comes and they reappear again in "a senseless pattern of ecstasy and madness" (181), as the remaining Lisbon girls join their sister in death. The fish flies veil the community under the cloak of rot

and despair as they "blacken windows, coat cars and streetlamps, plaster the municipal docks and festoon" (2) and "coated our windows, making it difficult to see out" (195). Symbolically, the stagnation of the neighborhood befalls primarily the Lisbon house, both its outsides and insides.

As the novel progresses, the Lisbon house starts to symbolically deteriorate, that people "began to mention how dim and unhealthy the place looked", appointing gothic elements, such as, "moss blackened windows", "miasmic vapors "(140), and the front lawn being "monstrous" and "erupting" (1). Eugenides uses a frequently used literary trope of a ruined house, a romantic symbol of deteriorating stagnation, channeling Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily", in which also the unified narrator, reflecting the voice of the lurking community observes the house and voices desire to inspect the insides in order to comprehend its inhabitants. As the house gradually disintegrates, it mirrors the decline of its inhabitants. In terms of the theme of coming-of-age and adolescence, as a notable mention, Ian McEwan explores a similar external representation of internal in his novel *The Cement Garden*. The external depravity of their environment manifests the girls' inner suffocation. Instead of blooming, the sisters wither. Consequently, it transforms into a "one big coffin" (158), where the girls are symbolically buried alive. By the end, when the Lisbon house is empty, it is said to look "even more run-down than ever" and quite symbolically, "seemed to have collapsed from the inside, like a lung (236). This mirrors the actual Lisbon girls' demises whose cause of death was either form of asphyxiation, (Bonnie by hanging, Mary's first attempt by gas, second by overdose, Therese by overdose, Lux by carbon monoxide, poisoning) or in Cecilia's case presumably the lung puncture. All in all, "the house receded behind its mists of *youth being choked off*" (140 emphasis mine). Their successive suicides that are attributed to the "airborne virus" (153), reflect the successive demise of the elm trees, which are being cut down "in order to inhibit further spread" (172). Cecelia likens the elms to "lungs filling with air" (41), and so upon their (the girls and the trees) death, the community is uprooted, changed forever, with their neighborhood like "an overexposed photograph" (237):

> We got to see how truly unimaginative our suburb was, everything laid out on a grid whose bland uniformity the trees had hidden, and the old

> ruses of differentiated architectural styles lost their power to make us feel unique. (237)

The newspapers, later writing about what they termed a "suicide pact," treated the girls as automatons, creatures so barely alive that their deaths came as little change.", due to which "the girls appear as indistinguishable characters . . ." (170). This is reinforced through Mary:

> Technically [she] survived for more than a month, though everyone felt otherwise. After that night, people spoke of the Lisbon girls in the past tense, and if they mentioned Mary at all it was with the veiled wish that she would hurry up and get it over with. (214)

She then actually hastens this process by putting herself for the eternal rest into her sleeping bag, ". . . with pilled flannel lining picturing dead ducks above red-capped hunters" (228). This image essentially invokes its equivalent of the black body bag. Moreover, ducks and red caps also seem to be an ominous nod to *The Catcher in the Rye.*

Stagnation, however, also possesses the boys, who have been unable to properly mature, and are after twenty years still paralyzed by what seems to be a strange mix of bereavement and fascination. They compulsively hold onto the past, which is supported by the obsession with their 97 exhibits (objects fetishizing the girls), "arranged in five separate suitcases, each bearing a photograph of the deceased like a Coptic headstone", and kept in their now "refurbished treehouse" (246). The fact that they even restore the tree house, a typical representation of childhood, shows us their need of regressing to their youth in order to reconstruct the point of origin and ideally achieve the proper closure through understanding; something that, arguably, never really comes to fruition. Another example of the role shift from bystanders to perpetrators is, that their inaction is now doing an active harm:

> [We were] telling ourselves that this would be the time we spoke to the Lisbon girls and asked them what was troubling them . . . [b]ut it was always the same: their white faces drifting in slow motion past us, while

> we pretended we hadn't been looking for them at all, that we didn't know they existed. (96-97)

From the perspective of their older selves, there seems to be a hint of remorse and regret about not being able to sufficiently reach out. Firstly, as we have already pointed out, they represent the voice of the community, which is also in denial and idle; the adults are incompetent, let alone children. Secondly, due to their adolescence, period inclined to self-consciousness, they are unable to approach them actively. The direct contact poses many threats as opposed to keeping a safe distance and living out their fantasies through voyeurism rather than facing the fear of rejection. They are only able to communicate with them through the secondary means.

Over time, it becomes clear that girls are also those who are able to watch others. When driving through their neighborhood to the homecoming dance, the Lisbon girls openly express opinions regarding the families, as they pass each of their houses, which leaves their dates taken aback: "Who had known they talked so much, held so many opinions" (Eugenides 119). Later on, the boys recognize this power dynamic: "they had been looking out at us as intensely as we had been looking in" (119). More importantly, the girls acknowledge they know they are being watched, and, arguably, use this knowledge to their advantage and begin to indirectly communicate with the boys by leaving them letters with messages, sending them messages using the flashing of the lights, which "sent out its untranslatable S. 0. S." (186). This idea of the reciprocal relationship excites them, as the best thing for them to see is "the pink heel of a hand flattening against the glass, then rubbing back and forth to uncover the bright mosaic of an eye, looking out at us" (155).

Even though it seems they have been able to establish a mutual and evened out communication, we can see its major shortcomings through the indirect conversations they have on the phone, where instead of talking, they play songs to each other. The boys devise this plan in order to secretly communicate with the girls, without their parents knowing; (by this time, the girls are deprived of every social contact). While the boys can be seen as active comforters and concerned witnesses of the tragedy, offering their help to free the girls from their oppression, much can be drawn from their song selection. In contrast to the records chosen by the girls which "throbbed with certain

pain” (191), with “stark plaintive voices [that] sought justice and equality (191), the boys’ selection was “for the most part, love songs” (191). They even explicate this further by stating: “Each selection tried to turn the conversation in a more intimate direction. But the Lisbon girls kept to impersonal topics” (191). We can assume that the boys seem to be frustrated by this stagnating development. The disconnect stems from the fact that they confuse love as compassion with love as a desire. Rather than offering them the former, they keep pushing for and fantasizing about the latter. Therefore, the problem is that while the girls “sought justice and equality”, the boys are unable to approach them as anything else as objects of their teenage infatuation as they keep daydreaming about them during these musical calls, listening to songs with “drumbeats so regular we might have been pressing our ears to the girl’s chest” (191). They imagine smelling their perfumes and envision scenarios where, “(Without warning, the girls had thrown their arms around us, confessed hotly into our ears, and fled the room)” (192 brackets in the original). Their fantasy climaxes with the ultimate adolescent escapist idea of running away with them. This, however, turns out radically different than what the boys have envisioned and ends in their massive disillusionment; the girls' mass suicide.

As it has been proposed multiple times, and many critics also recognize this as the reclaiming of agency and power reversal, for only by their suicides, the girls are finally able to control what they want the boys to see and subsequently escape the oppressive environment. The men, recalling this key event confess that they had never really known them and that the girls "had brought [them] here to find that out" (210). We might talk about the reversal of the roles, where the girls are now the perpetrators, punishing the boys for the stifling their individuality and voice. The voyeurism and objectification meet, culminating in the role of victims:

> We gazed up at Bonnie, at her spindly legs in their white confirmation stockings and the shame that has never gone away took over. The doctors we later consulted attributed our response to shock. But the mood felt more like guilt, like coming to attention at the last moment and too late. (Eugenides 215)

As Kostova points out, the boys "has suffered not a mere traumatic shock, but a gradual realization of [their] own guilty part in the story" (56), which seems they want to suppress in their adulthood. It is important to note here that the boys/men strongly oppose the generalizations made by the authorities and their community. They feel entitled to be the only true and genuine voices regarding the Lisbon girls' suicides, claiming: "[we] knew better" (Eugenides 195). They disregard Ms. Perl's articles which "boiled two or three months and the suffering of four individuals into a paragraph" (170), and evaluates her "airtight conclusions" as "far less truthful than [their] own" (217). This sense of entitlement they feel over the Lisbon girls' deaths stems undeniably from their direct involvement of being the witnesses of their suicides. Nevertheless, we can still catch them doing the same offenses they condemn.

In addition, however, the plural consciousness of we/us serves as them as a united testimony and a form of corroboration. Their narrative functions as "a therapeutic construct" (Kostova 58) as they try to "coalesce [their] intuitions and theories into a story [they] could live with" (Eugenides 236), which creates a bond of reassurance and helps them deal with the trauma, the cause, and its repercussion together.

This leads us back to what we have highlighted in the beginning. In his study of the novel, Kelly explores to a great extent the "emphasis upon the inescapability of the self in telling the other's story" (77). The boys carry the trauma into their adulthoods and by mourning the loss of the girls, they essentially also mourn parts of themselves. In other words, they mourn the idea of the girls they created for themselves; the idolized and inaccessible women. Kelly poignantly explains this reciprocal relationship in the following way:

> We will only ever be mourning the other as we have taken him/her into ourselves, and thus we are always mourning, narcissistically, a part of ourselves. At the same time, however, that part of ourselves, invaded by the other, no longer belongs entirely to us. (77)

The reciprocal relationship, the deaths, their involvement and the bereavement in a great extend problematizes the transition into the adulthood, leaving the men's identities not full-fledged. The narrators conclude: "But this is all a chasing after the wind. The essence of the suicides consisted not of sadness or mystery but simple selfishness."

(Eugenides 242). Though this final statement recognizes the futility of their detective work, if you will, it also goes against the disdain of simplified answers. Unable to find the answers they have been looking for, they denote their decision as selfish.

However, "through the imputation of an absolute narcissism to the other, it is the narcissism of the self that here resounds" (Kelly 95). They still believe that: "we had loved them and they hadn't heard us calling" (243). Consequently, due to the interconnectedness and mutual contamination, selfishness is "the only imaginable reaction to the fact that the events of the text are not about "us," but that "we" must deal with their consequences" (Kelly 95-6).

Conclusion

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, we can see the emerging tendency to reshape the traditional trajectory of the Bildungsroman genre, and thus Salinger's novel has served us as a case study through which we have provided an overview of the key narrative strategies common to modern coming-of-age narratives. Rather than following the protagonist from early childhood to late adulthood, here we see that the scope of narration is limited, it is instead 'a slice of life,' revolving around protagonist's period of crisis, focusing on his or her sudden break in life. Personal development manifested through the descending quality is thus appropriate, because it simulates protagonists emotional decline. The key element of the symbolic structure and the underlying conflict of the coming-of-age narratives is the binary structuring. Binary oppositions are the source of the tension, such as those of childhood and adulthood, individual and the society, past and present. In other words, as we have explored, the process of coming-of-agee can be perceived as space in between. A protagonist who is trapped in the middle – between childhood and adulthood, innocence and experience – is anticipated to transgress the boundary in an act that would solidify their maturation. Instead, we can notice a predominant stasis as they are either reluctant to or hindered from making a leap forward. Their trouble is that they perceive the two polarities as mutually exclusive. Consequently, this is manifested through the dichotomy in their beliefs and actions, desires and obligations, culminating in the state of paralysis. Moreover, we can notice a recurring tension created by duality and mirroring, which results in the subsequent blurring of the lines between the two polarities, and their interconnectedness. Therefore, ambiguity is another important component of these narratives. As we have observed, such a decisive moment of maturation hardly ever comes, and we leave the protagonists feeling uncertain, far from being their new evolved and confident selves.

Though the inconclusiveness of the endings might compromise the notion of a successful transition, instead of daunting, it makes them realistic and relatable. In addition, what makes the narratives relatable is their universality. Even though the stories are different, they still propose some sense of universal experience. The open endings highlight the fact that coming-of-age is a continuous process. Therefore, we have taken into account a hero' journey through *separation – initiation – return*, which

serves as a transitional pattern and shown, that the act of narration itself must be considered as its fundamental component.

I have conveniently linked the three key themes of identity, sexuality, and death with the stages of the hero's journey in order to show their interconnectedness and importance for the protagonist's development. Through the subsequent analyses of *The Bell Jar* and *The Virgin Suicides*, we have confirmed the aforementioned narrative strategies and the mechanisms of the themes through the pattern of the hero's journey. *The Bell Jar* has offed us a female perspective, while *The Virgin Suicides* deals with both male and female perspectives and their limits. Though the two novels differ in many aspects, the conceptualization of the triad of themes operates on the same basis. To provide a brief summary, the protagonists' identity is constituted by the other. They are equally affected by the appealing and the appalling qualities, and they are separating themselves from the rest while simultaneously longing to belong. Sexuality is manifested by the tension between innocence and experience and violation of purity that is especially crucial in case of female initiation. Return is linked to death, as an end of one phase and the start of the other, and is often reconceptualized as a rebirth alluding to progress (descending to death in order to ascent through rebirth). Both novels then explore death as a form of utter transformation. *The Bell Jar* utilizes this descend-ascend pattern, where life is established through a symbolic death, and wholeness can be reached through fragmentation. *The Virgin Suicides*, on the other hand, explores the limits of the return, with death as a permanent state from one cannot return, only to live through those left behind.

Interestingly, both novels integrate a dominant symbol of a tree. In *The Bell Jar*, there is the fig tree, with each fig representing a different possibility. It symbolizes abundance and limits. In *The Virgin Suicides*, there are the elm trees, representing the Lisbon girls, and the virus that cut short their lives. It is a symbol of past and present, girls' memory and boys' nostalgia. The tension of standing in between, cannot be resolved by the renunciation of one in favor of the other. Rather than perceiving it as an either-or situation, the protagonists must find a balance between the two that would enable them to thrive instead of wither. The trees, however, also highlight the cyclical

nature of growing up, proposing that under propitious circumstances, the decline can lead to the renewal.

There is thus a cyclical quality to the experience not only due to the dynamic of death and rebirth but also due to the retrospective storytelling, for the act of the narration itself is a formative experience. The act of confession functions as a ritual of 'becomingness' of "the unfinished or incomplete self, the 'self on the way'" (Radstone 38). One is forced to reconstruct their identity by constructing his or her narrative in order to make the break fit with the overall coherence. Narratives give sense to our experience; they make them understandable, and as a coping strategy, they set up the platform for our self-realization. As Kenneth Millard concurs, "the form and structure of the [coming-of-age] novels are often strongly expressive of a desire to create a myth of origins by which their protagonists can come to understand themselves" (Millard 9). The narrator-reader bond is the basis for relatability because it simulates trust, sincerity, and corroboration. The reciprocal relationship of relating to the other is fundamental for understanding who we are, making sense of our experience and the world around us.

Though the coming-of-age narratives differ in circumstances and plot from the reader's personal experience, there is still the shared understating between those going through the growing pains of adolescence, as well as those who sympathize with the sorrows of nostalgia when looking back.

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