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ESTHER THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS:
SELF-IMAGE DE(CON)STRUCTION IN SYLVIA PLATH’S *THE BELL JAR*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse the role of mirrors in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Specifically, I concentrate on the six scenes in which a mirror is literally or metaphorically present in order to sustain my thesis that it represents a socio-cultural filter in the protagonist's process of self-image construction, and that it mediates between her body and her mind, as well as between her superego and her ego. I approach my analysis from a gender perspective that is mainly grounded in the theories of Judith Butler regarding the construction of sex and gender as social tokens of either belongingness or alienation. Given that the protagonist's identity is (de)constructed through a *looking-glass*, I employ John Berger's conception of the act of seeing to explore the nature of this process of self-identification and self-definition. I also approach the relationship between the 'gazer' and the 'gazee' from a feminist perspective by applying Michel Foucault's definition of the act of seeing as surveillance and self-discipline. Since I contend that the presence of a mirror triggers dysmorphic and dissociative episodes in Esther, the main character, I base my analysis, on the one hand, on Susan Bordo's understanding of the body-mind dualism as a source of psychopathology, and, on the other, on Butler's rethinking of Sigmund Freud's concepts of the ego and the superego. In fact, my analysis fundamentally explores the way in which Esther's sadistic superego surfaces through the mirror in order to remind her of her unfulfilled social expectation as a woman.

KEY WORDS: *The Bell Jar*; self-image; gender; gaze; mirror.

LABURPENA

Sylvia Plath-en *The Bell Jar* eleberrian agertzen diren ispiluen funtzioa aztertzea da lan honen helburua. Nire tesia defendatzeko sei eszena aztertuko ditut zeinetan literalki edo metaforikoki ispilu bat agertzen da. Ispiluek iragazki soziokultural gisa funtzionatzen dute protagonistak haren autoirudi eta identitatearekiko duen pertzepzioa eraikiz eta baldintzatuz. Era berean, haren gorputz eta gogamenaren, zein supernia eta niaren arteko bitartekari dira. Nire analisiari genero ikuspegitik helduko diot, Judith Butler-en teorietan oinarrituz sexu eta genero eraikuntzari dagokionez, hauek 'partaidetasunaren' edota alienazioaren adierazle sozial gisa ulertuz. Protagonistak haren identitatea ispiluaren objektuaren bidez (des)eraikitzen duenez gero, John Berger-rek "ikustearen egintzaren" inguruan duen ikusmoldeaz baliatuko naiz auto-identifikazio eta definizio prozesu horren izaera interpretatzeko. Bestetik, "behatzaile" eta "behatua" kontzeptuen arteko erlazioa ikuspuntu feminista batetik ikertuko dut, Michel Foucault-ren "ikustearen egintzaren" definizioa aplikatuz, autozelataze, diziplina edo zigortze moduan ulertuta. Ispiluek Estherrengan, hau da, protagonistarengan, eragindako bai ikusmolde dismorfikoa bai disoziazio pasarteak aztertzeko, alde batetik, eta gorputz-gogamen dualismoa psikopatologiaren iturburu dela argudiatuz, Susan Bordo-ren ideiak izango ditut oinarri, eta, bestetik, Butler-ren gogoeta Sigmund Freud-en supernia eta niaren kontzeptuekiko erabiliko dut. Izan ere, ispiluen bitartez superni sadikoa azaleratzen dela argudiatuko dut nire analisian, protagonistari emakume izateagatik bete beharreko estereotipo sozialak gogorarazteko helburuarekin.

HITZ GAKOAK: *The Bell Jar;* autoirudia; generoa; begirada; ispilua.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper aims to analyse the different instances in which the word ‘mirror’ is used in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, so as to prove its use as a filter for the main character’s self-image. The initial hypothesis is that the object of the mirror functions as a device to trigger inner dialogue of Esther, the protagonist. In particular, I intend to analyse the specific ways in which this intimate dialogue fixates upon Esther’s body, as she constructs, through a subjective, reifying gaze, her own reflection, a reflection in which both her body and identity interweave as she searches for a voice within the patriarchal order and values. In this figurative journey from Other to Subject, the body, as Susan Bordo remarks, “is constituted by culture” (230). The female body in particular has been historically prone to a “cultural manipulation”, in which women, “besides *having* bodies, are also *associated* with the body, which has always been considered woman’s ‘sphere’ in family life, in mythology, in scientific, philosophical and religious ideology” (Bordo 230). This substantiates the intersection between the corporeal and the socio-cultural—the latter codified within the category of gender—which manifests through the material object of the mirror.

Published in 1963, *The Bell Jar* is the only novel written by Plath, and it follows the course of events that leads Esther Greenwood to a suicide attempt, and to a subsequent stay at a mental hospital. It is, therefore, a novel about a woman’s mental illness in the specific context of the latter period of the 1950s. Plath as an author does not need any further introduction, for both her life and her works have already been studied from multiple perspectives, particularly during the second feminist wave, and in connection to issues related to gender and psychology.[1] Likewise, the extent to which her texts are autobiographical or not is also the subject of an ongoing academic debate, especially considering that Plath herself committed suicide only a month after the publication of *The Bell Jar* in the United Kingdom. Even though my analysis contends that two of the most meaningful results of Esther’s process of self-reflection in and through the mirror are, indeed, pathological dissociation and body dysmorphia, it is not my intention to consider whether or not the latter’s presence is due to Plath’s personal experience of said mental disorders. Indeed, I approach Esther’s character not as a fictionalisation of Plath herself, but as an exploration of the experience of patriarchy by a non-conformist young white middle-class woman in the late 1950s.

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[1] See Brain and Miller.

To analyse the function of mirrors in the novel, I take into consideration the key instances in which the word ‘mirror’ is used, in the order in which they appear in the text. There are, in total, six excerpts involving mirrors, which I analyse in order to find evidence in support of my thesis of the mirror as a socio-cultural filter to Esther’s gaze. A close examination of the literary devices, rhetorical figures and figurative language deployed by Plath in the aforementioned scenes has eventually led me to qualify my initial hypothesis: the mirror does not simply trigger an inner-monologue—as these also arise without them—but it prompts the voice of Esther’s sadistic superego, which consists in the psychological representation of social constraints and pressures imposed on women by a patriarchal social system. In fact, I intend to analyse the mirror scenes taking a feminist[2] stance, that is, a specific kind of political position and discourse that aims for a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against all forms of patriarchy and sexism.

This examination will be principally framed by John Berger’s theories regarding the act of seeing, Susan Bordo’s critique of the body-mind dualism, and Judith Butler’s definition of sex and gender. The notions of gazer and gazee, surveyor and surveyed, converge upon Esther when she looks in the mirror, at the same time as she constructs and destructs her own self-image and identity. Since I argue that the latter are mostly built around and shaped by Esther’s sex and her identification as ‘woman’, understanding the concepts of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ is imperative, on the one hand, so as to comprehend their role in the construction of the self. On the other hand, as far as Esther’s mental condition is concerned, Butler’s rethinking of Freud’s conceptualisation of the ego and superego lays the foundations for my interpretation of her self-image as dissociative and dysmorphic.

2. FEMINIST APPROACHES TO IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION, GENDER AND THE ACT OF SEEING

In English, the act of seeing is also the act of understanding: ‘I see’ is interpreted as I understand. This seems to have Indo-European roots, as the same was true in Classical Greek, wherein the form ‘I have seen’ (ωἶδα) also meant ‘I know’ (Fernandez Menicucci).

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[2] I use the term ‘feminist’ as defined by Toril Moi’s “Feminist, Female, Feminine”.

The idea of seeing and that of understanding have ever since been combined linguistically and culturally: we cannot see the world but through our eyes and we cannot communicate what we see but through language, verbal or otherwise. Different names are given to the same concept of perception, whether one perceives the world with one's eyes or with other sensory organs, everything can be replaced by 'I see' in the sense of 'I feel', 'I think' or 'I experience'. These notions are ultimately constructed through verbal language, which functions as the main tool we use to communicate and to construct stories about anything, including the self. This ability to narrate turns us into characters/elements of that narrative, just like our personal, subjective experience of the world is both what makes us who we are, it gives us an 'identity', and the means through which we construct that 'identity'. This narrative that we, as viewers, and above all, as humans, have, is partly unique and personal, and partly shared by all of us as members of society. Both our individual identity and our cultural identity, therefore, work just as any other 'text' would, through the production of discourses that regulate and delimitate our lives.

From the moment that humans acquired language through culture and developed culture through language, the act of seeing could no longer be an objective act: "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (Berger 8). One of the clearest examples of this lies on the foundations of language grammar, that is, on the syntactic structure of subject and predicate. It is from the superficial form of language that the notion of a subject who sees and an object that is seen arises: I + see + you. The act of seeing turns then into a process of objectification in which both the gazer as the subject and the gaze as the act per se do not simply objectify nor reflect the reality of the gazee, but produce that which is being seen. This results in a projection of the viewer's reality onto that which is viewed. This reifying projection turns the subject-object relationship into a vertical one which is not merely carried out interpersonally, but also consists in the application and reiteration of certain socio-cultural norms and values through the act of seeing.

Given therefore, that identities are constructed discursively into narratives of the self, in the act of seeing not only do humans project "what they know or what they believe" onto other humans, but they may even project their self-narrative onto the object of their gaze. When encountering other individuals, we might see them as roles within our own narratives, and this creates certain expectations on the viewer's part. These expectations are, on the one hand, due to personal needs and motivations, and, on the other hand, they are also drawn from a collective system as part of a socio-cultural contract. Thus, the act of 'seeing people' is only partially rooted in the sensorial: it is also a socio-cultural practice that aims at the identification and classification of individuals. Therefore, the socio-cultural parameters within which our identities emerge will shape our view of external realities, which, of course, includes other humans. Depending on those socio-cultural parameters and on one's specific place in society, the act of looking at another human being might assign a specific role to them, and even dehumanise them, as we will see later on.

One of such socio-cultural parameters is gender, from whose perspective I intend to approach Plath's novel, as stated before. Apart from "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes", gender is, according to Joan Scott, "a primary way of signifying relationships of power", that is, "a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated" (1067-69). However, gender is not the only socio-political axis of power, as it intersects with other "modalities of discursively constituted identities" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 6), such as race, class, ethnicity, or sexuality. It follows then that "it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (6). Gender is, thus, a socio-cultural construction relative to time, space, and role in society and, more specifically to the act of seeing, it is the result of a projection of the cultural values or views of a society onto the body and identity of the object of the gaze.

Seeing will be first taken literally as a material act. This means that we need to consider the body as the primary object of the act of seeing.[3] "Bodies", says Butler, "only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas" (*Bodies that Matter* xi). One of such schemas is the female/male dichotomy, which is traditionally encompassed by the category of sex. Sex will then be understood not only as normative, but as part of "a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs", and "whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls" (1). Sex is, therefore, one of the norms by which the One becomes viable at all. In this sense it works as a power tool, and also as a weapon for including and excluding individual bodies from the collective 'body' of culture, that is, for qualifying "a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (2). This suggests that there are right and wrong ways of being female and male, and that what is left outside of the 'body' of culture remains unintelligible and, consequently, unseen and unspoken—what I do not see I do not understand.

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[3] As Luce Irigaray comments: "more than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters … In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch, hearing, has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations; the moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality" (50).

In this sense, not only do gender expectations designate the domain of acceptable bodies, but they also produce "a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* xi). Regarding the notion of abjection, Julia Kristeva was the first feminist who theorised this concept in connection with horror and the monsterisation of bodies that are 'seen' as wrong, repulsive, grotesque. As we will see, these are all adjectives that will be used by Esther when she sees herself in a mirror. According to Kristeva, one of the functions of the abject is to act as a frontier (9) by demarcating that which is or those who are marginalised. By lacking a definite identity, those rejected and abjected are excluded from the norm, and thus belong to the realm of ambiguity. It is from that position of indetermination and abnormality that they also threaten the subject, for they are perceived as posing a danger to the latter's stability and boundaries. In fact, it is through the very production of this exclusionary matrix that subjects are actually formed, always in contrast to those who are not yet 'subjects', but who still are part of "the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 3). In other words, if there is to be a collective identity, this must be delimited, contained. Those limits will always be defined 'in opposition to' and 'in exclusion of' these Others, which, though excluded, are still essential for the construction and definition of any political subject.

The physical act of seeing simultaneously creates the image of the body and the image of the identity of the gazee, which arises due to the imposition of the normative identification between sex and gender. "The 'I'", therefore, "neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relation themselves" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 7). Subjects are then shaped by the multiple conditions within which they are formed. Therefore, if we are to designate this 'I' as a construct instead of a pre-given premise shaped as a subject or agent, we first need to acknowledge that construct is "a process of reiteration by which both 'subjects' and 'acts' come to appear at all" (9). It is through those reiterative and regulatory discursive mechanisms that power exerts its hegemony. Power is not, therefore, a unified entity that ‘acts’ upon others, but a reiterated series of actions that work in a performative fashion to produce the actual phenomena that they regulate. Gender performativity can be understood as “a repetition or a ritual which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xv). The aim of this is to define and preserve gender identities; because Butler sees gender as an act instead of an ‘essence’, its stability needs to be maintained through the repetition and internalisation of certain practices such as actions, behaviours, gestures, or speech forms. These practices become identifiers of, for instance, womanhood.[4] We choose to do something or behave in a certain way because we have seen other people do so, that is, we ‘quote’ or “cite” them. Subjects are, thus, formed through and within these citational identity categories, which are never “merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary” (Butler, “Contingent Foundations” 166-67). Such identity categories ‘dress’ the body via layers of clothing or other material items, and via immaterial behavioural patterns or expressions to constitute “the materiality of the bodies”; in other words, “to materialize the body’s sex … in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative”[5] (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 2). It is, hence, because of this connection between material and immaterial gendering devices that I have chosen the material object of the mirror as a symbol for both the act of seeing and of projecting onto the body, and for the process of body construction through body images. Moreover, the mirror also functions as a symbol for the materialisation of gender expectations and ideologies, especially those regarding women.

Although gender expectations clearly do not only affect women,[6] when we combine gender relations, identity categories, and the notions of seeing and being seen, this creates, according to John Berger, a duality within a woman’s psyche, in which her self is split into two and she must continuously ‘watch’ herself. “From earliest childhood”, claims Berger, “she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself, and so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituents yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman” (46). This does not only determine the relations between women and men, but also the relations of women with themselves, as exemplified in the metaphor of the mirror. Thereupon, a woman envisions herself as an object, and most notably, the object of someone's vision, that is, as a sight (Berger 47). There seems, therefore, to arise, within a woman's psyche, a notion of self-surveillance that is closely connected with ideas of control, supervision, restriction, and, consequently, of punishment. These concepts have an immediate hold upon human bodies, invested as they are in the political field, and it is only through that constant surveillance and examination that it is possible "to qualify, to classify and to punish" them (Foucault[7] 184). This process of physical discipline and of literal corporal punishment is particularly conspicuous in the case of those bodies labelled as 'female'.

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[4] The word ‘women’ refers to more than the sum of the concepts of sex and gender, as it alludes to its social role or dimension.

[5] This is something that can also be done subversively, detaching yourself from it in order to defy and redefine the very notion of womanhood, of what, in social terms, being a woman means.

[6] For an account on the difficulties that men and boys face regarding gender identification and normativity see *Masculinities* by Connell.

This self-oversight can also be traced back to Freud's theory of the ego and the superego, and especially to Butler's version thereof. "If we rethink Freud's 'superego' as the psychic force of social regulation" asserts Butler, "and we rethink social regulation in terms which include vectors of power such as gender and race", then that watching agency originally described by Freud as a watching judge embodying a set of socially instituted and maintained ideals becomes "the means by which social norms sear the psyche, expose it to a condemnation" (*Bodies that Matter* 182). The superego is thus "a regulatory mechanism by which social ideals are psychically sustained" (180). It stands for the norm, the standard, or the ideal, and it embodies the psychic agency through which social regulation is exerted. It, therefore, functions as the set of norms by which the sexes come to be differentiated and installed, producing socially ideal men and women against which to compare and torment ourselves. This idealization, which is the ego-ideal, lays the groundwork for the superego, which, according to Freud, "is lived as the psychic activity of 'watching' … as it (the superego) constantly watches the real ego and measures it by that (ego-) ideal" (181). What this means is that "the ego designates the psychic experience of being seen", whereas the superego "that of seeing, watching, exposing the ego" (181). Hence, the superego's main feature is to see the ego under persistent scrutiny, in order to judge and hound it by that (ego-) ideal measure or law.

In Plath's novel, the superego often takes sadistic pleasure in martyrising the ego with condemning voices that disturb and oppress it, voices that are frequently triggered by the mere presence of the mirror. In fact, the superego can also be understood as "the psychic apparatus that interweaves the voices of parents, tradition, and culture" (Colin 307), that is, of social order. Therefore, the "watchful eye" of parents, or, more generally, of the authorities in early life, "is internalised in the superego's watchful eye", which, in turn, "haunts the subject, guides its behaviour, and stalks it with feelings of guilt that tyrannise" (309). This internalisation of authority is one of the greatest "cultural achievements", through which the subject is constantly reminded of its subaltern status (308-09). Accordingly, Elizabeth Howell defines this "harsh superego" as "a dissociated, aggressive, internal persecutor self-state" (230), which will be a permanent feature in the analysis of mirrors. This cruel superego is not part of the unified self (232), which, in turn, splits in a number of fragments of the self that are usually pitted against each other by the sadistic superego. It is imperative that these fragments are re-integrated for the healing of any pathology.

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[7] In *Discipline and Punish,* Michel Foucault examines the use of controlled surveillance in Western penal systems. Through the symbol of the panopticon, Foucault envisions an "all seeing" central focus of power in social structures, such as the prison. This could be further on developed to the concept of a 'panoptic body' in which the individual internalisation of discipline would have achieved its peak, as in the case of women who censor or suppress themselves by censoring and suppressing their bodily dimension.

The duality within a woman's psyche and the notions of the ego and the superego are also intimately linked to our dualist heritage, articulated in Western philosophy by Plato, Augustine, or Descartes. Susan Bordo explores its scope with regards to psychopathology. "Psychopathology", she remarks, "is the final outcome of all that is wrong with culture" (227). This means that the different psychological pathologies that emerge within a certain culture are the "crystallisation" of that very culture, of what that culture promotes and what it degrades, which underscores the close connection between our personal circumstances and our cultural and political surroundings. Cartesian dualism makes a clear distinction between our bodies and our minds, that is, between the material and the metaphysical. Rooted in the patristic philosophical tradition, the body is seen as confinement or limitation, almost as a prison or a cage to the mind. It is also something that is outside of and far from our 'true' self, which, in turn, is alienated from the body. Bodies are seen, in short, as sources of ambiguity and obscureness, almost as enemies, and as "the locus of all that threatens our attempts at control" (231).

These ideas, though they might seem superseded, are still consciously present in our collective imagination, and psychological disorders such as anorexia or, more generally, body dysmorphia, give a clear example of their lasting relevance today. For the person experiencing body dysmorphia, as Esther does when she looks in a mirror, some feature of their body is terribly flawed. This flaw is imagined, conceived out of a distorted, definitely biased vision of their reflection. Given the aforementioned definition of psychopathology, the source of this bias should not merely be located in one's personal circumstances or temperament, but on a wider scheme that takes socio-political and cultural variables into account, that is to say, the outside constraints and pressure put, in this case, on women. Therefore, Esther's relationship with her body, or more precisely, with the image she constructs of her body, is terribly troubled because it is shaped by that dualism that construes her body as ultimately Other.

Apart from body dysmorphia, dissociation is another psychological disorder that Esther often experiences throughout the novel. The American Psychiatric Association defines dissociation as "a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control, and behaviour" (291). Although dissociative experiences in their mild form are common in the general population, they become especially frequent and severe for certain psychological diagnostic groups, as well as for victims of a psycho-traumatic event. The victims of those events may use dissociation as a last resort to "protect themselves against the overwhelming exposure of threat", particularly in those occasions in which "escape is not a viable option" (Giesbrecht and Merckelbach 337-38). To dissociate is then to forget, to forget in order to protect yourself. It must be said, though, that the aim of this paper is neither to diagnose Esther nor to try to explain or understand the origin of her dissociation, but simply to analyse it within a wider scheme by considering her neurosis not only as an individual trait, but as a metaphor that could be extrapolated to women in general as members of a patriarchal social system. This symbolic representation is anchored in the body in so far as bodies are the primary material objects of the act of seeing, which is also backed by psychological and trauma theory.[8] Thus, it is the combination of the individual, psychological sphere, and the continuous influence of external agents such as the environment, a specific community, or society in general, which sustains and retriggers trauma, caused by socio-cultural abuse. It is within this theoretical framework that the material object of the mirror will then be analysed as a bridge or medium between society and Esther's body and identity, and as the element that keeps her body separate from her mind.

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[8] See Rothschild.

3. THE MIRROR, THE SELF AND THE OTHER

Words related to the semantic field of the act of seeing appear almost on every single page: nouns like ‘eyes’, ‘sight’, ‘gaze’, ‘look’, ‘glance’, ‘glimpse’, ‘view’, ‘stare’ or ‘vision’, and verbs such as ‘see’, ‘look’, ‘watch’, ‘observe’ or ‘peer’, just to name a few. The different connotations of each of these build a carefully crafted structure or system within which to locate the dialogue between the mirror and the protagonist, Esther, who considers herself to be an observer, and sees this as one of her most outstanding qualities. Throughout the novel, she emphasises her taste for observing, looking at others: “I liked looking at other people in crucial situations … I’d stop and look so hard I never forgot it.” (Plath 13). Eyes seem to hold some sort of ambivalence: some eyes are real, while some are false (150); some are dead and others alive (154). The presence of eyes can be an indicator of threat: “I walked in and found nine pairs of eyes fixed on me. Nine! Eighteen separate eyes.” (208), but also of guidance, of safety, as in the very end of the novel: “The eyes and the faces all turned themselves to me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room.” (258).

The word ‘mirror’ is found twenty-seven times in *The Bell Jar,* and each of these instances constitutes a decisive moment of self-construction for Esther as she faces, literally and metaphorically, herself. The mirror, or even just the idea of the mirror, creates a very intimate space in which Esther turns both into the gazer and the gazee, the subject and the object of the act of seeing. The act of looking becomes, thus, reciprocal, and converges here upon a single individual, but this does not prevent the act from being one of projection, as well as of perception. When Esther sees herself, or, more precisely, sees a reflection of herself in a mirror, she is not simply seeing her body or her physical appearance, but constructing that very own self through the act of seeing. Specifically, the way she sees herself is articulated through words that signify a most dysmorphic perception of a body from which she is constantly trying to flee. The process of disembodiment which her self-image triggers creates, at the same time, a distance from her own physical dimension and the means of expressing her feelings and her mind. Such paradox illustrates the kind of troubled relationship Esther has with her body, a relationship highly conditioned by her psychological condition, but which cannot either be understood without a proper socio-cultural approach.

The first mention of a mirror takes place at the very beginning of the novel. Esther is in New York, working at her summer internship as an editorial assistant. After a night out with Doreen, she decides to walk back to the hotel by herself:

> I slid into the self-service elevator and pushed the button for my floor. The doors folded shut like a noiseless accordion. Then my ears went funny, and I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked. (19)

Although the word 'mirror' *per se* does not appear in this fragment, the reader infers that she is looking into the elevator's mirror. At first, she does not even recognise herself in its reflection: later she adds that, of course, the reflection was only she, as if she had needed the rational, logical part of her brain to confirm and endorse that what her eyes were seeing and what her mind was construing was, indeed, she. Only that such construction is far from being objective or true to reality, although what is undeniable is that it is part of *her own* reality, of what she feels, what she thinks, and what she sees. Esther describes her eyes as "smudgy", that is, smeared, blurred or stained, a description that may simply refer to make-up, but that may also be an indicator of a self-awareness of her sight being corrupted by social expectations and impositions, of her gaze projecting certain thoughts and ideas onto her body; in short, of her body dysmorphia. When she lastly recognises her 'real self' in her 'reflected self' she is appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up she looks. She is, thus, concerned with the passing of time with regards to our 'usefulness'. In this passage, the stress is not on the fact that having wrinkles might make her look less beautiful or diminish her sex appeal, but that her time might be up, that she may no longer be useful to or valuable for society. Through the culturally constructed metaphor of ageing, Esther is expressing her own fears and worries about not fitting in a society that constantly seeks for productiveness and freshness: she feels already used in its most extreme way, wasted, with nothing left to offer. The dysmorphic mind creates a misshapen version of its body in which nothing can be regarded as 'right'. This vision represents and forms that which is unacceptable, horrible, monstrous; that which would be part of what is not socially approved, of what in Butler's terms would constitute the domain of bodies that *do not* matter. Such domain is partly established as a result of reiterative power exerted through sex, but sex understood as "a regulatory ideal, a forcible and differential materialization of bodies, that will produce its remainder, its outside, what one might call its unconscious" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 22), and it is precisely this outside, this Other, that Esther sees in this scene's mirror. In order to express rejection towards herself, she uses a culturally constructed metaphor to disclose her concerns about being used-up or being use-*less*: she sees herself as an old, wrinkled, Chinese woman—a derogatory use of race that will resurface in a passage later on. Her ugliness revolves around the idea of having become an Other who no longer has a function. In this case, this Other is racialised and, as such, is given no voice in society; this is, therefore, someone with whom women at the time, marginalised from the public sphere as they were, could identify because of their shared subalternity. When she gets out of the elevator, she goes into her room and thinks Doreen's cigarettes' smoke must have "materialized out of thin air as a sort of judgement" (19). Self-judgement is thus present from the very beginning of the novel, and takes many different shapes, from the smoke to the mirror itself, since it is through the physical object of the mirror that her reflection acquires such harsh tones.

The next encounter with a mirror occurs in the very next page: "[t]he mirror over my bureau seemed slightly warped and much too silver. The face in it looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury" (20). The description of the actual mirror could function here as a depiction of the gender role one does not fit in: it is "slightly warped", twisted, a direct reference to the etymological sense of the term dis-*tortion*, and the excess conveyed by the phrase "much too silver" turns the otherwise positive denotative meaning of "silver" into a blinding, almost burning and oppressive sensorial experience. Her reflection is here again deformed or disfigured, dysmorphic in its most literal sense, as if she were looking at herself in a funhouse mirror. Immediately after describing herself in the mirror, Esther thinks "of crawling in between the bed- sheets and trying to sleep, but that appealed to [her] about as much as stuffing a dirty, scrawled-over letter into a fresh, clean envelope." Eventually, she "decided to take a hot bath" (21). The metaphor of the envelope is a rephrasing of the aforementioned vision of herself "wrinkled" and "used-up" like a crumpled sheet of paper. In this case, all the paper in the letter has been used and is now unappealing, even disgusting. In order to clean, or more precisely, to spiritually cleanse herself, she needs to take a hot bath, which needs to be "very hot, so hot you can barely stand putting your foot in it" (21). The bath functions as a cathartic experience, oscillating between a baptism with holy water and self-torture with scalding water. Everything dissolves in the bath: Doreen, the boys she has met that night, even New York. None of them matter anymore and she can finally detach herself from social reality. In fact, she creates a very clear distinction between 'them' and herself: they are dirty and she is pure. “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” (22): her perception of the outside world, big, scary, and unknown, reveals traces of a religious mindset in the identification between ‘worldly pleasures’ and dirt, but what these feelings mostly hide is a very deep sorrow, and a desperate need to purify herself through the metaphor of the bath.

The following scene continues with the analogy between physical cleaning and spiritual cleansing:

> I fumbled in my pocketbook for the gilt compact with the mascara and the mascara brush and the eyeshadow and the three lipsticks and the side mirror. The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell after a prolonged beating. It looked bruised and puffy and all the wrong colours. It was a face that needed soap and water and Christian tolerance. (104)

The make-up in her pocketbook—mascara, eyeshadow, and lipstick being symbols of the performativity of womanhood—deeply contrasts with the face “peering back” at her, described as that of a prisoner; not just any prisoner, but one that has been beaten up, tortured. It is the ultimate portrait of a victim that has no escape. Faced with the woman peering from the “grating of a prison cell”—which, considering what has previously been said about the body-mind dualism could refer to her own body—the gazer feels abused, wounded, hurt. Besides the body-mind dualism, this image also signifies the split self of the narrator, who does not only see herself as victimised, but also as guilty. She does not say she needs pity nor mercy, but tolerance, and, more specifically, Christian tolerance. To tolerate somebody implies thinking they are wrong, or annoying, or even sinful, but also that one is still making an effort to accept them. In this case, she wants to help and take care of herself, but only after blaming and condemning her soul and flesh. Self-care is thus conditional on having purged her guilt via the fire of redemption. The question that arises is how she is to achieve this redemption. Her first reaction is to equal the signs of torture to dirt, or, at least, to declare that they make *her* dirty. Obviously, one cannot clean, wipe, nor wash a bruise off the skin. Nevertheless, and as in the metaphor of the bath before, “cleaning” is what she, in her self-loathing, seeks. Lastly, she adds that she “started to paint [her face] with small heart” (107), trying to conceal “all the wrong colours” in it. “Wrong” is a considerably strong adjective, indicating something inappropriate, unacceptable, even immoral or dishonest. She, therefore, proceeds to symbolically hide or cover with make-up the remains of her impropriety and unsuitability for society, for she could not hold back her tears nor mask her pain otherwise. In her inability to perform femininity correctly, she is both unfulfilling her expected role as a woman—collected, moderate, still—and simultaneously fulfilling the expectation of the 'hysterical woman'[9]—neurotic, irrational, mad.

To properly understand the passage above, it is crucial to contextualise it. Esther is getting ready to have her photograph taken for the magazine. Photographs resemble mirrors in that they also allow us to see ourselves from an external point of view. To be able to see the way we look is, as we have seen, something much more complex and profound than to simply acknowledge our physical appearance, especially for somebody who suffers from dissociation. Esther recounts how, when asked to smile, she started to "quirk up" her own mouth, "obediently, like the mouth of a ventriloquist's dummy", only to find herself "burst out" into tears (107). The analogy with a dummy reveals the drastic disembodiment she experiences. Since the dummy belongs to a ventriloquist, she distances herself from her own body and actions, as if these were performed by a third party through an inanimate object. Disconnected from the present time and the world around her, she is also detached from her own actions, passive and doll-like. The way she expresses her feelings is also very insightful into her awareness of the mechanisms of her neurosis: "I felt limp and betrayed, like the skin shed by a terrible animal. It was a relief to be free of the animal, but it seemed to have taken my spirit with it, and everything else it could lay its paws on" (107). She feels weak, exhausted, and also betrayed by her own body, by her crying, and mainly by that which seems to be in control of her physical dimension, that which she describes as a terrible animal that strips her of her will and power. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as her mental disorder; on the other hand, the 'animal' can also refer to the superego's sadistic voice, sprung from the fragmentation between the ego and the superego due to a dysfunctional relationship between the two of them. Both interpretations are, nevertheless, ultimately united in a circular cause-effect relationship: the sadistic voice is reinforced by her illness, and her illness feeds on her intrusive thoughts.

Chapter ten starts with the words: "The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian" (118). Here again, she uses the figure of a racialised Other to express her own Otherness: she, too, has been silenced, marginalised. This vision in the mirror sets the context for and triggers the action in the scene, as she “drop[s] the compact [mirror] into [her] pocket-book and stare[s] out of the train window”, focusing her attention on her surroundings, and, eventually, on her body: “I glanced down at my unfamiliar skirt and blouse”. The night before Esther had “fed [her] wardrobe to the night wind, like a loved one’s ashes” (117), and had then to trade her bathrobe with Betsy for a blouse and a skirt. Esther describes the frills of the sleeves of Betsy’s white blouse she is now wearing as “floppy as the wings of a new angel” (118). Despite her word’s lyricism, a “new angel” implies a corpse left behind, the body of somebody recently dead. “Ghosted over the landscape”, she distinguishes “a wan reflection of [herself], white wings, brown ponytail and all” (118). She envisions herself as an angel, purified and sinless. However, this angel is still pale, colourless, weak; its delicate white wings cannot conceal the fact that for one to feel as an angel, one must first and foremost feel detached from the liveliness and colourfulness of life. In harmony with her blouse, her skirt, which “stuck out like a lampshade”, was a “green dirndl with tiny black, white and electric blue shapes swarming across it”, swarming like insects directed towards a shared interest, which may be a piece of fruit, dirt, or a corpse. To complete her funereal look, “two diagonal lines of dried blood marked [her] cheeks”, traces of a quarrel with Marco, one of the boys introduced to Esther by Doreen. She decided not to wash the stains because they seemed “touching, and rather spectacular”, worthy of being displayed on her, “like the relic of a dead lover, till they wore off of their own accord” (119). On this occasion, she has not felt the urge to clean herself in order to feel pure, worthy, again, because she has provided the smears of their own significance: they make her feel powerful. But the blood lines are also very uncomfortable to wear, if she “smiled or moved [her] face too much, the blood would flake away in no time”, so she must keep her face “immobile”. The power she feels is thus stained by a sense of paralysis, stiffness, passivity, signs of her increasing apathy and depression. The vision of herself ghosting over the landscape denotes how out of place and disembodied she feels. She creates this ‘phantasy’ as a coping mechanism against a reality ever more stifling and distressing, in which her corporeality dissolves. In this whirlwind of emotions, Esther observes: “I didn’t really see why people should look at me. Plenty of people looked queerer than I did” (119). Wavering between wanting to stand out and wanting to belong, she yearns for a moment of peace away from the disapproval and inquisitiveness of other people’s gazes. In this scene wherein her clothes seem to mirror her inward state, it begins to dawn on her that something is not right within herself, but she still refuses to believe it is so.

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[9] For more information on the establishment of hysteria as a medical category and its association to women and femininity see Arnaud, especially chapter one.

The next scene containing a mirror takes us one step further into Esther's final acceptance of her affliction, as it lets us glimpse her forthcoming suicide attempt. With the Gillette blades in her hand, Esther stands "in front of the medicine cabinet. If [she] looked in the mirror while [she] did it, it would be like watching somebody else, in a book or a play" (156). She is imagining how the surface of the mirror would reflect her suicide. In doing so, she distances herself from her reflection to the point that she imagines the act would feel as alien, as if somebody else were committing 'it'. Her words suggest a spectator observing a performance, which turns the woman in the mirror into a character in a play or film: fictional, unreal, false. What she is considering doing requires such a distance between action and actor, performance and performer, that the latter needs to be fictitious, somebody with whom she cannot identify. The fact that the word "mirror" is used in what is otherwise a mirror-less scene, implies, by definition, the employment of the gaze's mutual symmetry to recognise and regard the two versions of the same person, which brings her back to herself and her ruthless self-disgust: "but the person in the mirror was paralysed and too stupid to do a thing". Scornfully, she insults herself, despises herself for not being able to go through with 'it'. Once more, her perverse hostility finds its origin and cause in the superego's sadistic voice, which intrusively pierces and corrupts her body and mind through these heartless, unyielding, convictions: 'you are a coward and you are dumb'. All along, the image of the mirror, either real or fictional, has been the one prompting this dialogue. This passage starts with Esther planning her death, recalling the words of "some old Roman philosopher" who said "he would open his veins in a warm bath" (156). The bath now symbolises the ultimate form of self-purification, a rebirth which does not entail an upcoming 'birth', but the finality of death. After the inner, mirror-mediated, communication, Esther lets the razor "drop of its own weight, like a guillotine" (156), as if the razor were delivering justice, and, specifically, a sentence on her guilty flesh. She is short on time, for her mother will be home any minute, so this is merely some "practice", "a start". Esther then focuses her attention on her body: her right ankle, her left knee, her right hand, her calf. She follows the trail of the dripping blood with her eyes as it descends into the "cup of [her] black patent leather shoe" (156). This close-up[10] to the parts of her body might indicate an effort to escape from this dissociative episode, directing her gaze towards the traces left by her blood, as an indicator of the fact that, for the moment, she is still alive. Yet, she might also feel unable to escape the process of depersonalisation, feeling so trapped within the delusion that she envisions her body in pieces, as if she were witnessing the figurative dismemberment of her future corpse.

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[10] This can be read as Esther performing one of the techniques known as 'grounding' that are used to get out or come back from a dissociative episode. It works by "engaging the senses and occupying the mind in a non-destructive fashion" ("Grounding Techniques"), refocusing one's attention on the present moment.

The final passage takes place in a hospital. Esther has been taken there after having been found in the cellar's breezeway. She has attempted suicide and is watched closely by the staff at the hospital. Soon after regaining consciousness, Esther insists on seeing a mirror in order to see the way she looks and to see the way others see her. At first, her request is refused; the nurses believe it is better for her not to see her face because, as they tell her, she does not "look very pretty" (184). Even if that might have been said as an excuse, it is remarkable how, even after a suicide attempt, beauty is still presented as central to a woman's identity. Finally, one of the nurses yields to Esther's demand and hands her the much-desired mirror, which triggers the following inner monologue:

> At first I didn't see what the trouble was. 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. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose-coloured sore at either corner. The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colours. I smiled. The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin. (185)

This scene once again begins with Esther not recognising herself in her reflection, and this time, not even identifying it as a mirror's reflection, but as a picture, static and suspended in time. This lack of self-identification is connected with the ambiguous, genderless image she visualises, neither a man nor a woman, something unidentifiable, unclassifiable, and which thus belongs to the realm of Otherness and of abjection. Throughout the passage, she refers to the image in the mirror in the third person, creating a clear distinction between herself and that Other. In doing so, she is also detaching from her own appearance and her body. The face in the reflection is bloated to the point of shapelessness; it is deformed and disfigured into something indeterminate. The conglomeration of bright colours in it makes it seem unnatural, inhuman, while the sallow hue of her skin indicates sickness. She smiles, but this gesture is not mirrored by her reflection, as the Other "cracks into a grin", as if aping Esther's facial expressions without comprehending them. It follows that the Otherness reflected in the mirror does not simply consist in a lack of beauty, but in something grotesque to the point of being disconcerting, alarming, even scary. After the suicide attempt, her disfigurement is more literal than dysmorphic, but it is striking that her way of experiencing it still measures herself against a (social or ego-) ideal: the mirror reminds her of what she is not, but is expected to be—happy, beautiful, looking for a husband—and it makes her believe she is something she is not—ugly, disgusting, monstrous.

Directly after she looks in the mirror, a crash is heard, and the mirror is found in pieces by the nurses. There is no further explanation on how the mirror breaks, but it is clear that, deliberately or not, Esther is the one who causes its shattering. The aforementioned scene thus ends with a literal destruction of the mirror in the hospital and an emerging symbolic destruction of the mirror as a filter to her gaze, a filter between her mind and her body. This incident will also be the reason for her admission in a psychiatric hospital. "Anybody could drop a mirror" thinks Esther, "I didn't see why they should get so stirred up" (185). She seems to regard it as an accident, but the line between "dropping" and 'throwing' is deliberately blurred by the discursive construction of the narrative that locates the crash immediately after describing Esther's monstrous self-image. We, as readers, are left with the baffling words exchanged between the nurses: "didn't I tell you" (185). They are referring to the mirror: "didn't I tell you [not to give her a mirror]". In a hospital, there are specific protocols for patients admitted after a suicide attempt. The nurses may have been afraid that Esther might break the mirror on purpose to cut herself with its fragments. The incident or accident was then something that could have been foreseen both by the nurses and by the readers, but for different reasons. Since we have followed Esther's interior monologues and thought process, we know the mirror sparks the sadistic voice in her mind. Thus, even if we cannot be sure whether it was done intentionally or not, nor of her reliability as a narrator, the crash of the mirror still reveals an emerging inner struggle, perhaps between her body, which tries to protect her, and her mind. In this sense, in her split self, the body might be the one responsible for the breaking, acting under the most primary of instincts: that of survival. Since the vision in the mirror is threatening her well-being, her bodily self tries to keep her safe by breaking the object that threatens her stability. This action goes beyond the realm of will or agency: it is involuntary, visceral, and thus, powerful in a primitive, instinctive way. At this initial point in her recovery process, it is not that crucial to ascertain whether she drops or throws the mirror, but to realise that something is changing in her, as she regains the control over her body and releases it from the hypnotic power of the mirror and of her dysmorphic self-image to the point that her hand finally let it go.

On her way to the new hospital, Esther's mother mentions that she should have "behaved better", she should not have "broken that mirror, then maybe they'd have let [her] stay" (186). With these words, her mother is embodying the sadistic voices that have been torturing her, as she condemns Esther for having broken the allegorical object of the mirror through which those voices also echo. She, thus, represents the gender oppressions within any patriarchal order by judging and blaming Esther for having confronted them. After all, this incident also entails Esther's internment in a mental institution, which implies that both society at large and circle of personal relations label her as 'crazy', as a 'danger' to both herself and others. In this context, the breaking of the mirror becomes an act of rebellion, although not a very successful one, since Esther herself is not fully aware of what its destruction means, much less the nurses or her mother. Nevertheless, she has physically felt the urge of smashing it, whether by dropping it or throwing it away. This impulse, albeit unconscious, still indicates a start of a journey of emancipation from the destructiveness of the social system that caused the sadistic superego to exist in the first place. When she instinctively breaks the mirror, that is, the symbol for the materialisation of certain external beliefs and expectations, literally a lens that corrupts her gaze through the imposition of social values, she is then symbolically distancing herself from those constraints and demands, starting on her own path towards recovery by regaining control over her split self, and reclaiming her body as an inseparable part of her self.

4. CONCLUSION

The passages analysed above create the illusion of there being two bodies, one at either side of the mirror, when in fact there is only one body and one viewer that functions both as gazer and as gazee. Furthermore, there also exists a second opposition: that of the mind vis-à-vis the body; and a third one: that of the mind that turns against itself. Within this dichotomous structure, the mirror functions as a medium, a filter, a third element that comes between the mind and the body, the superego and the ego, and mediates between Esther the individual and Esther the social construct. This element is physically and metaphysically external to Esther, as it is a material object made of glass and silver, and a symbolic device composed of socio-cultural parameters. The mirror showcases her shortcomings, her inability to fulfil her social role as a woman. It follows that not only does it bridge the symbolic distance between the real and the deformed body, but it also produces Esther's distorted notion of her Self through the reiteration of socio-cultural impositions and expectations. Thus, the mirror triggers the superego's sadistic voice by functioning more as a window to the outside world than as a looking-glass, as it reflects not only her individual trauma, but a whole society that constantly reproduces it.

On the one hand, the presence—either material or imagined—of the mirror unleashes the dissociative episodes analysed in this paper, and, on the other, it catalyses Esther's dysmorphic vision of her body. These two pathological mechanisms reflect and fuel the unequal relationship between the body and the mind: everything that is negative is projected onto the body, which, in turn, is experienced as a prison and seen as something repulsive, dirty, impure, and useless. The mirror is thus a symbol of Esther's process of self-deconstruction into polarised opposites—subject/object, mind/body, superego/ego—and of her process of self-destruction. However, by literally breaking the mirror, Esther shows herself capable of reclaiming her body as part of the self and, consequently, of regaining her agency through her physical dimension. She thus defies the Cartesian dualism that pits the mind against the body. The destruction of the mirror also discloses Esther's rebellion against society, embodied by the nurses and by her own mother, who epitomises the voice of social order by verbally chastising her for breaking the mirror. Her mother's words are a reminder of the fact that reconstructing her self-image is only the first step in Esther's journey of self-acceptance, for there are countless 'mirrors' in the world, that is, spaces wherein systematic social control is exerted on one's identity through the manipulation of one's self-image. Esther's ultimate goal must, therefore, be to refuse to be reduced to being the object of the collective gaze of social scrutiny and reclaim her agency in the process of self-definition. Whether she succeeds in doing so or not is not clear in the novel, for the ending is ambiguous: the narrative thread stops at the moment Esther gets into the room wherein the doctors will decide if she should be discharged or not. There is also a hint at Esther having a baby in the future, but this ending is still controversial, and the search for the liberation of the female subject remains unsettled. The act of breaking the mirror thus achieves further significance as the first step in a lifelong process that signals, as an affirmative action, Esther's determination to explore and build her own self far from the objectifying power of social impositions.

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