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PONTIFÍCIA UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL
FACULDADE DE LETRAS

SUELEN ELISE SANDRIN

**BEYOND *THE BELL JAR*: A COMPARISON BETWEEN SYLVIA PLATH'S LIFE
AND FICTION**

Porto Alegre

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Monografia apresentada à Pontifícia
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como requisito parcial para a obtenção do
grau de Licenciado em Letras.

Orientador: Prof. Dr. Pedro Theobald

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Porto Alegre

2012

To my mom,
whose strength and kindness encourage
me, every day, to go on.

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I would like to thank God for guiding me and always being by my side. Without Him, nothing would have been possible. I also would like to thank my father, my brother and my mother, for being supportive, caring and always proud of my achievements.

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Finally, my special thanks to my boyfriend, Paulo de Mello Junior, who was always by my side, supporting my choices and whose love and companionship encouraged me to proceed.

When they asked me what I wanted
to be I said I didn't know.
'Oh, sure you know,' the
photographer said.
'She wants,' said Jay Cee wittily, 'to
be everything'.

(Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*)

ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath's poetry is known by its great account of themes as depression, sadness and despair. Her words are powerful and the subjects of her writing are usually based on personal experiences and feelings. Plath's premature death left a great amount of poetry but only one novel, *The Bell Jar*, which tells the story of Esther Greenwood, a young woman who suffers from the society's pressure and attempts suicide. Taking this information into account, this paper presents the genres which approach the art of transposing real life to literature as well as the theories which support this practice: Autobiography, Autofiction and Autobiographical Novel. Moreover, basing fictional characters on real people is also discussed, mainly considering Candido's theory, which explains the topic and classifies the characters according to their distance from reality. This paper also analyzes Sylvia Plath's only written novel *The Bell Jar* considering and focusing especially on its autobiographical elements. In order to accomplish the autobiographical analysis, Sylvia Plath's novel is compared to her personal letters as well as to an authorized biography. Finally, this paper fits *The Bell Jar* in one of those genres as well as exposes where the main character of the novel fits into the classification regarding its distance from reality.

Key-words: Sylvia Plath. Fiction. Autobiography. autobiographical novel. Autofiction. Character.

RESUMO

A poesia de Sylvia Plath é conhecida pela utilização de temas como depressão, tristeza e desespero. Suas palavras são famosas por sua força e por normalmente serem baseadas em experiências e sentimentos pessoais. A morte prematura de Plath deixou uma variada gama de poesia, mas apenas um romance, *The Bell Jar*, que conta a história de Esther Greenwood, uma jovem que sofre com a pressão da sociedade e tenta suicídio. Levando esses fatos em consideração, este trabalho apresenta os gêneros que abordam a arte de transpor a vida real à literatura assim como as teorias que suportam essa prática: Autobiografia, Autoficção e Romance Autobiográfico. Além disso, a criação de personagens baseados na vida real também é discutida, utilizando como base, principalmente, a teoria de Candido, que explica o assunto e classifica os personagens de acordo com a distância da realidade. Além disso, este trabalho analisa o único romance de Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, considerando e focalizando seus elementos autobiográficos. A fim de realizar a análise, o romance de Sylvia Plath é comparado a seus diários e autobiografia autorizada, permitindo, assim, sua classificação de acordo com os gêneros expostos, assim como a classificação da protagonista de acordo com a distância da realidade.

Palavras-chave: Sylvia Plath. Ficção. Autobiografia. romance autobiográfico. Autoficção. Personagem.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath is an expressive, controversial and important figure in American Literature. She is known by great technique and strong words, which have the potency to touch the readers to their very core and express, at the same time, beauty and sadness.

Once reading the author's poems and novel, the power of her words evoke some questions regarding the autobiographical account they portray. Upon reading the poem "Daddy", for example, one might question Plath's hatred towards her father and if it really is autobiographically based.

The same feeling occurs with her only novel *The Bell Jar*, where Sylvia Plath introduces us to Esther Greenwood, a young, talented and successful writer haunted by her own need to reach perfection. Esther ends up facing a breakdown and attempting suicide. Through a detailed first-person narrative, Plath is able to share Esther's feelings, thoughts and actions and totally involve the reader, who ends up questioning if Esther is mirrored in Plath's own personality and if the character's life is based on the author's own.

Taking these facts into account, this paper, whose approach is theoretical, aims at discussing if Sylvia Plath was, in fact, able to transpose real events and feelings of her life into her novel *The Bell Jar*, expose this transposition as well as analyze events and characters whose essence is, indeed, fictionalized. Upon discovering that, it will be possible to conclude if the *The Bell Jar* is considered an autobiography, an autofiction or an autobiographical novel and to what extent Esther Greenwood is distant from Sylvia Plath's reality.

The opportunity to identify the resources the author used in order to cause the effect of hiding and disguising herself when telling her own life in literature and understanding the ability to convert life into fiction are the reasons which make this subject valuable and interesting to be studied. Besides, *The Bell Jar* is deeply analyzed under other aspects but few studies were found about its autobiographical nature.

In order to accomplish this research, this paper begins with an introduction which is followed by three sections of theoretical background and four sections of analysis. The first section of the theoretical background deals with the autobiographical theory, based mostly on Lejeune's proposition. The second aims to explain two

variations of autobiography -autofiction and the autobiographical novel - and the last one approaches specifically the character and how it can be based on real people. The analysis starts by introductory sections which aim to present Sylvia Plath's literary moment, biography and novel, in order to allow the analysis in the last section.

2 THEORETICAL APPROACH

In order to accomplish this research and understand the construction of *The Bell Jar*, it is necessary to comprehend basic aspects of the autobiography, autobiographic novel and autofiction genre and the differences and similarities between the fictional character and the real person. The following sections of theoretical background approach these topics.

2.1 THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Etymologically derived from the Greek words 'self', 'life', and 'write' (auto/bio/graphic), the term autobiography has been thought to be coined by Robert Southey in 1809, when describing the work of a Portuguese poet called Francisco Vieira. There is evidence of earlier usage, at the end of the eighteenth century, in a review attributed to William Taylor of Isaac D'Israeli's *Miscellanies* (ANDERSON, 2001).

However, signals of the genre date back to AD 398-400, with St. Augustine's *Confessions*, which is often thought as the origin of Western autobiography, both in the sense of making a historical beginning and of setting up a model for other, later texts. According to Roy Pascal, "this 'first great' autobiography has a 'decisive significance' and it establishes a crucial narrative design where incidents, trivial in themselves, become representative moments in the growth of a personality" (PASCAL, 1960 apud ANDERSON, 2011, p. 3). After Augustine, three writers contributed for the development of this genre. Each of them followed Augustine's turn inward and their autobiographies constituted the modern moment of the genre, with different accounts and ways of problematizing the relationship of the self to the world: Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1781-89), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Poetry and Truth* (1812) and William Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, *The Prelude* (1850). According to Stelzig, "each of them accomplished the definitive self-inscription of a highly developed individuality in a genre revitalized and transformed to allow for the full display of that individuality" (STELZIG, 2011, p. 4). The originality of these three autobiographers "was to give distinctive imaginative forms to their lives" (STELZIG, 2011, 4).

More recently, Roland Barthes' *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977), even though aiming to be an autobiography, attempts to deconstruct the major assumptions which underline the genre. The author discards the use of the first person singular and adopts the use of "he", "R.B", "you" and "I" instead, reinforcing the distance between the author and the text in a fragmented autobiography. Barthes interrogated the boundary between different kinds of discourse and used autobiography as a source of pleasure and critique.

Thus, the autobiography has been considered and evolved along time as a "distinct literary genre and, as such, an effective way to expose controversial ideas, including authorship, selfhood and representation and the division between fact and fiction" (ANDERSON, 2001, p. 2). E. Stuart Bates defines autobiography as "a narrative of the past of a person by the person concerned" (BATES, 1937, p 2). One of the most considerable studies in this area, however, belongs to the scholar Philippe Lejeune, who proposes *The Autobiographic Pact*, a theory about the autobiography which was chosen as a basis to discuss this genre in the present paper. This study served as reference to the autobiographical genre and helped to clarify confusing theories which considered it only a variation of fiction (ALBERCA, 2007). In his work, Lejeune starts exposing what he thought to be a plausible definition for autobiography: "Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité"¹ (LEJEUNE, 1996, p.14).

The unwritten yet real pact between the autobiographer and the reader Lejeune proposes is that there can be no discrepancy between the name of the protagonist, the narrator and the author. Furthermore, the author has to be committed to tell the reader the truth about his life and this pact can only happen if the author intends to establish it. This intentionality of telling the truth signals the "honesty" of the author, the belief that he is behind the text, guaranteeing the truth of the events and leading to his own origin. Thus, the author's intention is a crucial link between him, the narrator and the protagonist (ANDERSON, 2011). According to Alberca (2007), in order to establish an autobiography, the author should not only tell the truth about his life but also promise sincerity to the reader, declaring this

¹"A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" Translation in *Autobiography: New Critical Idiom* (ANDERSON, 2011).

commitment and asking for trust. Roy Pascal states that the autobiography depends on the “seriousness of the author, the seriousness of his personality and his intention in writing” (PASCAL, 1960 apud ANDERSON, 2011, p 3).

In order to specify the definition, Lejeune proposes other elements which he divided into four different categories:

1. Forme du langage: (a) récit; (b) en prose.
2. Sujet traité: vie individuelle, histoire d’une personnalité.
3. Situation de l’auteur: identité de l’auteur (dont le nom renvoie à une personne réelle) et du narrateur.
4. Position du narrateur: (a) identité du narrateur et du personnage principal; (b) perspective rétrospective du récit² (LEJEUNE, 2008, p. 14).

These categories restrict the genre: to fully be considered an autobiography, a text has to meet all these demands; otherwise it ends up being classified as one of the neighbor categories, such as memories, biographies, first person novels, autobiographical poems, diaries and essays. In biographies, for example, the identity between the narrator and the main character is not respected (the narrator is one person whereas the main character is another, they are not identical), in autobiographical poems, the linguistic form used in autobiographies is not underscored, in personal novels, the third item is not applied.

Thus, all related categories end up failing with one of the required elements. These elements, however, are susceptible of changes and certain conditions may not be totally underscored by the text and, even so, it can be deemed autobiographical. The only demands which cannot be discarded are 3 and 4 (a): there must be identity between author, narrator and protagonist and this identity must be explicit.

This identity which the autobiographical genre supposes is usually characterized by the use of first person narrative, which Gérard Genette calls “autodiegetic” (GENETTE, 1976), when the narrator and the main character are the same through the first person discourse. However, according to Lejeune, identity may also be established if the text is written in third-person narrative, for example. Although, in this case, the identity is not exposed by the use of the first person, it is indirectly presented through the equation author = narrator and author = protagonist,

²“1. Linguistic form: (a) narrative; (b) prose. 2. Subject treated: individual life, personal history. 3. Situation of the author: identity between author (whose name designates a real person) and narrator. 4. Position of the narrator: (a) narrator and protagonist are identical; (b) narration is retrospectively oriented”. (My own translation).

which leads to the conclusion narrator = character. This process of writing may result in different feelings, such as great proud or submission. Other voices in autobiography are mentioned by Lejeune, such as the use of the second person narrative, “you”, in autobiographies, even though this practice is rare.

In what concerns the coincidence of name, Lejeune states the author, narrator and protagonist must be the same person and, thus, author and character must share the name. According to Alberca, the importance of the real name goes beyond the autobiography:

La importancia de la identidad nominal no es en la autobiografía, ni tampoco en la vida cotidiana, una mera cuestión de registro civil, sino que es un tema de profundo calado, pues no existimos socialmente hasta que no detentamos una identidad administrativa y, por consiguiente, un nombre. (ALBERCA, p.68, 2007).³

Considering the importance of the identity of name in the autobiography, how can we confirm that author and narrator are the same? Lejeune suggests this identity can be established in two forms: (1) Implicitly (a) through the use of titles which convey the idea of an autobiography, such as “History of my life”, “Autobiography”; (b) through the initial section of the book, when the narrator speaks as the author and commits with the reader, so the latter assumes the narrator refers to the name written on the cover, even though this name does not appear in the text; (2) Overtly through the coincidence of names between narrator-character and author. Even when the author opts for a pseudonym instead of his real name, it is considered only a variation and does not interfere in the author’s identity. (LEJEUNE, 2008).

When cogitating fictional elements in autobiographies, such as a fictional name for the character (different from the author’s), the reader might think the history lived by the character is exactly the same the author lived, either by reading external information or because the narrative does not seem like fiction. According to Lejeune, however, this case cannot be considered an autobiography, since this genre assumes an explicit identity between author and narrator-protagonist.

Thus, in order to explain fictional elements and as a counterpart to this autobiographical contract, Lejeune suggests the fictional contract, which has two main

³ “The importance of the identity of name is neither in the autobiography nor in the everyday life a matter of civil registration, but a matter of profound significance, because we do not exist socially until we have an administrative identity and, thus, a name.”(Myown translation).

aspects: the non-identity between author and protagonist, and an attestation of fictionality. This attestation is usually expressed through the subtitle “novel” which leaves no question of genre to the reader. With these two variables — type of contract and identity or non-identity — Lejeune proposes a classification of all possible cases.

Name of character → Pact↓	≠ Name of the author	≡ 0	≡ name of the author
Fictional	1 a Novel	2 a Novel	
≡ 0	1 b Novel	2 b Indeterminate	3 a Autobiography
Autobiographic		2 c Autobiography	3 b Autobiography ⁴

In the first case (1), the name of the character differs from the author’s and this dissemblance discards the possibility of the autobiographical pact because, as stated before, an autobiography requires identity between the author, the narrator and the protagonist. Even if the story is presented as truth or if it is deemed as truth by the reader even being categorized as fiction, the lack of the onomastic pact and identity determines its category as novel.

In case number two (2), the name of the character is unknown (=0) which turns this case more complex, enabling three different options of interpretation. The first one is if the pact established is fictional (the fictional nature of the book is portrayed in its cover or cover page). In this case, the autodiegetic narration, when narrator and main character are the same, is attributed to a fictional character. The second option is established with an unknown pact (=0), neither fictional nor autobiographical. Finally, the third option consists of an autobiographical pact: when the character does not have a name but the author explicitly declares he is the narrator and, due to the autodiegetic narration, the character. This pact can be signed through the title of the autobiography, as Lejeune exemplifies using Edgard Quinet’s work *Histoire de mes idées* or *History of*

⁴LEJEUNE, Philippe. O pacto autobiográfico: de Rousseau à internet. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2008. p. 28.

*my ideas*⁵ when the author reinforces the autobiographical nature of his book in the preface. In this case, Quinet's name is not mentioned during the story, but the pact signed defines the "I" as the author.

In the third case (3), there is onomastic identity between the character and the author and this identity excludes any possibility of fiction. This case can be divided into two different options according to the pact established. Firstly, in the unknown pact (=0), the reader is able to identify that the author, narrator and character share the same identity even if this information is not explicitly declared. Secondly, the autobiographical pact, when the autobiographical nature is either explicit by the title or by the identity of names.

Lejeune considers autobiography only the following cases: 2c, 3a and 3b. The others can be deemed as novels (1a, 1b, 2a and, according to our judgment, 2b). In this combination, however, two options are ruled out as impossible: the autobiography, in which the name of the protagonist is not the name of the author, and the work of fiction in which the name of the protagonist is the name of the author. Although Lejeune considers the possibility of creating these categories, he claims they would be provided with internal contradiction. In the first case, for example, the reader might conclude there is an error and in the second option, the reader might deem the autobiography as a novel. He claims these two options would result "in neither autobiographical nor fictional readings, but in an ambiguous game" (LEJEUNE, 2008, p 32).

As an answer to the supposed improbability of author and protagonist sharing names in a fictional story which Lejeune supports, a French author called Serge Doubrovsky coined a new term, "autofiction", to categorize a novel he wrote about himself - *Fils*⁶. The term was first used in 1977, being considered an answer to Lejeune's proposal, and created to name a genre between autobiography and fiction. The term as well as its characteristics are going to be underscored later on.

Indeed, much has been discussed in what concerns fictional elements in autobiographies. As an example, contrasting with Lejeune's ideas, Bates (1937) claims that in an autobiography the author can deal with content he considers essential when telling the story, omit information he is ashamed of and enlarge

⁵ QUINET, Edgard. *Histoire de Mes Idées : Autobiographie*. Paris: Paris Hachette, 1878. (My own translation).

⁶ DOUBROVSKY, Serge. *Fils*, Paris: Gallimard, 1977.

special events. The author “may begin where he likes and end where he likes; or must” (BATES, 1937, p. 3). The autobiographer is able to alter his/her story, shape the facts as desired, include or omit events. Even the most accurate autobiographies have fictional elements (BATES, 1937). Thus, Bates, differently from Lejeune’s proposal, accepts fictional elements in autobiographies and the omission and enlarging of facts of the author’s life. Fiction in autobiography and the possibility of not telling the real truth goes against the autobiographical pact Lejeune would propose. According to Bates “There is, in fact, no dividing line between autobiography and fiction” (BATES, 1937, p. 9).

It is understood Bates’s theory about the autobiography is more incipient than Lejeune’s and that the latter has updated it, clarified and categorized the genre, but not only Bates believes in fictional elements in autobiographies: this statement has been supported by some theoreticians especially in the last decades of the twentieth century. In the chapter *Autobiographie et fiction* present in *Signes de vie. Le Pacte autobiographique*⁷, for example, Lejeune problematizes topics formerly approached and replies to scholars that doubt the trustable characteristic of the genre and who state that the only way to reach any form of truth is through the creation of fictional resources, which the autobiography discards. According to the author (2008, p. 104), “it is impossible to reach the truth of human life, but the desire to achieve it defines a discursive field and acts of knowledge, a type of human relations that has nothing illusory”.

These discussions and opinions about fictional elements in autobiographies, fictional books in which the protagonist and the author share the same names and autobiographical books with different names of author and protagonist have evoked different opinions and discussions. Due to this mixture of ideas, other terms have been coined, such as the neologism *Autofiction* created by Serge Doubrovsky. Moreover, as a possibility to explain fictionality in autobiographies the term *autobiographical novel* is frequently used. Thus, in order to understand these two genres, approach their differences and similarities, they are going to be discussed in the next section.

⁷ LEJEUNE, Philippe. *Signes de vie. Le Pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Seuil, 2005. p. 37-44.

2.2 FROM AUTOBIOGRAPHY TO AUTOFICTION AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

Recapturing what has been said in the previous chapter, Lejeune's studies discarded the possibility of writing a fictional story in which author, narrator and protagonist share the same names. The author considered the possibility of creating this genre yet highlighted the internal contradiction this practice might cause as well as the reader's impression of error when reading it. In *The Autobiographical Pact (bis)*⁸, Lejeune (2008), evokes this topic again, reevaluates his chart as scanty and inefficient and reconsiders the creation of what he had previously deemed impossible or improbable. The author reevaluates the chart proposed,

The name of the character can be simultaneously similar or different to the author's name: same first letters, different names (Jules Vallès/ Jacques Vingtras); same name, different last names (even if it is just one letter: Lucien Bodard/ Lucien Bonnard) etc. A book can be presented as a novel in the subtitle and as an autobiography in its core. Ergo, sixteen options and not nine.⁹ (LEJEUNE, 2008, p. 58)

Thus, Lejeune broadened his chart and classified as possible other types of writing. This review of concepts was occasioned by the creation of the term *Autofiction*, coined by Serge Doubrovsky when categorizing his novel *Fils*. Doubrovsky was encouraged by Lejeune's theory to create such a fictional novel in which the author shares the name with the protagonist and narrator but the story is filled with fictional elements. The scholar worked to defy Lejeune's proposition that the author is unlikely to create a text whose protagonist shares his name and characteristics but inhabits a fictional space. Lejeune himself declared Doubrovsky's novel inspired him and expounds a "tendency of 'true lie' to 'autofiction', making the boundary more undecided between autobiography and the fictional text" (LEJEUNE, 2008, p. 59).

Indeed, much has been discussed since Lejeune proposed *The Autobiographical Pact* in 1975. The autobiographical genre has been constantly

⁸ Originally, *The Autobiographical Pact (bis)* was presented as a chapter in the book *Moi Aussi* (LEJEUNE, Philippe. *Moi Aussi*. Paris: Seuil, 1986.p. 13-35).

⁹"O nome do personagem pode ser ao mesmo tempo semelhante ao nome do autor e diferente: mesmas iniciais, nomes diferentes (Jules Vallès /Jacques Vingtras); mesmo nome, sobrenomes diferentes (ainda que seja pelo menos uma letra: Lucien Bodard / Lucien Bonnard) etc. Um livro pode ser apresentado como um romance, no subtítulo, e como autobiografia no adendo. Logo, 16 casas, e não nove." (My own translation).

under criticism and reformulation¹⁰ and this uncertainty has inspired other scholars to explain the gaps Lejeune's autobiographical pact has left. One of them is Doubrovsky, who imagined a field between fiction and autobiography in which the author, narrator and protagonist share one identity (MCDONOUGH, 2011). He explained the idea on the back cover of his book:

Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives, in a refined style. Fiction, of events and facts strictly real; autofiction, if you will, to have entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, outside of the wisdom and the syntax of the novel, traditional or new. Interactions, threads of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing before or after literature, concrete, as we say, music. (DOUBROVSKY, 1977 apud MCDONOUGH, 2011, p.7)

Doubrovsky points out the fact that the aim of an autobiography is portraying the history of a life from its origins whereas autofiction allows the author to shape facts of different moments, giving a fictional intensity to the story (FIGUEIREDO, 2010). As the precursor of autofiction, Doubrovsky's *Fils* retells the author's life experiences as a traditional autobiography, but disrupts it by using untraditional perspective, syntax and chronology (MCDONOUGH, 2011). Thus, it is possible to infer autofiction is similar to autobiography in what concerns identity of names, but different in content, since it includes fictional elements that the autobiography totally discards. According to Alberca (2007), autofiction aims to open a space of invention and creation between fiction and fact, exactly where they oppose themselves. Corroborating Alberca, Kjellman-Chapin (2009) adds that the "practice of autofiction might involve the retention of one's real name and persona while maintaining insertion into imaginary life, or the creation of a fictional clone who narrates the author's real existence". (CHAPIN, 2009, p.148)

Nevertheless, this new definition has raised a discussion about the real differences autofiction represented when compared to autobiography. Bacon (c2010) states that the difference between traditional autobiography and the genre of autofiction is that autobiographers attempt to represent their real lives, whereas autofiction writers only base their works on real experiences. Doubrovskian autofiction, according to Hughes (2002), affords their creators a potential for

¹⁰ Although this genre has suffered reformulation and criticism along the years, this paper will prioritize Lejeune's definition, which is also considered the basis for the autobiographical theory.

manipulation avoided by classical autobiography, as transcriptive, mimetic, documentary practice. This new term joins, in one word, fiction and autobiography: two genres that formerly should exclude each other.

However, according to Figueiredo (2010), the term became too fashionable and its use, indiscriminate. Even Lejeune criticized the banalization of the term, stating it turned a “floor cloth, a broom which gathers everything” (LEJEUNE, 2005apud FIGUEIREDO, 2010, p. 92). Thereafter, Doubrovsky decided to establish a pattern to the use of the term and, along time, the definition evolved. The author articulated criteria that Gasparini (2008) summarized:

- 1- Onomastic identity of the author and hero-narrator;
- 2- Subtitle: “novel”;
- 3- Primary importance of the narrative;
- 4- Pursuit of an original form;
- 5- Writing that aims to “immediately articulate”;
- 6- Reconfiguration of linear time (through selection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, disorientation);
- 7- A significant use of the present tense;
- 8- An effort to only tell “strictly real facts and events”;
- 9- The urge to “reveal one’s self truly”.
- 10- A strategy that aims to require active engagement from the reader. (GASPARINI, 2008 apud MCDONOUGH, 2011, p. 21)

These ten items clearly help to specify the genre, but, even so, autofiction is in constant discussion and reformulation and its use is still banalized.

Another point of discussion is the misuse of the terms “Autobiographical Novel” and autofiction in order to describe the same genre. Due to the characteristics and construction of the autobiographical novel, it can be regarded as identical to autofiction. However, what are the differences between these two variations of autobiography? In what sense does the autobiographical novel differ from Lejeune’s classical theory of the autobiography?

According to Biezma (1994), the autobiographical novel emerged at the same time as autobiography did, in Europe, especially in France. It consists of a modality of novel in which the author narrates his own history, rebuilding his own existence, and it is usually centered on an intimate drama or in a crisis which is fundamental to the character’s destiny. If compared to Lejeune’s autobiographical pact theory, the autobiographical novel fits almost entirely to its definition, except for the fact that the autobiographical novel accepts fictional elements and different names for the author and narrator/character. Even Lejeune (2008) adopted the term in order to categorize

all fictional texts which can be deemed autobiographical by the reader but the author denies his identity and chooses to hide it. According to the theoretician “the autobiographical novel covers both first-person narratives (identity between narrator and character) as ‘impersonal’ ones (characters designated in third person)”; it is defined according to its content (LEJEUNE, 2008, p.25). The difference between autobiography and autobiographical novel, according to the author, is that in the latter there are different degrees. Whereas reading an autobiographical novel, the reader may notice that either the protagonist slightly resembles the author or they are clearly the same person: there may be degrees of resemblance. In the autobiography, on the contrary, there are no degrees: it is “all or nothing”.

Alberca (2007) points out the fact that the concept of autobiographical novel is wider and vaguer than other types of memories. Any possible combination of narration, character or name can result in an autobiographical novel and it can only be categorized as such if the content is taken into account. Identifying an autobiographical novel depends either on hints the author gives along the story or the knowledge the reader has about the author’s biography, otherwise, it can be classified as a simple novel, without autobiographical aspects. Alberca states that “as its definition indicates, it looks like a novel (the detachment between author and character and the generic indication confirms it), but, as its adjective emphasizes and some hints of the text may promote, it is possible to notice an autobiographical inspiration”¹¹ (ALBERCA, 2007, p. 101). There is no defined division between novels whose content is clearly and mostly autobiographical and those with few hints of real life in it, but both of them are, primarily, novels and they are presented under the fictional pact in which the author cannot be identified as or share names with narrator, protagonist or one of the characters of the story. This way, the author hides himself and delegates the conduction of the story to the narrator or protagonist, protecting himself under the mask of fiction in order to tell his personal experience in a discrete and safe way.

Alberca (2007) adds that the autobiographical novel consists of an intellectual game whose purpose is solving a problem using the hints and pieces the author has left. With these hints, the reader can establish relations of similitude between reality

¹¹“Como su denominación indica, parece una novela (el distanciamiento entre autor y personaje y la indicación genérica lo confirman), pero, como su adjetivo subraya y algunas insinuaciones de texto pueden propiciar, le ayudan a reconocer una marcada inspiración autobiográfica.” (My own translation).

and fiction, propose hypotheses and detect how much of the author the protagonist resembles until finally discovering the fictional story has a link with the author's real life. The autobiographical novel is an answer to two different and contradictory movements: the urgency of expression and the need of disguise.

Thus, the autobiographical novel can be defined as the novel that dissimulates the real autobiographical content, but suggests it in a slight, or not, way. The author intends to talk about himself, but disguises his identity by using the resources of fiction. On the other hand, the autofiction, even though closely related to the autobiographical novel (its daughter or younger sister, according to Alberca), uses the mechanism of fiction to serve as autobiography. In the autobiographical novels the author has the autonomy to hide his identity whereas the autofiction supposes the author and protagonist share names in a fictional story. Perron (2005) problematizes the difference of these two genres and concludes that the difference consists mainly on the degree of priorities attributed to fiction. The author states:

If autofiction depends on the confusion between character and author, the autobiographical novel deviates from it by hiding the author under a different name inside the story. The novel thus clearly assumes its status as fiction, which does not prevent the author to deliver his personal sources or his publishers to sell the book by focusing on the "experience" on it. If Flaubert claimed to be all his characters, the author of an autobiographical novel is represented by a particular person (PERRON, 2005, p. 27).¹²

Therefore, autofiction is a fictional proposal and its main difference when related to the autobiographical novel is the confusion between character and author the latter avoids and the former depends on. Alberca adds that the difference also remains on the transparency and ambiguousness that the autofiction portrays. It is presented as a novel, but a novel that simulates autobiography so clearly that the reader suspects that it is pseudo autobiographical. This transparency is mainly due to the onomastic identity the genre supposes and that consists of one of the main premises of the theory of autofiction. Thus, autofiction supposes identity between author and narrator/protagonist but the autobiographical pact, proposed by Lejeune, is not

¹²"Si l'autofiction mise sur la confusion entre le personnage et l'auteur, le roman autobiographique s'en éloigne en camouflant l'auteur sous un autre nom dans le récit. Le roman assume donc clairement son statut de fiction, ce qui n'empêche pas l'auteur de livrer ses sources personnelles ou son éditeur de vendre le roman en misant sur le caractère « vécu » du livre. Si Flaubert affirmait être tous ses personnages, l'auteur d'un roman autobiographique y est représenté par un personnage en particulier." (Translated by Anna Faedrich Martins).

respected due to the mixture of referential and fictional elements. Insofar, the autobiographical novel does not respect the onomastic identity and its pact is fictional, even though it contains autobiographical elements, explicitly presented or not.

Moreover, the protagonists are key elements to the construction of both autobiographical novels and autofiction. The identity the author shares, or not, with the character may categorize the genre that story belongs to. Therefore, the importance of the characters cannot go unnoticed: in both genres, the protagonist represents a person who “is not only a fictional being, but real from the moment we guess that behind the character is the author” (ALBERCA, 2007, p. 113). Thus, the relationship between the fictional character and the real person is going to be approached in the next section.

2.3 THE FICTIONAL CHARACTER AND THE REAL PERSON

It is difficult to dissociate a literary novel from its characters. The plot exists through the characters and the characters live the plot. They both are connected and express the objectives of the novel. The character represents the most alive piece of the novel, and reading it depends on accepting the truth the character represents to the reader (CANDIDO, 1972). According to Candido (1972), the novel bases itself on a type of relationship between the human being and the fictional character, which is manifested through the latter.

Brait (2006) adds that there are two important aspects to be underscored when discussing the relation character and human being. Firstly, the issue regarding characters is linguistic, since the character only happens through words and secondly, characters represent real people in specific modalities of fiction. Thus, it is possible to conclude that fictional character and human beings have an intimate relationship in what concerns fictional reality.

In the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov approach what concerns the ‘linguistic problem’ of the fictional character,

A naïve reading of works of fiction confuses characters and living persons. “Biographies” have even been written of characters, going so far as to explore the parts of their lives absent from the book (“How did Hamlet spend his student years?”). It is forgotten in these cases that

the problem of the character is first and foremost linguistic, that the character does not exist outside of words, that it is a paper being. However, to reject all relationship between character and person would be absurd: characters *represent* persons, according to modalities appropriate to fiction. (DUCROT: TODOROV, 1979, p. 221).

There are both differences and affinities between the characters and the real person and this relation is what creates the truth and makes it plausible. Especially in autofiction and autobiographical novels, the relation between them is slightly established and the character is usually made of a mixture of self-portraiture and fiction.

However, even though the character in autofiction and autobiographical novels usually strongly resembles the author, the differences between human beings and fictional characters are as important as the affinities in order to create the feeling of truth or verisimilitude. Candido (1972) explains that the relationship human beings establish with each other is fragmented, unsatisfying and incomplete and that human beings are, by nature, mysterious and unexpected. Thus, characters are also approached this way in novels, because that is the way relationship in real life is established or how the knowledge of the other is developed. This closeness of approach between human beings and fictional characters is what turns it plausible and causes the verisimilitude, an indispensable element to, especially and characteristically, realistic literature. It is important to consider, however, that in real life this fragmented and unsatisfying view is imminent to the real being whereas the character is created and directed by the author. Moreover, the interpretation of human beings is more spontaneous and varies according to time and behavior conditions whereas in fiction, it is possible to vary relatively the interpretation of the character but the writer has already given it coherence and has set its personality, existence and nature.

In order to clarify this distinction, Forster (apud CANDIDO, 1972) proposes the terms *Homo fictus* and *Homo sapiens* and explains that although *Homo fictus* lives under the same parameters of action and sensibility as the latter, these two categories are not equivalent. The fictional being is inserted in a different proportion of life (they rarely sleep and use the toilet, for example) and establish certain human relationships much more intensively than the *Homo sapiens* does, especially in what concerns love relationships. Moreover, with *Homo fictus*, the reader is able to know deeply inside the character since the author takes us there, whereas it is only possible to know the exterior of other human beings. James N. Frey (1987) adds that the reader wishes to read about the exceptional rather than the mundane. The reader

demands that *Homo fictus* has intensified characteristics, a more exciting life than real people, that they are “more handsome or ugly, ruthless or noble, vengeful or forgiving, brave or coward” than real people are (FREY, 1987, p. 2). Another difference Frey points out is that life in stories is simpler than in the real world due to space limitations which turn the *Homo fictus*’ life simpler than that of *Homo sapiens*.

However, if a character has to resemble a human being, be under a universe similar to what we know of life and establish relations with our world’s reality, “is it possible to totally transplant a character from real life to fiction so that the author can achieve this effect of resemblance? To what extent is it possible to copy a real being in order to utilize his reality?”¹³(CANDIDO, 1972, p. 65). These problems were raised by Forster as well as answered: No, it is not. Firstly, according to the author, it is not possible to capture the essence of a person. Secondly, copying a real person would discard artistic creation and finally, even if possible, this copy would not contain the needed specific knowledge, different and more complete, which is the reason of fiction (apud CANDIDO, 1972).

Considering the aforementioned topics, Candido (1972) evokes another discussion: how does the author manipulate the reality when creating fiction? In order to answer this question, Candido relies on François Mauriac’s work (1952) which approaches this subject. The French author states that fictional characters are born from real people due to the memory arsenal the author has, but the essential is always created. Insofar as a novel aims to be reality, it is bound to failure. Thus, the principle which rules turning the real into fiction is the modification, either by the addition or by small changing.

Aiming to clarify the subject, Mauriac classifies the characters based on the level of distance from reality:

- 1) Slight disguise from the novelist, which happens with the teenager who wants to express himself. Such characters happen with memoirist novelists.
- 2) True copy of real people, which do not represent fiction but reproduction. This case occurs with portraitists.
- 3) Invented, based on a special type of reality. The case of Mauriac, according to what he states, reality is only initial information which is used to accomplish imagined situations. In his work, he says, there is an inversely proportional relation between fidelity to reality and the

¹³ “Poderia então a personagem ser transplantada da realidade, para que o autor atingisse este alvo? Por outras palavras, pode-se copiar no romance um ser vivo e, assim, *aproveitar* integralmente a sua realidade?” (My own translation).

degree of formulation. The secondary characters in his work are *copied* from existent beings¹⁴ (MAURIAC, 1952 apud CANDIDO, 1972).

Thus, considering the classification, Mauriac accepts the existence of characters truly copied from reality, either by the projection of the private world of the author or by the transposition of models from reality. Contrarily to Mauriac, however, Candido accepts only one valid form for creating characters, the third – invented, yet accepts characters have to establish necessary connections with the real world. He points out that truly copying a character from the real world would be denying the fictional nature of the novel.

However, even though Candido criticizes Mauriac's assumption of true copies of the real world, he admits that the creation of characters oscillates between two poles, the transposition of reality and the imaginary invention. According to him, these are the limits of creation the novelist has in order to define the characters. The author explains that there are characters whose physical appearance or behavior resemble real people's and that it is only possible to conclude there was similarity through external indication or documentary evidence. When these evidences do not exist, the reader can only suppose the similitude.

Based on these two premises, the transposition of reality and the imaginary invention, Candido (1972) proposes the following distinction of the fictional character, also based on their distance from reality:

- 1) Characters that relatively resemble models the novelist has due to direct experience, either internal or external. Internal experience is the projection of a character, related to the experiences and feelings the author has whereas the external is the transposition to the novel of people the novelist had direct contact to. In order to exemplify this distinction, Candido uses *Adolphe*¹⁵, by Benjamin Constant, and *Menino de Engenho*,¹⁶ by José

¹⁴“1. Disfarce leve do romancista, como ocorre ao adolescente que quer exprimir-se. Tais personagens ocorrem nos romancistas memorialistas. 2. Cópia fiel de pessoas reais que não constituem propriamente criações, mas reproduções. Ocorrem estas nos romancistas retratistas. 3. Inventadas a partir de um trabalho tipo especial sobre a realidade, sendo esta um dado inicial, servindo para concretizar virtualidades imaginadas. Na sua obra (diz ele) há uma relação inversamente proporcional entre a fidelidade ao real e o grau de elaboração. “As personagens secundárias, estas são, na sua obra, copiadas, de seres existentes.” (My own translation).

¹⁵*Adolphe* is a classic French novel by Benjamin Constant, first published in 1816.

¹⁶*Menino de engenho* (in English, *Plantation boy*) is a novel by the Brazilian writer José Lins do Rego, first published in 1932.

Lins do Rego, to categorize characters that were based on internal experiences, and Tolstoi's *War and Peace*¹⁷ for external experience.

2) Transposed from previous models which are rebuilt indirectly by the author. In this case, Candido uses Napoleon I, a character from Tolstoi's *War and Peace*.

3) Characters whose creation is based on a real model, which is known by the author and serves as the connection or the starting basis for the novel. The process of creation modifies the model but it is possible to identify itself along the story. Candido exemplifies it using the character Tomás de Alencar of *Os Maias*¹⁸ by Eça de Queiroz, which caused polemic when the character, even though different from the origin, was recognized by the model.

4) Based on a directly or indirectly known model whose characteristics are explored and changed through fantasy. As an example, the author uses Charles Dickens' novel *David Copperfield* and its character Mr. Micawber¹⁹, which is the transposition of the author's father to fiction, as the author himself declared. However, even though related, they differ from each other entirely, yet share an event of life and some habits because, according to Candido, the model could have lived what the character lived in fiction. In other cases, however, the character that is developed along the story has nothing to do with the primary model, which serves only as a basis for its creation in fiction.

5) Created based on a dominating real model which serves as the center line but to which other secondary models are added. Of course, everything changed and undone under the mask of fiction. Candido mentions as example Proust's Baron the Charlus²⁰, inspired in a dominant model, Robert de Montesquiou, as well as in secondary ones, such as Oscar Wilde, a certain Baron Doazan, Comte Aimery de La Rochefoucauld and the novelist himself.

6) Developed with the presence of several living models but with no sensitive predominance of one or another and whose mixture of faces creates a new

¹⁷ *War and Peace* is a novel by the Russian author Leo Tolstoy, first published in 1869.

¹⁸ *Os Maias*, by the Portuguese Eça de Queiroz, was first published in 1888.

¹⁹ Mrs. Micawber is a fictional character from Charles Dickens' novel *David Copperfield*, first published in 1849–1850.

²⁰ Baron the Charlus is a fictional character in Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, first published in 1913-1927.

personality. It also occurs in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* with the character Robert de Saint-Loup, whose origins combine many inspiring models.

7) Characters whose origins cannot be traced because they were lost inside the universe of fiction. Even the author is unable to tell which real model was used when composing the character. Candido exemplifies this type with Machado de Assis' characters, who are usually men punished by reality (cf. CANDIDO, 1976, p. 71-73).

Considering this classification, Candido states that the nature of the character depends on the author's conceptions and intentions. This connection the character establishes with the reality only portrays the feeling of reality but the truth of the character primarily depends on its function in the novel, how it is organized and developed internally. Moreover, the verisimilitude, which consists of the relation between fiction and real life, also depends on the organization of the novel and this organization is a decisive element to create the truth of the fictional beings in realistic terms.

Thus, basing the discussion on the aforementioned characteristics proposed by Candido and revoking the subject that originated this discussion, how does a character from an autobiographical novel or from autofiction fit in this classification? Alberca (2007) compares the creation of a character in autofiction to a process of "author's cloning". He explains that the author uses some of his biographic information and mixes it with fictional elements. After that, he waits for the result, which can be monstrous or not. This process is what he calls "literary cloning"²¹ or the installation of another personality in the author's own body. In what concerns the autobiographical novel, Biezma (1994) states that the creatures in this genre are not independent and endowed with full life but are only projections of the author's heart.

Hence, aiming to fit the process of creation of autofiction and autobiographical characters in the categories Candido proposed, it is possible to connect the autofiction character to almost all of them; it depends on the purpose of the author when creating it. However, options one, three, and four are the ones which fit better in the concept of the character in autofiction either because they presume the author was inspired by one known, real model or because they all are based on reality but contain fictional elements. On the other hand, the autobiographical novel supposes a

²¹Clonación Literária. (My own translation).

character which is based on the author and that portrays an event the author lived but contains elements of fiction. The author bases the character on him but changes it along the story, using the mask of fiction in order to disguise, although it is possible to identify his experiences through external information and hints within the text. Considering these elements, option three is the one which most fits the autobiographical character due to its basis on reality but changes along the story, allowing, even so, the identification of the model.

Indeed, Sylvia Plath was able to portray herself in her character, giving the reader an impressive account of her thoughts and despairs, which turned out to reveal her temperament as well as her aptitude for literature. She was able to convey elements of her life without overwhelming the reader with purely emotional sense. In Sylvia Plath's only novel *The Bell Jar*, the slight boundary between life and fiction, which the author had so many times used in her poems, is again brilliantly used by the author and turned out to arise the interest and be the subject of analysis of the next section.

3 ANALYSIS

This section will be conducted by a brief overview of Sylvia Plath's literary moment and biography, a summary of *The Bell Jar's* followed by the analysis of the novel according to the theories of Autobiography, Autobiographical Novel, Autofiction and The Character and the Real Person.

3.1 THE CONFESSIONAL MOMENT

So far, the art of transposing real life to literature was widely discussed in the previous sections. Firstly, the practice of maintaining identity between author, protagonist and narrator through the autobiography was approached. Secondly, how mixing fictional elements with reality ended up originating the neologism autofiction and finally, the art of disguising through fiction that the autobiographical novel supposes. This section, however, aims to situate this practice in American Literature and approach its main characteristics, relating them to the writings of Sylvia Plath, whose novel is the subject of this paper.

The use of personal experiences and the possibility to express private feelings, thoughts, emotions, needs and desires that challenged the decorum of the moment was urged by a writing tendency in the American writing of the day called "The Confessional Moment", which, according to Christopher Beach (2003), served as a model to authors who decided to deny the modernist voice. Even though Beach questions the real origin of the movement, whether it was really a break from New Critical Formalism or just a generation of poets who desired to express their emotions, he admits and illustrates the term "Confessionalism" has achieved great notoriety. It was coined whereas M.L. Rosenthal, reviewing the poems found within Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, noticed Lowell removed the "mask" that used to hide the author's face. He explained that the term "confessional" sounded appropriate to describe Lowell's poems "because of the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of *Life Studies*" (ROSENTHAL, 1959 apud LOUCKS, 2007). Thenceforward, this label was destined to categorize the writing style of many authors during the 1950s and 1960s, which started with Lowell in the late 1950s, lasting until the 1960s in its more extreme

phase (BEACH, 2003). It grouped authors such as Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, Randal Jarrel, among others.

According to Beach (2003), this movement was marked by a more relaxed, colloquial and self-revelatory tone than the New Critic formalism, the first now allowing the poets to portray their usually tempestuous and depressing lives. Frequently written in the first-person, which shortens the distance between author and speaker, it is known by the exposition of personal themes, autobiographical revelation, depicting, often in an autobiographical manner, difficulties the author suffered, such as mental illness, alcoholism, depression, hopelessness etc. In fact, the tempestuous life the author portrayed in the confessional writings was the main point which appealed to scholars, readers and critics. However, it is possible to point out that, according to David Yezzi (1998),

What they (the poems of Snodgrass, Lowell, Sexton and Plath) have in common, what sets them apart from other poems that incorporate details from life, is their sense of worn-on-the-sleeve self-revelation and their artful simulation of sincerity. By relying on facts, on "real" situations and relationships, for a poem's emotional authenticity, the poet makes an artifice of honesty. Confessional poems, in other words, lie like truth (YEZZI, 1998, p.2).

Thus, it is not the subject or the personal drama that turns the work confessional but the direction in which this content is handled. Although confessional authors base their writings on their lives, the content is modified through artifices of fiction as well as built and thought in order to transcend the mere report of personal feelings and experiences. Hence, it is possible to compare the confessional poets to autofiction, as the confessionals "lie like truth", exactly as the autofiction does.

According to Yezzi, parallel to the social unease the 1960s lived, from traditional forms and morals to a more relaxed moment, the poetry of the self started with the publication of Lowell's *Life Studies* and, closer in tone, William DeWitt Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*, which approached the dissolution of his marriage and the feeling of estrangement towards his daughter. Yezzi adds that a comparison between Snodgrass's poems and Plath's demonstrates the changes in the confessional poetry, since it came from the ease of Snodgrass to the violence of Plath. Plath's and Sexton's suicide marked the end of the movement, even though it continued to influence the 1970s and 1980s.

In an interview to Peter Orr (ORR, 1966) Sylvia Plath mentioned the elements that inspired and attracted her as a poet. She exposed Lowell's influence on her poetry and her excitement with this "new movement" which allowed emotional and personal experiences - elements previously seen as taboo in poetry. The author also mentioned the emotional tone Anne Sexton conveys whereas telling the experiences as a mother who suffered a breakdown.

Indeed, Sylvia Plath's own writing style followed this tendency which so excited and inspired her: facts of her real life, full of strong images and metaphors commonly support her work even in her earlier poems. However, it is especially in the ones published after her death in *Ariel* that her suffering is widely portrayed. Plath herself admitted her poems came from her own experiences. She stated:

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is (Sylvia Plath in an interview to BBC, October 1962).

Even though Plath followed Lowell's tendency of confessionalism and was inspired by his way of writing, her style differs from his mainly because in the last one the speaker is a version of the author, whereas Plath bases her work on her own life experiences as well as on a fictional character. Plath exposes her personal experiences, her suicide attempts, for example, in a vague way whereas Lowell clearly creates a version of himself. For instance, in "Lady Lazarus", even though it can be deemed autobiographical and personal, there are also hints of a fictional character. According to Beach "Though the poem deals in a general sense with Plath's own suicide attempts and their aftermath, the personal details are left vague and the poem's speaker focuses more on the creation of her mythic persona" (BEACH, 2003, p. 160). Besides, Beach adds that a strategy used by the confessional authors, which can be seen in Plath's work, is that of metaphors to describe their emotions. In the case of Plath, the images are usually strong, rich and full of symbolism. For instance, according to Pamela J. Annas, in a review presented in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, the poem "Daddy" is full of sexual metaphors whose real purpose is analyzing the structure of the society, its patriarchal and war-making nature. The speaker of the poem sees the manly image as all the patriarchal structures of the twentieth century, which are responsible for the imperialism and turn

out to become “demoniac, finally a gigantic vampire figure” (ANNAS , In: BEATY, Jerome et al. *The Norton Introduction to Literature* (ed.), 2002, p. 944).

However, contrary to the classification of Sylvia Plath as a confessional poet, Rodrigo Garcia Lopes, in his article “*Sylvia Plath: Delírio lapidado*” (LOPES; MENDONÇA, 2007), states that Plath’s writings may not be characterized and reduced to a mere act of crying or confessing. Sylvia was able to challenge her own experiences and write poetry without restricting it to something limited and narcissistic. Her writings are not restricted to crude autobiographical experiences, but built by chosen methods, mastery of language and selected excerpts of her life. The author herself declared the importance of selecting excerpts of life and manipulating them in order to transform these events in good literature.

I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrific, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on (Sylvia Plath in an interview to BBC, October 1962).

She knew that personal experiences could represent valuable content to her work, but highlighted that the autobiographical aspects should be relevant to the final construction. Thinking of Sylvia Plath only as a confessional poet and minimizing her works to a mere personal outburst and a problematic mind is, according to Lopes, understanding poetry as important only when it is a comment about real life.

In the next section, Sylvia Plath’s life will be briefly exposed in order to, later on, understand to what extent it is transposed to her fiction.

3.2 SYLVIA PLATH’S BIOGRAPHY

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27th, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, from Otto Plath and Aurelia Plath. Her only brother, Warren, was born three years later, in 1935. Only a week and a half after his daughter’s eighth birthday, Otto Plath died of an embolism following a surgery. This event would inspire many poems Sylvia wrote along her life. Both Sylvia and Warren used to expose their knowledge to Otto Plath by reciting poems, telling how the day was, making up stories, thus Otto was

seen as a dominant father, someone to be pleased, without really being part of their lives. Plath's relationship with her parents, mainly with her father, greatly contributed to doubts she would have as an adult, questions about her existence and place in the world and the feeling that she could only be loved if excelling in all areas, with constant A's and popularity. Besides, the narcissism and the sense of dependence which so many times ruined her relationships as an adult had their origins in the events she faced as a child, especially the fear of abandonment after Otto Plath's death. For Sylvia Plath, love was only a consequence of her achievements (MARTIN, 1987).

Since an early age, Sylvia expressed great talent and tendency to creative writing. She published her first poem, about crickets and fireflies, in 1940, at the age of eight, in the children session of the *Boston Herald* (10 August 1941, page B-8). In school, she always excelled in all subjects, taking straight A's and was known by teachers as a gifted student. Her childhood, even though her father's loss and the consequent financial difficulties the family faced, was marked by the richness of many pets, outdoor activities and creative games. In her adolescence, she kept the good results and won her first awards and Honor Certificates due to outstanding performance. In 1945 Sylvia Plath started publishing her poems in magazines and her favorite themes at that time were nature and moods. Excelling in high school, not only academically but also socially, was Sylvia Plath's main purpose. When her results were not as expected, the failure deeply depressed her. Always striving for perfection, her diaries and poems are full of complaints: "Never, never will I reach the perfection I long for with all my soul – my painting, my poems, my stories" (PLATH, 1975, p.39). Nevertheless, Plath's entries in her diary show several relationships and flirting, which not only indicated her need to be accepted socially but also the tendency of early marriage of that time. The average age for women to marry during the 1940s and 1950s was 20.3 and the early engagement indicated personal health and not being married suggested the woman was unfeminine. All schoolgirls were set to marriage at that time and Plath's journals are full of entries which expose her disagreement with that as well as the pressure she suffered, even though she did not plan to be an unmarried career woman. She writes in her journal in May of 1953: "suddenly everyone else is very married and happy, and one is very alone, and bitter about eating a boiled tasteless egg by oneself every morning and painting on a red mouth to smile oh-so-sweetly at the world with" (PLATH, 1975, p. 214). Sylvia Plath

doubted she could perform both activities: being a wife and a mother and excelling in her career as a writer.

After her triumphal graduation in High School, full of recognitions and prizes, Sylvia Plath won a scholarship to attend Smith College as English Major. For her freshman year, she received the fund from a local Smith Club and from Olive Higgins Prouty, who would be great help to Plath along her life. In Smith, the self-imposed pressure was even more intense and demanding. She was satisfied and happy only if excelling in all areas of knowledge and socially. Besides, Plath felt intimidated by all the talented women on campus and felt insecure and unsure about her own talent. The need to choose between career and marriage overwhelmed her and represented one of the central issues of the women in the 50s.

In 1953, Sylvia Plath was chosen to work on the staff of the Mademoiselle College Board in New York with other nineteen women. After returning, Plath experienced her first breakdown, being treated with shock treatments and trying to kill herself by taking a great amount of her mother's sleeping pills. The event inspired the creation of the novel *The Bell Jar* years later, which is the object of analysis in this paper and is going to be approached in the next section. The attempt of suicide echoed along Smith and when Plath returned she was known as the girl who worked too hard and suffered a breakdown. She continued to fill her days with as many activities as she could, ignoring her mother's advice, who attributed her breakdown to the excess of work. She maintained her high level of grades and felt totally cured, even though the insecurity always accompanied her. Nevertheless, all her friends were marrying and the pressure to do the same increased. In 1955, she graduated *cum laude* in Smith and won a Fulbright grant, this time to study in Cambridge, England. Even though happy in Europe, Plath always felt unsure about her place in the world and the severe winters of England worsened her depression.

In February 1956, in England, she met the poet Ted Hughes, with whom she would marry in June the same year. She emphasized her happiness and passion in her journals and letters sent to Aurelia Plath in US. Plath considered her marriage was a source of great happiness and satisfaction to her. In 1957, Plath took her Cambridge degree and the couple moved to the United States. Although happy, soon the housework routine annoyed Plath, who scarcely had time to write. For many times, she felt Hughes' writings were more important than her own and dedicated more time to

typing her husband's manuscripts, keeping the house clean and cooking than writing. Furthermore, financial issues were always a subject of worries for the couple.

In 1959, Plath managed to spend time writing again, was once again productive and had her book of poems chosen as alternate to the winner of the Yale Younger Poets Contest. In the same year, she started to attend Robert Lowell's Boston University Poetry Workshop, where she met Anne Sexton, whose poetry attracted Plath mainly because of the innovative techniques she used. In May, Plath and Hughes returned to England, where they had their first child, called Frieda Rebecca Hughes, born on April 1st. In October, Plath published *The Colossus*, which had good reviews. However, worries about money increased and evoked the idea of taking part-time jobs. The responsibilities of taking care of a baby and the housework forced Plath to be away from writing. Furthermore, Plath's jealousy of Hughes was increasingly out of control and the fact that she could not deal with being a mother, a housewife and a writer deeply depressed and annoyed her. However, despite the lack of time, Plath managed to start writing her first novel, called *The Bell Jar*, mainly at night, when Frieda was asleep.

Nicholas Farrar Hughes was born from a dramatic and painful birth, different from Frieda's. The year was 1962 and Sylvia Plath's depression, especially after the birth of the second child, grew worse. Besides, Hughes and Plath's arguments because of jealousy intensified and a second woman in Hughes's life occasioned the end of the marriage and the leave of the husband. This event would only aggravate the mental state Sylvia Plath faced: insomnia, relying on sleeping pills, bipolar disorder. She felt lonely and noticed she needed help and that something decisive was about to happen. In the midst of this turmoil of feelings, Plath found a way to externalize all the sorrow and anger she felt and wrote powerful and strong poems, which would later constitute her book *Ariel*. Poems such as "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus" and "The Jailer" were written in the weeks following Hughes' departure. In January of 1963, *The Bell Jar* was published under a pseudonym, "Victoria Lukas". Good reviews followed the publication, but Plath felt frustrated and saw nothing besides tasks, chores and demands in her future. At the edge of physical and psychological illness, Sylvia Plath left glasses of milk next to her children's beds, sealed the room door so the fumes would not escape, knelt beside the open oven and inhaled gas until death. It was February, 11th, 1963.

In 1965, the book *Ariel*, edited by Hughes, was published. It included poems Plath chose for the book, yet they were arranged differently. In 1968, the book was published in the United States. It was quickly recognized as a poetic work of the highest order. Besides, the notoriety of the details of her death attributed to her a cult and known status. *The Bell Jar* was reissued in England under Sylvia Plath's name in 1967 and its repercussion was even bigger than that of her poems: *The Bell Jar* has been sold more widely than Plath's poetry. The publication of a great collection of Plath's letters by Aurelia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950–1963*, and her journals in 1982 attracted even more readers and fans. In 1977, Hughes issued a collection of entries of her journal and published short stories and essays under the name *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings* and in 1981, again under Hughes' organization, the book *Collected Poems* was published. It won the Pulitzer Prize, an award usually not given posthumously.²²

3.3 THE BELL JAR

As seen in the previous section, Sylvia Plath faced, along her life, severe crises of depression, a breakdown when she was only twenty, committing suicide years later. Her life was strongly marked by the feeling that she would only be loved if excelling in all areas and she felt she could not be a complete writer whereas she needed to be a mother and a wife, yet society at that time demanded the marriage. Her career as a writer and her poems were also affected by the constant depression and her oscillatory mental and physical state. At certain moments, unsure about the topics she could write about and unsatisfied about the ones written, she relied on lists of possible topics, which Hughes prepared for her. However, it is unquestionable Plath's main inspiration comes from her own experiences in life, as she herself declared and as it was already exposed in this paper, in the chapter The Confessional Moment.

The Bell Jar is Sylvia Plath's first and only novel. The author first only aimed the profit, a "pot boiler", but its power, attitude and the voice of the 1950s changed the author's mind when the story ended. In fact, *The Bell Jar* has been sold more than Plath's poetry and its success may be attributed to the curiosity it arose after Plath's

²² Many sources were used to recover Sylvia Plath's life in this paper, but especially WAGNER-MARTIN, Linda. *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*. London: Cardinal, 1990.

death, who was considered a cult writer and a martyr by the women's rights movement. Many readers aimed to find Plath in Esther Greenwood, the character of *The Bell Jar*.

The novel tells the story of Esther Greenwood, a talented American girl who goes to New York from the suburbs of Boston in order to work for a magazine, *Mademoiselle*, as a guest editor. The protagonist and other eleven girls won a contest whose prize was a job in New York during one month with all the expenses paid and piles of gifts and bonuses. Esther was supposed to be having the time of her life but she feels displaced and empty. Although she feels lucky since she could not afford a trip like that and won it totally free, life in New York does not excite her the way she thinks it should. Moreover, she does not feel at ease with her friends' attitude - Doreen's rebellious personality and Betsy's conformism and innocence. Along her stay in New York, Esther narrates disastrous and funny dates as well as curious events during her internship, such as the food poisoning the protagonist and her friends suffer during a fancy banquet and, in her last day in New York, how she was almost raped by a man named Marco. Meanwhile, Esther questions her talent and wonders what she is going to do after college. She is uncertain whether she marries and leads a traditional and domestic life or pursues her desire to be a successful writer. There are so many choices and she feels lost amidst them.

Esther also reminisces her relationship with Buddy Willard, who is the son of her mother's friend, had a relationship with Esther and seemed to be the ideal mate for her yet he does not understand and support her poetry. Although Buddy asks Esther to marry him, his chances are ruined as soon as Esther finds out he had slept with a waitress while they were already dating and did not tell her.

In chapter ten, back to her hometown, she hopes to win another scholarship to a summer course, but finds out she was not accepted. Then, she decides to spend the summer writing a novel, even though she is unsure if she has enough experience to do it. As her life was based on academic achievements, she feels uncertain about her talent and career in the future and, since feminine professions, such as topography, do not appeal to her, she feels increasingly depressed and unstable. Soon, she stops bathing, can no longer sleep, write, read or swallow properly. Her mother, then, encourages her to see a psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon, who prescribes shock treatments which deeply scare Esther and, after the first session, she decides she will never come back. Meanwhile, she feels she cannot sleep, already awake for

twenty one weeks and rehearses suicide attempts: with a blade, she tries to slit her wrist but is not courageous to do so; instead she slashes her calf for “practicing”. She also tries to hang herself, but cannot find a place to tie the rope and tries drowning herself, but she keeps floating on the water and gives up. Esther’s depression worsens. She describes the feeling as being under a bell jar, struggling for breath “I sank back in the gray, plush seat and closed my eyes The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn't stir” (PLATH, 1999, p. 186).

She visits her father’s grave in the cemetery, cries and remembers she had never cried for her father’s death and neither has her mother. She cries as she has never done before. After that, she steals her mother’s sleeping pills, crawls into a crevice in the cellar and takes them, one after another. Chapter fourteen starts with Esther in the hospital after her suicide attempt. She survives with no heals and she starts recovering with the help of Dr. Nolan who convinces her to restart the shock treatments section again, now under total assistance. After some days, Esther describes the treatment as beneficial, and with a combination of talk, electric shock therapy and insulin her mental and physical conditions improve gradually. At the hospital, she meets Joan, a friend from her town, whose experiences were similar to Esther’s, including the fact that they both dated Buddy Willard.

Due to good behavior and improvement, Esther is allowed to leave the hospital. In one of her leaves, she sleeps with a man named Irvin, finally losing her virginity and conveying the idea she does not feel intimidated by the consequences of sex anymore and she is no longer affected by the pressure to be a virgin and to get married. In chapter nineteen, Esther finds out her friend, Joan, killed herself, even though she had improvements in her treatment. Esther decides to attend the funeral. Buddy Willard also visits Esther and they both agree their relationship is over. Esther seems peaceful and free of the bell jar. The story ends with Esther’s interview to decide if she is apt to leave the hospital or not. The sense of rebirth and hope is what strongly marks the end of the story.

The novel is composed by twenty chapters which, according to some scholars, may be divided into two parts: the first half, until chapter fourteen, tells us the breakdown suffered by Esther and the second half, the retrieval (MCCANN, 2012). In fact, chapter thirteen ends with Esther’s attempt to suicide and fourteen begins with the process of her recovery. The story portrays exactly the moments Plath faced in

her own life: her experiences with boyfriends; her family, especially her mother, the month she spent in New York working for the *Mademoiselle* College Board and especially her breakdown. However, for readers who see Esther Greenwood just as a fictional character and not the personification of Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* is a meaningful novel about fears teenagers usually share, about a poor girl who could not afford the university and depended on keeping scholarships and winning prizes and whose performance could not be less than perfect. It is about doubts adolescence conveys, the need to fit in some place in the world, to succeed and to fulfill the expectations and, finally, how to be true to yourself even being under the demands of the society. Thus, even though written in the 1950s, the novel portrays recurrent topics which still echo nowadays. As a woman, Esther Greenwood shares the issues that women in the 1940s and 1950s faced, such as the pressure to get married and the difficulties to succeed in the sexist American reality of that time.

3.4 SYLVIA PLATH'S LIFE AND FICTION

It is known that Esther Greenwood was based on Sylvia Plath as well as the story was based on episodes that Plath herself experienced. That is the fact that makes *The Bell Jar* be so disturbing. It is constantly classified as something between autobiography and fiction, but to what extent Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood are the same? If it contains fiction, can we identify it or is every single piece of the story genuinely Sylvia Plath's own? Upon answering these questions, is it possible to deem *The Bell Jar* an autobiography, an autobiographical novel or an autofiction? This section aims to explore these questions, mainly through the use of the theories of Autofiction, the Autobiographical Novel, Autobiography and the Character and the Real Person. Plath's fiction versus the author's real life will be approached through the use of her fictional novel as well as journals and authorized autobiographies.

Victoria Lukas was a pseudonym Plath chose to disguise the authorship of *The Bell Jar* when it was first published in London. Firstly, because the portrait of real people in the novel could hurt feelings and secondly, because she was uncertain about the literary quality of it. In fact, not only family and friends of Sylvia Plath are transposed to fiction but also the author, Sylvia Plath, is mirrored in Esther Greenwood. Even Esther's last name, Greenwood, was based on Plath's

grandmother's. However, coincidences go beyond the name. Both, Esther and Plath, were talented students who suffered with the pressure of the American society of the 1950s, mainly because they were supposed to choose between career and a domestic life. Sylvia Plath exposed the feeling that she could not succeed in many entries of her journals and also complained about the limitation of life, as seen:

I can never read all the books I want; I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want. I can never train myself in all the skills I want. And why do I want? I want to live and feel all the shades, tones and variations of mental and physical experience possible in life. And I am horribly limited (PLATH, 2000, p. 59).

Likewise, Esther doubted her future and her talent for writing. She was also uncertain if she could succeed in both areas, either writing or being a wife. There were many options and she did not feel at ease to opt for only one of them. She uses the metaphor of a fig tree to externalize this internal conflict.

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor (...) I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (PLATH, 1999, p. 77).

Other small coincidences are clearly noticed once reading more carefully the novel and knowing the author's biography. Both were raised by mothers, with dead fathers and with only one brother. They both won a contest to work for a guest editor in New York for a month and they both suffered a breakdown during adolescence and, more important, they both recovered. Even peculiar events which are thoroughly portrayed in *The Bell Jar*, such as Esther's poisoning by ptomaine at a fancy dinner hosted by a huge advertising agency, the broken ankle when skiing with Buddy Willard, the act of "relieve" when throwing many of her clothes out of the window were, according to the autobiography written by Linda Wagner-Martin, simply a reproduction of events Plath herself experienced.

Physically, Both Plath and Esther resemble each other yet it is possible to notice they have different perceptions of themselves. They are both tall, slim, but it is clear by reading the journals that the first is aware of her beauty whereas the other

does not acknowledge that. Instead, in events of *The Bell Jar*, the reader may infer that Esther is uninteresting. The protagonist of the novel clearly considers her friend, Doreen, more beautiful and so do the men they go out with. They are usually not interested in Esther, but in Doreen:

For a minute I had a wild hope we might pair off according to size, which would line me up with the man who had spoken to us in the first place, and he cleared a good six feet, but he went ahead with Doreen and didn't give me a second look (PLATH, 1999, p. 9).

On the other hand, Plath knew she was beautiful and stated that in her journals. "I knew I looked nice - in my simply cut black velvet suit with the skirt full as a caress and the red jersey showing through the scooped neckline" (PLATH, 2000, p. 42).

Besides, although the college Esther attends is not clearly stated along the novel, it is possible to infer it is a reputed woman's university, which could easily mirror Smith College, the place Plath attended. Their feelings are also similar. Plath's depression and suicide tendencies are widely used in many of her poems. Her poem "A birthday present", for example, written weeks before her thirtieth birthday, may be firstly interpreted as a positive poem considering its title, since a birthday present usually reveals excitement and happiness. However, Plath is able to turn this poem into a cry of despair, exposing her ill mental state and suicidal tendency, conveying the idea that, finally, her birthday present would be her death. The use of first-person narrative convinces the reader that those distressful feelings are the author's own. The same first-person narrative is presented in *The Bell Jar* and the depression feelings, the suicide tendency, the deep confusion and sadness are also part of Esther Greenwood's life, likely as it was in Plath's.

Some characters are also transposed from the author's life to fiction. Buddy Willard, for example, strongly resembles Dick Norton, the first passion of Plath's life. Norton's mother was Aurelia's friend and it is possible to recover details of this real relationship in the novel *The Bell Jar*. Again, events of real life are transposed to fiction: he attends the medical school, he invites Plath to the Yale prom and after this event their relationship changes exactly like the relationship between Esther Greenwood and Dick Norton does. In life as in fiction, Dick/Buddy represented the ideal husband but they both insisted in bringing their medical reality to Plath's and Esther's, taking them to hospital tours, watching dissections of cadavers and seeing live births. In this episode, however, Plath may have exaggerated in the details in

order to transpose to the reader Esther's fear of motherhood. This event is described minutely by Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*.

The head doctor, who was supervising Will, kept saying to the woman, "Push down, Mrs. Tomolillo, push down, that's a good girl, push down", and finally through the split, shaven place between her legs, lurid with disinfectant, I saw a dark fuzzy thing appear (PLATH, 1999, p.66).

Besides, Norton as Buddy spent about a year at a sanatorium due to tuberculosis, as Linda Wagner-Marin recovers in her biographical book: "In the midst of all this came a phone call from Dick, with the news that he had tuberculosis and would be spending at least a year in a sanatorium in Saranac, New York, and that Sylvia should have a chest X-ray as soon as possible (WAGNER-MARTIN, 1990, p. 88). The same happened with Buddy Willard, the fictional character. Besides, another event which is portrayed comically and accurately in fiction by Sylvia Plath is when she goes skiing with Buddy and breaks her leg. This event, according to Wagner-Martin, happened exactly as depicted in *The Bell Jar*.

Characters, such as Jay Cee, Esther Greenwood's boss in New York, is a copy of a real boss called Cyrilly Abels; Ms. Philomena Guinea, Esther's benefactor at Smith can be identified as Mrs. Olive Higgins Prouty and other people may be totally considered as "cloned" from Plath's life. Even the relationship with her mother and the hatred Esther demonstrates - she even considers killing her mother while she sleeps - especially after her mother allowed her to shock treatments has its origin on Plath's own troubling relationship with Aurelia Plath. However, Esther's feelings are apparently stronger than Plath's, who always felt she could not reach her mother's expectations - or what she thought to be expectations. Esther's feelings, however, were closer to betrayal, which she felt not only towards her mother but also to other characters. She feels she was betrayed by her mother when she allowed her to shock treatments, by Buddy Willard when he announced he was not a virgin anymore and Jay Cee when she doubted her talent.

Considering all these similarities, Plath's novel could be considered really closer to autobiography. However, certain characters, such as Doreen, Betsy and Joan are evidenced neither in Plath's journals, nor in her biography. Probably, these are elements Plath created in order to give a fictionalized account to the story of her life. In fact, Sylvia Plath is known by the use of metaphors and imagery in her poetry and the same happens in her novel. Linda Wagner-Martin suggests that elements of

the bible may have been used to inspire Plath when composing *The Bell Jar*. For instance, the *Mademoiselle* Guest editors in New York, originally twenty, were diminished to twelve, the well-known number of apostles who joined Jesus in the Last Supper. Besides, it is possible to apprehend the image of Evil and God through Esther's two friends: Doreen and Betsy.

Betsy and Doreen are presented to the reader at the beginning of the novel, when Esther is in New York. Esther admires Doreen's sexuality, personality and security, yet considers her "trouble". Esther states Doreen made her feel sharper than the others and that she was "wonderfully funny" (PLATH, 1999, p. 5). However, Esther seemed unsure about Doreen's attitude and did not feel at ease about certain situations Doreen exposes her. In a particular episode, Esther narrates going out with Doreen and how she ends up alone whereas Doreen has fun with a boyfriend. She clearly seems uninteresting whereas Doreen is beautiful and desired. Esther, on the other hand, feels lonely and depressed. After being with Doreen, she takes a long bath so she can purify herself, escaping her 'dirty actions'. "I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath" (PLATH, 1999, p. 20). After sleeping a while, Doreen appears terribly drunk at Esther's room, pleading for help but Esther decides to leave her in the corridor outside her room, denying help. She denies what she considers an inappropriate behavior and feels ashamed of being part of that. Doreen's behavior disturbs yet amazes Esther and the impureness she represents only a bath can clean. The imagery of the double is also approached since Doreen represents what Esther desired to be, even though her attitudes trouble the protagonist. Esther uses the imagery of shadows to convey what Doreen represented to her: the light, the positive, the socially skilled and beautiful friend, unaware and careless woman. Whereas she was in the shadows and, as she herself stated, was the negative of a person, Doreen was in evidence, in the lights:

It was so dark in the bar I could hardly make out anything except Doreen. With her white hair and white dress she was so white she looked silver. I think she must have reflected the neons over the bar. I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life (PLATH, 1999, p. 10)

Betsy, on the other hand, represents the innocent friend, whose purpose was to "save" Esther from the inappropriate companionship of Doreen. Negating Doreen's troubling personality would be accepting the ingenuous temperament of Betsy.

Esther, since disturbed about Doreen's attitudes, searches for Betsy's immaculate behavior in order to save herself. As she states,

I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart.(PLATH, 1999, p. 22)

Betsy represents the kind and innocent side of Esther whereas Doreen, the sexual, restless and daring side. Joan, who appears in the story when Esther is already in the sanatorium, is also Esther's double, but Joan decides or is forced to lead the same path Esther does.

Another important character, whose presence is important during the second half of the novel and whose essence may be considered totally fictionalized, Joan Gilling, is the double of Esther. They both face the same mental illness and try to recover at the same hospital, they come from the same city and studied at the same university; they both dated Buddy Willard; they are both talented students and have the ambition to become professionals and they both defy the norms of that time's society. On the other hand, Joan is also the representation of the wealthy condition, opposite to Esther Greenwood's reality. Her frequent association to horses reinforces this condition. The first description of Joan conveys the idea that they are similar, yet Esther has a negative image of her.

Joan Gilling came from our home town and went to our church and was a year ahead of me at college. She was a big wheel-president of her class and a physics major and the college hockey champion. She always made me feel squirmy with her starey pebble-colored eyes and her gleaming tombstone teeth and her breathy voice. She was big as a horse, too. I began to think Buddy had pretty poor taste (PLATH, 1999, p. 59).

When they meet in the sanatorium, it is clear Joan is interested in Esther and that it strongly influences her choice for the same sanatorium. When they first meet there, Joan shows Esther she saved newspaper clippings about Esther's attempt to suicide. Esther herself externalizes the close relation she established with Joan, as she was the "black part" of hers:

I looked at Joan. In spite of the creepy feeling, and in spite of my old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me. It was like observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts

and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own. Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose (PLATH, 1999, p. 219).

Joan's suicide at the end of the novel breaks the connection between Esther's and her alter ego, releasing the latter of the "black image" that accompanied the crises of her life. Now Esther was ready for recovering and rebirth. Joan's death surprises the reader and reinforces the idea of "rebirth" in Esther's recovery. Now the protagonist is free of her "dark side" and can finally leave the oppressive "bell jar".

Plath uses these elements in order to go beyond the mere exposition of true facts and the mixture of truth and fiction enriches the novel. Due to the exposition of elements of real life, one could say it had an autobiographical account. However, is it possible to deem *The Bell Jar* autobiographical? After the aforementioned exposition of events and people whose origins were Plath's life, one might think that *The Bell Jar* is an autobiography. However, based on Lejeune's theory, the novel does not have an essential characteristic: The Autobiographical Pact, which consists on identity between author and narrator/protagonist. In the case of *The Bell Jar*, even though Plath based the protagonist's name on her own grandmother's, she does not declare the identity *The Autobiographical Pact* supposes: neither by clarifying on the cover it is an autobiography, nor by naming her character with her own name. Moreover, evidence shows Plath opted for a pseudonym when first publishing it, that is, she decided to hide herself and negate the autobiographical account in it. The "honesty" Lejeune demands is not seen in Plath's intention when writing her novel. Moreover, when considering the elements which specify the autobiography, *The Bell Jar* fits in the linguistic form since it is a narrative; the subject treated, individual life/personal history, also encounters the demands of autobiography. However, the position of the narrator (narrator and protagonist are identical) as well as the situation of the author (identity between author and narrator) fail to deem *The Bell Jar* an autobiography. Besides, since Plath fictionalized people and events of her life in the novel, she established a fictional pact and not an autobiographical one. Fiction is not allowed in autobiographies and, thus, *The Bell Jar* and its known fictional elements are excluded from the genre's demands.

Since the novel fails to be an autobiography, two further options are left: autofiction and the autobiographical novel. Once recovering the concepts of autofiction,

term coined by Doubrovsky when defying Lejeune's theory, this genre allows the author to shape facts, focus on different elements of the story and go beyond the truth, relying on fictional elements. Indeed, Plath created fictional characters and intensified specific elements of her life in the novel. However, autofiction also demands certain conditions *The Bell Jar* fails to accomplish, such as, again, the identity between author and protagonist. In fact, autofiction supposes onomastic identity, as autobiography does, but allows the classification as a "novel" and the creation of a space of "invention" of strictly real events of life, that is, give a fictionalized account to events which truly happened. Furthermore, due to the onomastic identity, autofiction supposes confusion between author and protagonist and its purpose is transparency and ambiguousness, which was not Plath's aim with *The Bell Jar*.

In fact, *The Bell Jar* invites the reader to know more about Esther Greenwood, an adolescent who suffers from the pressure of the society and appeals to suicide. However, looking closer, *The Bell Jar* may also be seen as the story of a young poet, Sylvia Plath, whose depression almost lead to her premature death. As the author herself declared, her main inspiration for her poetry came from her own life experiences and feelings and *The Bell Jar* is, as already discussed, strongly based on the author's own life. However, even though writing the novel using the first-person narrative voice as an act of self-revelation, Plath opted to hide herself behind Esther Greenwood, as well as disguise other people of her life, with different names and faces. For an unaware reader, the novel is purely fictional, but once reading about Plath's biography and researching her journals and letters, it is totally possible to recover facts and people who are mirrored in her real life. It dissimulates the autobiographical content and the author disguises herself relying on fictional elements. Thus, the resources used by Plath when creating *The Bell Jar* clearly convey the elements of an *Autobiographical Novel*. Recovering what has been seen before, the objective of the autobiographical novel is not exposing the author's face as in the autobiography but hiding it under the resources of fiction. Usually based on traumas the author faced, the autobiographical novel allows an urge to disguise. Writing *The Bell Jar* served as a liberating experience for Plath, but she did not intend to evidence her own face in the character. Autofiction is presented as autobiography, although it is not, whereas the *Autobiographical Novel* is presented as a novel, even though it contains hidden elements of the author's real life and its

base may constitute the author's own experiences. Considering the several facts Plath transposed to her life, according to biographies, her own letters home, *The Bell Jar* can finally be considered an autobiographical novel.

Its character, Esther Greenwood, is based on Plath, and exists through the latter, firstly because the author created it and second because the character was based on the author. Esther's internal conflicts represent the main issue of the novel and, even though based on a real event, it was modified through fiction. The affinities between Esther and Plath are unquestionable, however, according to Forster, it is not possible to capture the essence of a real person and transpose it to fiction. Real people are more complex than fictional characters. Esther Greenwood, in spite of being based on a real person, has different proportions of life and, thus, can be classified as a *Homo fictus*.

However, it is possible to state that Esther Greenwood represented a complex amount of Plath's personality during adolescence. The mental illness is described in detail as well as how Esther felt during the breakdown. Besides, considering Plath and Esther had the same issues, questions and internal conflicts and that the purpose of Plath when writing this novel was to externalize these issues, is it possible to conclude that Esther is a true copy of Plath? According to Candido, true copies of the real world would negate the fictional portion of the novel and that, even though based on real people, characters cannot be exact copies of the real world.

In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, character and author strongly resemble each other but the latter only based the novel on her own experiences, so, in fact, certain proportions, such as the author's feelings the might have been altered in fiction. Besides, Plath opted to name the character differently from her own and regarded the story as a novel, not an autobiography, so it conveys the idea that Esther and Plath had, indeed, differences.

Aiming to fit the protagonist of *The Bell Jar* in one of Candido's distinctions according to the character's distance from reality, option three – characters whose creation is based on a real model – seems to attend the process of creation in *The Bell Jar*, not only for Esther Greenwood but for most of Plath's characters. A great part of them was based on real people and even if they are modified along the story, it is possible to identify their real model due to external information. Plath could transpose people from real life to fiction almost perfectly, maintaining, most of the

times, their essence, even though Candido considered this transposition was difficult to be done. The reader, as seen before, prefers to read about the exceptional than the mundane and Plath provided the reader with exaggerated and fictional elements to compose her novel and create the “exceptional” aura of her novel. Certain characters, for example, were created to intricate and enrich the story, transposing it from a mere act of confession. The essence of Plath and her alter ego, Esther Greenwood, are mixed, and once reading *The Bell Jar*, knowing the author’s life and experiences, it is almost impossible to dissociate the literary character from the real one. The ability to deeply express her feelings and personality under the mask of a fictional character, without transforming it into a mere act of revelation, but into a great fictional novel, is what turns Sylvia Plath’s ability to write distinguished and *The Bell Jar* beautifully disturbing.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the second page of *The Bell Jar*, published by Harper Perennial, New York, in 2005, there is the following description “This book is a work of fiction. All characters and events are a product of the author’s imagination. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental”²³. In fact, *The Bell Jar* does not fit into this description. Plath’s main inspiration when writing her only novel was herself: her experiences and her personality, a common practice of the Confessionals, as she is considered. Even adding fictionalized elements and intensifying certain relationships, Plath was able to portray a twenty-year old Sylvia Plath, who suffered a breakdown and attempted suicide. However, for those who do not know Plath’s biography, *The Bell Jar* is about the crisis of adolescence, the need to fit in the world and the self pressure society may cause.

Upon analyzing Plath’s biography and journals, it is possible to identify that several events and people Plath thoroughly described in the novel are accurately taken from her own life experiences. However, in spite of the real account in her novel, some characters are also fictionalized, which turns her novel even richer: it slightly establishes the boundary between fiction and real life. Moreover, since Plath decides to hide herself under the mask of her alter-ego, Esther Greenwood, it determines her novel is an autobiographical novel, since there is no onomastic identity between author and character, an essential element to autofictions and autobiographies. Plath wanted to release herself from her breakdown in her twenties but did not want to publish an autobiography, giving her character another name. Besides, fictional elements were added, which discards the possibility of being an autobiography.

Notwithstanding, the character, Esther Greenwood, is really close to real life and fits in Candido’s classification regarding its closeness to reality. However, it is possible to infer that Esther is not only based on Plath but that she aims to be the real transposition of the author. Plath was able to portray herself, her feelings and experiences in a fictional novel, disguising herself, even being honest to her readers. The author managed to mix genuinely real elements with fictional portraits and details which conveyed certain effects, such as irony and the double. The slight boundary between fiction and reality which is established in *The Bell Jar* intrigues the reader and might explain its success and validity for deep studies.

²³ PLATH, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.

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