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Abstract

In this thesis I will undertake a comparative analysis of three different novels to investigate how restrictive gendered ideals affect the protagonists' sense of womanhood and, as part of this examination, discuss how the female condition has changed from the Victorian era to 1950s post-war America. A particular focus will be placed on the doctrine of domestic bliss as the ultimate goal for women.

I have chosen three novels written by women who themselves had to either conform to or be deviants from the reigning expectations of their societies, that is, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). These three novels have primarily been chosen because they portray women who are in similar predicaments, but are placed in different time periods and spaces, and who represent different circumstances of class. Hence, I will investigate how the Victorian, Modernist and Post-war societies pressure women to conform to ideal mothers and wives, and how four different female characters both are seen to accept and refute these ideals.

In order to discuss and critique the mentioned ideals, I will refer myself to a range of theoretic material. I will be using feminist theory that was written during or shortly after the heights of the ideals mentioned – such as *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan, that described the repressive ideal while it was still in effect. Additionally, I will be looking at essays and text from recent years that have interpreted the novels and connected them with the female condition of the era the novels are set in. Lastly, I will be referring to memoirs and news articles that demonstrate that some of the limitations described in the novels for women are still in effect today.

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1. Introduction

“The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings”

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899, 85)

Our society has for a long time been structured as a patriarchy, where men have ruled and set expectations and ideals for how women should be. Women’s fight for equality has lasted for more than 200 years, and in current discussions on whether or not women still need to fight, it is also important to look back on the earlier fights and the challenges that have been overcome. By drawing comparisons on these restrictive ideals that are often considered to be left behind in the past, we will see that remnants of them still exist today. There are many facets of a woman’s life that has been controlled and that can be discussed, but for the sake of this thesis I have chosen to narrow the focus down to ideals of domesticity and how these affects one’s identity as a woman, with a point of departure in three novels written by women in three different eras. The aim for this thesis is to investigate how the Victorian, Modernist and Post-war societies pressure women to conform to ideal mothers and wives, and how four different female protagonists accept or refute these ideals. The novels were written by women who experienced internal conflict created by these ideals and sought to explain the internal struggle in the literary medium. Hence, all three novels feature female protagonists that have either accepted or rejected the idea of who they should be as a woman and explore how it affects their thoughts of self. The first is Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), the second is Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and the third is Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963).

The reasoning for choosing this topic is based in both my academic interests and that it is a continuation of the work I started in my bachelor’s thesis. In my BA I discussed how the economic and societal rules influenced two women protagonists’ approach to getting married and the female condition of the Victorian era, by undertaking a feminist reading of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Focusing on domesticity and what comes after marriage is somewhat of an extension on this project but adding in more than one time period allows for a greater span in the discussion of feminine ideals, and for an opportunity to observe how these change over time. Secondly, I wanted to investigate the background for the female condition women are living in today, and to see what parts of earlier ideals still exist, and how earlier ideals may have morphed into modern versions.

The earliest of the novels and thus the one that presents the oldest ideals is Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. This literary work is set in New Orleans and the vacation destination Grand Isle, but the ideal of the angel in the house is present wherever the protagonist Edna Pontellier sets her feet. As the title states, Edna goes through a process of an awakening to realize that she does not actually desire or enjoy the life she is living, and that it is merely something she is expected to appreciate. It was not only the ideals of the Victorian era that hung over Chopin's shoulders: the stiff format of the Victorian novel was also one that she wished to distance herself from. However, she struggles with creating a new direction like the one Woolf explores in *To the Lighthouse*, and the two plot alternatives available to Edna is represented in Mrs Ratignolle and mademoiselle Reisz. The first is the ideal woman and the angel in the house, whilst the other is the unattractive and rude artist. Not wanting to have Edna end up as either and unable to find a middle way that was plausible in the society and age the novel was set, Chopin sees no other option than to have Edna commit suicide.

Further advances to defeat the angel in the house and the Victorian novel are made in the second novel, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, where we encounter two female protagonists who are just as different as Mrs Ratignolle and mademoiselle Reisz. Woolf herself grew up with an angel in the house as a mother and saw first-hand the toll it took on her. Woolf also felt the angel looking over her own shoulder as a literary critic, and in *Professions for Women* (1931) she described why she had to figuratively kill it. This, and the conditions needed for women like Woolf to write fiction, was something she further discussed in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The angel in the house in the novel is Mrs Ramsay, a devoted wife and mother of eight, and Lily Briscoe, a spinster artist. The plot issues of the Victorian era have been tackled by the stream-of-consciousness narration and Woolf decides that the only way to get rid of the angel in the house is to kill Mrs Ramsay. However, Mrs Ramsay's death is different from Edna Pontellier's because whilst Edna died at the end of the novel when there were no other options, Mrs Ramsay's death in the middle of the novel is just briefly mentioned before the novel goes on without her – another way of refuting the Victorian novel. Mrs Ramsay has put on the performance of a lifetime in being the angel in the house, and it is through close readings of minor moments we realise that the ideal is wearing her out, as is her demanding Victorian husband. The other protagonist, Lily Briscoe, is not being weighed down by living as the angel – it is the presence of the ideal and her knowing that she does not live up to it that makes her question her identity. She is not taken seriously as an artist, and the angel in the personification of Mrs Ramsay would find it more appropriate for Lily to marry a man twice her age rather than to continue pursuing art.

The third and final novel is *The Bell Jar*, where it seems like the ideal woman has taken a 180 degree turn since Woolf attempted to kill the angel in the house. There had been progress since Woolf's time, and as a result Sylvia Plath herself was allowed to attend college. However, she and many women her age experienced that college would be as far as they should go before returning to domesticity. Hence, the protagonist Esther Greenwood finds herself with an almost identical identity crisis that Edna Pontellier experienced – she may be either a domestic angel or an artist. In the first half of the novel, Esther is in a repetitive cycle at her summer editorship in New York whilst struggling to accept that she may not be more than one thing at once, i.e., a mother and a poet, and the second half details her institutionalization and electric shock therapy as she is treated for mental illnesses.

The theoretical section that is the second chapter in this thesis will serve to explain the ideals that were present as these women authors wrote their novels, and that influenced the inner conflicts of their protagonists. I will open this by discussing various feminist critics' discussions of what a woman is, and how society affects this definition. It is namely because society affects the definition of what a woman is that it is necessary to discuss the contemporary ideology that dominated the times and places where these various novels were written. There are four theoretical works that will be especially important for each of the historical periods. Firstly, the female condition in the Victorian era and the woman question will be discussed, and this will be linked to Elaine Showalter's seminal theoretical works *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (1978) and *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830~1980* (1987), where she gives an overview of how these ideals affected women writers and the treatment of mental illnesses in women in the nineteenth century. As mentioned, American women experience somewhat of a revival of the angel in the house ideal in the post war period, and in *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan explains the feminine mystique and examines how it goes hand in hand with patriarchy on securing its influence on society. What separates post-war America from the late Victorian period is that Friedan's publication of *The Feminine Mystique* comforted American women who thought they were the only one not cut out for domestic bliss. Many of her arguments were later followed up by Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990), which focuses on how women historically have also been kept in check by being presented with impossible beauty ideals and how these grew in strength as the patriarchal society began to lose its hold on women in the domestic sphere.

Following the literary review section are three chapters where I link the feminist theory mentioned above to my findings from close reading the three novels. The imagery of a

parrot in a gilded cage in *The Awakening* opens these discussions, and it is one that also appears in *The Bell Jar*. Two women from these novels are either personified in or compared to a caged bird, and this is representative of how women become property to be owned through the institution of marriage. Additionally, it also represents how women's speech is not taken seriously, due to their limited education leaving them to repeat what others have told them.

Another finding which I will argue that is central to the internal conflict in the women of all the novels, is the few available narratives for them. For all of them, there are really only two options for what they can be: an angel or a devil. The angel being the ideal woman, and i.e., the path that Mrs Ramsay has taken in *To the Lighthouse*, where she has given up all individual dreams and pursuits to serve those around her. The other is the devil, which is the woman that decides to not follow the path society would have her take, and so she must pay a price of some sort. The first one we meet is mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening* who is brutally honest, unmarried, a pianist and disliked by almost everyone. The same goes for the other foils of untraditional women that the other protagonists meet, and Edna, Lily and Esther are variants of this themselves as they struggle to accept being an angel. This is visually represented by Esther in *The Bell Jar*, when she imagines her future as a fig tree, with the different paths as figs on branches before her. However, like Edna could not find a way to be both a mother and an independent artist, Esther is only allowed to pick one fig, either a family, being a poet or travelling to Europe. And just like Edna, she is unable to choose and watches as the figs rot. The women are then punished for not choosing the preferred path by society: Edna commits suicide, Lily is lonely and poor, and Esther is institutionalized and put through shock treatments.

Lastly, I will argue that women not being taken as seriously as men is something that is present in all three novels in various aspects, and something that is also relevant in present times. This is especially visible in the treatment of the protagonists' mental health and career aspirations. For the mental health aspect, when Edna starts acting out of decorum, her husband visits a doctor to ask how he can fix her, instead of actually talking to his wife. Edna never goes through any treatments, but Esther on the other hand, does. Here, I refer myself to *The Female Malady*, and how mental illnesses have been used against women and that the patriarchy used mental institutions to render harmless women that worked against them. For the career side, the women also experience that they are not taken as seriously as a man would. Lily gets interrupted and suffers critical glances whilst she paints outside, but Mr Ramsay is never disturbed in his philosophical pacing in the same space. When Edna takes up

painting she has to teach herself, and her husband is appalled that she spends her time in her atelier instead of on her social duties. Esther is not taken seriously as a poet, and during a photoshoot for the magazine she has been a guest editor at, she is asked to hold a pretty flower, smile and describe how happy it makes her to write poetry. After all, it is just something for her to dilly-dally with until she finds a husband and devotes her time to growing their domestic bliss.

2. Literary review

Mary Wollstonecraft's work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* became an important feminist work that would pave the way for the struggles of the Victorian, Modern and post-war era women as she challenged the normative ideas of femaleness. Here, Wollstonecraft critiques the difference between male and female education and also describes the discrepancy between being human and being a woman, stating that: "I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers (...)(Wollstonecraft 223–24)" Drastic changes occurred from 1792, when Wollstonecraft published her work, until 1963 when Sylvia Plath published *The Bell Jar*. But even though women had acquired the kind of education Wollstonecraft had argued for, when Sylvia Plath attended a commencement speech at Smith College, democratic politician Adlai Stevenson gave a speech where he emphasized the important work women should do as housewives (Friedan 43), clearly signalling that women were better suited for work inside, rather than outside, the home.

The aim for this thesis is to investigate the representation of three different female characters from three different historical periods in order to explore how women from the Victorian, Modernist and post-world war eras faced pressure to conform to normative ideals of femaleness. I will conduct a feminist reading of *The Awakening*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Bell Jar* with particular emphasis on the protagonists of the three novels. Edna of *The Awakening* struggles with conforming to the role of the dedicated mother and also wants to pursue art. Mrs Ramsay of *To the Lighthouse* has perfected the Victorian art of being a housewife, while Lily Briscoe, her doppelganger, has dedicated her life to her art and, as a result, abstained from the traditional path of marriage. Lastly, Esther of *The Bell Jar* struggles between pursuing a career and settling down into marriage and motherhood. These four female characters were all created in times where the patriarchal divide on society was clearer than it is today, and when women both had to figure out what they wanted to be and who they were while, at the same time, trying to adhere to the reigning ideals and expectations for how they should structure their lives as women. To discuss whether the mentioned protagonists act according to the norm or go against it, I will be presenting some of the ideals that prevailed in the historical periods when the novels take place and explore how the protagonists approach them. Edna Pontellier, Lily and Mrs Ramsay were written with the ideal of the angel in the

house in mind, whilst Esther experienced the comeback of the ideal domestic housewife, as critiqued by Betty Friedan in her study *The Feminine Mystique*.

This literary review will be focused on these historical contexts, concentrating on discussions and scholars who dealt with the woman question from the 1840s and onwards, since the earliest novel analysed in the thesis was published in 1899. The chapter will also discuss what it means to be woman in a historical sense, and in what ways this can be different from being a human being. From Wollstonecraft's publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, numerous processes have been undertaken by both women and supporters of women to secure fundamental human rights for the female sex. The first wave of feminism, or the suffragette movement, spanning from 1848 to 1920, marched, lectured and protested for political rights such as the right to vote, equal opportunities to education and employment, and the right to own property (Grady). Many female writers contributed to express and criticize the prevailing ideals, such as Virginia Woolf, who published critique on the Victorian era. The second wave that spanned from 1963 to the 1980s is often thought to have begun with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and, also, the ideas expressed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Although Friedan was not the first to express the message that the world is trying to force women into domesticity, the impact of her work was revolutionary. The feminist movement's message that "The personal is political" championed against the belief that issues which were judged as petty and individual were essential for women's equality and had systemic causes (Grady). Later on, Naomi Wolf published *The Beauty Myth* (1990), a critique on the societal beauty ideals that, in her opinion, replaced the domestic ideal of the housewife, and which, moreover, to a large degree still influence women's self-comprehension in contemporary times.

The first question that we need to ask, then, is what is a woman?

2.1 What is a woman?

In order to look at some definitions of "woman" and define which one I will be using it is relevant to look back to 1792 and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as it gives a fundamental definition on the perceived differences between being a woman and a man. Wollstonecraft famously argued that the discrepancy between male and female education lead to women being excluded from the world outside the home, and that being a woman was different from being a human being. Unpacking what it means to be a woman is no simple feat, as it is something that is still being discussed in present day.

Additionally, woman writers discuss how being a woman affects the individual. Being a woman is both a normative concept in relation to how women should think about themselves, but also an internalized idea. Overall, there are two main concerns: the political, cultural and social rights for women that make up the woman question debate, and secondly, the ideal that is created as an ideological construct.

Whilst Wollstonecraft and other critics provide extensive discussions, dictionaries take a simpler approach. These definitions can be useful in the sense that they give a short answer to a complicated question that is still being debated in the present day. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines *woman* as “an adult female human being” and *femaleness* as “the fact or quality of being female”. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* gives the same definition for *woman* but is not as clear on what *femaleness* is. Here, it is listed as a subsection under “female” which reads “characteristic of girls, women, or the female sex: exhibiting femaleness”. There are also a few different definitions of *female*. The first is focused on the biological aspect and defines female as “of, relating to, or being the sex that typically has the capacity to bear young or produce eggs”. The second entry under *female* defines being female in opposition to being male in the sense of “having a gender identity that is the opposite of male”. These two distinctions depict some of the different ways to approach the definition of *female*, and the difference between biology and culture, which will be further discussed using the works of philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir. Finally, *feminine* is then defined as “characteristic of or appropriate or unique to women”. Although these definitions are short and to the point, they are circular and lead back to one another, and thus does not give a proper definition of the terms. Perhaps the definition is so complex that it is impossible to define in short sentences, and especially the definition of woman being the opposite of a man makes it necessary to look to philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir.

Moreover, the dictionaries do not take into consideration the many ways women have been defined in relation to men, and the difference between being a woman and being perceived as a woman. In her 1949 book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously asks “what is a woman?” People of her time stated “Be women, stay women, become woman”, indicating that there are various levels of being a woman, and that some women are more “woman” than others (Beauvoir, ‘From *The Second Sex*’ 193). Beauvoir goes all the way back to Aristotle and other philosophers and critics who in some way or other view women in relation to the man, and as “the other” or, the second sex. Given the various qualifications and expectations a “woman” must meet, Beauvoir concludes that “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.”(Beauvoir, ‘From *The Second Sex*’ 198). It is essential to consider how

“woman” is largely a cultural construct, and something you become, as Beauvoir states, which is also something that is suggested as early as 1792 in Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. These are the kinds of concerns and problematizations that have formed the novels that I am investigating, and which will underpin my readings of both the novels and the historical, social, political, and cultural contexts in which they were written. Here, for the purposes of this thesis, I will therefore be using the definition of Beauvoir and other feminist philosophers: that woman is a cultural construct that one can become.

While the dictionaries often tend to seek towards biology to define what a woman is, Beauvoir concludes that it is not enough to have a woman’s body or to perform acts of femaleness such as being a lover and a mother to be a “real woman” (Beauvoir, ‘From *The Second Sex*’ 1220). The “real woman” accepts her position as the other and finds autonomy through sexuality and maternity. Beauvoir notes that the divide between seeing the woman as somewhat of a peer whilst also being inessential creates two destinies that are not reconcilable, and she becomes unbalanced in her hesitation to suit to either. Beauvoir is therefore certain that it is difficult for the women of her time to assume both the status of the autonomous individual and their feminine destiny. And, in the same way as Mrs Pontellier of *The Awakening* would rather kill herself than to fight her way out of a female condition she is unsatisfied with, Beauvoir concludes that it is “more comfortable to endure blind bondage than to work for one’s liberation” (Beauvoir, ‘From *The Second Sex*’ 1221). Both the women writers that I am dealing with, and their protagonists do not endure this blind bondage. The writers protest by exploring other options for women, or by demonstrating how impossible it is to have both the autonomy and feminine destiny that Beauvoir described. This leaves the question of what rewards those who endure the blind bondage are given, and what price must be paid for those who work for their liberation.

2.2 The woman question and the angel in the house

Both *The Awakening* and *To the Lighthouse* take place in a period of drastic change in women’s rights, with the woman question debate and the pressing ideal of the angel in the house in the centre of attention. The woman question was an intellectual debate which began to emerge in the 1840s and largely dealt with ideas of what a woman was and what she should do. The debate included women’s legal, education and social rights. Before the Women’s Property Act of 1870, a woman did not have any ownership of her finances as long as she was married. Queen Victoria agreed that women should have the right to education, and supported

the founding of a college for women in 1847, but was still opposed to women having the right to vote (Greenblatt, *TNAEL vol. E*, 654). Although voting rights were not granted until 1918 and were not formally achieved during the woman question debate, the debate directly contributed to acquiring this right through opening up other arenas, such as education and the right to own property, for women. Both the Queen and many of her female subjects felt that the Victorian woman's role was divinely willed, as signalled by Sarah Ellis's *The Women of England* which was a manual in domestic conduct. The female condition improved through increased access to education, but the goal for a Victorian woman was not to be highly educated and independent, rather it was to live the un-academic and boresome life as an upper-middle class angel in the house.

The term angel in the house is commonly used to refer to the strict domestic ideals that existed for women in the Victorian period as described by Sarah Stickney Ellis, but "The Angel in the House" is originally an 1854 poem written by Coventry Patmore about his perfect and model Victorian wife. He describes the many attributes he considers ideal: she is pure, charming, powerless, graceful. The art of family life was where she excelled, and she does not think twice about sacrificing herself for others (Greenblatt, *TNAEL vol. E*, 659). Patmore used the term as an homage to his wife and to show his appreciation for her, as she lived up to the unspoken ideal for married women in the Victorian era. This is drastically different from the way the term is used in literary criticism today, as Woolf and others have appropriated it to define the strict ideals of the Victorian era. The goal for Patmore's wife and women like her was to afford servants that took care of the house and children and left the wife with as little as possible to do. And she could not pursue just any hobby to fill her time but had to engage in "ladylike" activities such as knitting, and embroidery which were the ones deemed suitable for the Victorian upper-class wife. There was little to no support or encouragement for serious study or artistic endeavours (Greenblatt, *TNAEL vol. E*, 655).

These views were criticized by writers such as George Eliot, who, in an essay on Mary Wollstonecraft, argued that the pedestal women were put on hindered them from achieving any alteration in status (Greenblatt, *TNAEL vol. E*, 654). Her sentiment was enforced by feminist writer Mona Caird, who criticized the belief of marriage as a relationship ordained by God, and stated instead that it was a social construct and an association that should be reinvented to promote freedom and equality for both parties (Greenblatt, *TNAEL vol. E*, 654). Such views were not mainstream, however, and functioned largely as a threat to perceived ideals of femininity. If a Victorian woman was to be outspoken and assertive, she would often fall under the satirized label of the "new woman" which emerged in the 1890s, an gestured

towards a bicycle-riding, cigarette-smoking, mannish creature (Greenblatt, *TNAEL vol. E*, 655). The new woman will be mentioned several times throughout the thesis and through the various periods. The qualities attributed to the new woman varies, as she is sometimes the ugly feminist mentioned above, and sometimes another variation of a woman that defies tradition and/or campaigns for political, economic, and cultural changes for women.

2.3 The Female Malady & A Literature of Their Own

Expected to be an angel in the house, Kate Chopin's protagonist does not want to live according to the above-mentioned ideals, and it can be debated if she is a representation of the new woman. In the discussion of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, I will refer myself to two books by Elaine Showalter: *The Female Malady* and *A Literature of Their Own*. The first is a study on "women, madness and English culture" in the 1830s to the 1980s, and the second a study of female writers, spanning from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing. In the fourth chapter of *A Literature of their Own*, Showalter discusses the development of the female tradition of heroines. Namely, how in the late Victorian period the passive and self-destructive heroine was more persistent in women's literature than the rebellious Brontë heroine. The heroine, like Chopin's Mrs Pontellier, has moments of illuminations, awakenings to an unendurable reality, but quickly finds a way to go back to sleep (Showalter, *ALTO* 107). Showalter discusses several other female protagonists that rather let themselves go to opiate addiction or suicide instead of fighting like Jane Eyre did. She reasons this defeat by quoting Florence Nightingale's statements that the mental illnesses and addictions suffered by Victorian women were a result of suppressed anger and a lack of real work in the world. The goal for Victorian women was to be in a rich enough household that they did not have anything to do with their day. When left alone in this passivity, some experienced anger and frustration as a result of the boredom and exclusion from the outside world. Heroines like Mrs Pontellier identify passivity and renunciation with womanhood, and thus it is "easier, more natural, and in a mystical way more satisfying, to destroy herself than to live in a world without opium or fantasy, where she must fight to survive"(Showalter, *ALTO* 107). Mrs Pontellier is married to a wealthy businessman and has cooks and nannies to take care of her household, and thus fits into this category of women that had to choose whether or not to fight against the limitations that had been set on their lives.

In *The Female Malady's* second chapter, titled "The Rise of the Victorian Madwoman" Showalter notes how the mid-nineteenth century saw a significant rise in the predominance of women among the institutionalized insane, and investigates the societal and

individual causes for the shift (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 52). Showalter points to poverty as one reason, as this was more common amongst women than men. Other causes she points to are that men had a monopoly on the psychiatric medical field, that the availability of institutional space allowed for women to be admitted for marginal cases, and lastly, the rise of the psychiatric profession in itself and its inherent attitudes towards women (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 54–55). These views conflict with those of Victorian psychiatrists, who blamed the vulnerability caused by the female reproductive organs – which cause a lesser sexual, emotional, and rational control. On the other hand, there were a few moral managers who recognized that the lack of education and mental exercise among middle to upper class women could be a contributing factor (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 59–60). These arguments of women being unstable due to their reproductive organs and their nervous systems also had extensive influence for social policies. They were some of the contributing factors that denied women political rights, kept them under the control of their family and the state, and held them out of the workplace and inside the lucrative asylums (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 73).

Showalter also specifies that these narratives of Victorian mental illnesses and their treatments are almost exclusively told from the viewpoint of men. The female nurses and matrons did not have the opportunity to express their views on the way women were treated, and the stories of the female lunatic patients are non-existent (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 60). Victorian women's diaries and novels are some of the few sources on the female perspective on insanity. Although they mostly tell the narratives of middle-class and aristocratic women, they present female insanity as a reaction to the limitations of the feminine role, and in its social contexts (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 61). Some of the reasons for mental illness presented by the female novelists are the ones we see in Mrs Pontellier: lack of meaningful work and companionship. Her main purpose in life is being a mother and socialite, a purpose she does not identify with herself. Another is Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, who has mental break and is institutionalized after struggling with choosing which one of the rigid booths she should be put in by society.

2.4 The Awakening

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* can be described as a bildungsroman as it tells the story of Mrs Pontellier's quest to the awakening of the female condition she is living in, and her short-lived attempt at fighting it. Hence, it details her growth from a child to a mature being, in a spiritual

sense. Mrs Pontellier and her family are vacationing in the Louisiana Gulf Coast when she is approached by the charming and unmarried Robert Lebrun. The excitement of the extramarital relationship and the women she gets acquainted with awakens Edna, and she realizes she is in a marriage and family that nineteenth-century societal ideals would like her to be in, and it is not something she actually wanted for herself. Edna leaves Grand Isle without having committed any serious acts of adultery, but she slowly awakens to her distaste for how she has been living her life and starts to break social conventions. Lebrun comes back from his adventures in Mexico, and Edna does not hesitate with pursuing him and he reciprocates in a kiss between the two. When Lebrun leaves her, there is nothing to do but to fall back into her familiar situation, and so she decides to end her life by walking into the sea. Mrs Pontellier's domestic situation was well familiar in 1899, but the narrative of a married woman cheating almost without guilt was shocking and scandalizing when it was first published. In *The Norton Critical Edition of The Awakening*, there is an essay by Bernard Koloski on the first hundred years of criticism of the literary work. In the essay, entitled "*From The Awakening: The First 100 Years*" (2008), Koloski declares that the novel was ahead of its time for the criticisms it received right after publication (Koloski 313). He demonstrates how critics described Chopin's heroine as a "sinner", largely regarding her suicide as an attempt to free herself from temptation and lust. Koloski notes that many critics felt the pressure to follow social conventions and therefore condemned the novel as it clearly broke against accepted ideals. Koloski then states that the novel was forgotten for the next thirty years, before it was rejected once again in the 1930s. After its second rejection, it was overlooked for some time before eventually being rediscovered by scholars in the 50s and 60s, and finally being embraced in the 70s by UK and US feminists (Koloski 313). Lastly, it was favoured by teachers and students, and in our contemporary times it is praised as one of the earliest works of feminist fiction.

2.5 A Room of One's Own

Following the end of the Victorian era, its strict ideals and the female condition were being put into words and criticized by writers such as feminist critic and author Virginia Woolf. She condemned the oppressive effect of the ideal that was presented in Coventry Patmore's poem, and the term was later used to sum up the Victorian attitude towards women. Woolf both coins and explains the term of the lingering angel as intensely sympathetic, immensely charming, and utterly unselfish, at a branch of the National Society for Women's Service in

1931, where she delivered a speech that was later published as “Professions for Women”. Woolf felt the angel hanging over her shoulders when she sat down to write a review of a novel written by a man. She felt the angel tell her to use all the “arts and wiles” of her sex, to flatter and complement the man, to make him like her and think that she does not have a mind of her own (Woolf, 177).

Woolf feels that it is impossible to write a proper review or to even be a female writer with the angel watching over her, and so she must kill the angel in the house. She would have called it self-defence had she been in court, for the angel would have killed her had she not killed it first, she states. The angel would have kept Woolf from, as she puts it, “writing with her heart” – to write what she wishes. Even a review cannot be written without a mind of one’s own, and the angel asks the woman to put her own thoughts and opinions aside and write lies with charm. All the questions that women should be able to deal with openly, cannot be dealt with the angel over their shoulder. Woolf concludes that killing the angel in the house is a part of the occupation of the woman writer (Woolf, 177).

Woolf did not only criticize the rigorous ideals and the female condition, but also the conditions for the female writer. In her work *A Room of One’s Own*, she discusses the relationship between women and fiction, and why economic circumstances and a room to write in and are essential for a successful woman writer. Woolf experienced her argument first-hand when an inheritance enabled her to focus on her writing, and to afford a living space where she could do it. For what is the outcome for an aspiring female writer without funds? She would be strongly encouraged to marry someone, so that her parents would not have to bear the costs of providing for her, and the income of her husband would then be a deciding factor for her artistic opportunities. If they are in the lower-middle class she would have to spend most of her time taking care of the children, and potentially also take on a part time job. There would be no time nor room for her to write. Woolf herself mentions that many would point out that there were several great male writers who came from poor backgrounds and who struggled financially, and she confronts this by pointing out that this is a common thought that holds little truth. Regardless of gender, the predominant number of successful writers of fiction have a college background and sufficient finances. (Woolf 103). Woolf also draws on similar arguments as in “Professions for Women”, stating that men want women to remain inferior so that they may continue to enlarge and sustain patriarchal societies. She names Napoleon and Mussolini as two chief examples of this mindset (Woolf 35). This is why it is so difficult for women to give criticism to men, in i.e. a book review, for the man would present a far greater rage towards a negative review from a woman than he would from

a man (Woolf 36). The need for finances to pursue art and the difficulty of pursuing said art in male-dominated environments is discussed by Woolf in both her non-fiction works, and indirectly in her work of fiction, *To the Lighthouse*.

These conditions for the woman artist were something that Virginia Woolf experienced herself and reflected on in *A Room of One's Own* and "Professions for Women", and *To the Lighthouse* expresses the way she observed her parents adhere to the Victorian ideals. In her essay "Feminism and Gender in *To the Lighthouse*" Gabrielle McIntire discusses the many ways Woolf present and critique current and previous gender relations in her novel. McIntire opens by referencing Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, and how women have historically lacked the material and social conditions to produce art. She points out how in *To the Lighthouse*, the gender landscape is very traditional, and features many aspects of Victorian culture. Mrs Ramsay is the caregiving angel in the house, whilst her husband, Mr Ramsay, is a patriarchal provider and a "authoritarian, tyrannical, emotionally distant philosopher". These traditional parental characters were based on Woolf's parents. Not all the characters are traditional however, and McIntire highlights Lily Briscoe as a glimpse of the newer roles for women. Echoing the arguments presented in *A Room of One's Own*, Lily must paint outside for she does not have a room for herself. Exposing herself to men's censorious glances, she is told that women cannot paint nor write, much like Woolf and other women of the late eighteenth hundreds to early nineteenth hundreds were told (Mcintire 83).

2.6 To the Lighthouse

Although it is one of several novels that Virginia Woolf wrote, *To the Lighthouse* sets itself apart from the others with the amount of inspiration Woolf took from her own life, giving it an autobiographical tint. The first two protagonists are Mr and Mrs Ramsay who are based on Woolf's parents and who represent the dying ideals of the Victorian era. The New Woman is portrayed in the character Lily Briscoe, a guest of the Ramsays at their holiday home on the Isle of Skye. She is free to paint because she is single, but does not have a room of her own and is consequently interrupted in her work by the various guests as she tries to paint in the garden. The Ramsays have a total of eight children, and it is James who is constantly asking his mother if they can travel to the lighthouse the next day. His request is always denied by his father on the basis of the weather, and he does not venture to the lighthouse until the third and last part of the novel, 10 years after his mother's sudden death. When the novel was published in 1927, it appeared to be more favoured by critics than her other works had been.

Jean Mills goes through the criticism the novel has received from its publication up until present times in his essay titled “*To the Lighthouse: The Critical Heritage*’ in the *Cambridge Companion to To the Lighthouse*”. Whilst the initial criticisms and praise focused on the poetic and stylistic elements of the novel, second wave feminism steered readings of the novel in the cultural, social and political readings of the novel (Mills 160–64). The criticisms of the relationship between the Ramsays were used to praise Woolf’s wish to create “new modes of human love and partnership”(Mills 164). Woolf’s discussions of androgyny in addition to Lily Briscoe as a new woman prompted discussions by several gender scholars such as Elaine Showalter and Toril Moi on the androgyny of the character.

2.7 The Feminine Mystique

In the middle of the twentieth century a countless number of women in the United States are silently under the weight of an unidentified problem. Whilst their mothers had petitioned for their rights to education and careers, the position of a suburban housewife has now become the female ideal. As she has said farewell to her husband and dropped her 2-4 children off at school or day-care, the housewife is left alone at home with her appliances and existential dread. She asks herself “is this all? (Friedan 5). This is the circumstance described by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, where she, in the first chapter, states that she seeks to address “The Problem that Has No Name”. For the empty feeling that sat on the shoulders of the 50’s housewives was a sentiment shared by countless women, but which was not spoken out loud until writers such as Friedan put it into words. The relief that others felt the same way spread across the United States, and, in this manner, progress could finally begin to be made.

These ideals of a blissfully ignorant housewife did not appear out of thin air and was promoted on all levels of the patriarchal structure. The patriarchal society is a system that seeks to maintain certain spaces for women and other spaces for men, and women’s magazines have traditionally been seen as loyal to that ideology and are a part of the patriarchal structure that permeates all structures of society. Friedan notes that women’s magazines also heavily influenced what American housewives thought mattered. Most articles in magazines such as *McCall’s* in the 1960’s heavily featured articles on topics such as beauty, child rearing, needlework, celebrities, and short stories. There are no mentions of current events that take place outside of the home. Whilst at an editorial meeting, Friedan listened to a man describing how women are not interested in the public issues of the day, and

how “They are only interested in the family and the home” (Friedan 24). Further contributing to women being cut off from the outside world, and their whole being centred around the domestic sphere. The female ideal has many similarities to the angel in the house, except for that affording nannies had been replaced with affording the newest appliances, which the housewife was appointed to shop for in order to feel that she had any agency in her life.

In her study, Friedan wonders why women decided to part with the world and return home. After all, Wollstonecraft had argued for the proper education for women, and throughout the Victorian and Modern periods women had fought for property, educational, social rights etc. Why give it all up? Friedan launched an investigation into the short stories published in popular women’s magazines such as *McCall’s*. There was a significant change around 1939 – the heroine in the short stories was different. Whereas she had normally had individual goals and dreams she wanted to achieve for herself or her career, the new heroine had become a housewife. Previously, she had lived a happy life alongside her husband, and succeeded in a career as a nurse, teacher, artist, actress, copywriter, saleswoman. The new woman was younger when she met her husband and dropped any plans of a career when she met him.

Friedan discovers the last heroine who passionately searched for an identity of her own in a 1950’s story, and it is then followed by the focus on the new heroine: the women who filled out occupation: housewife on their census blank. The magazines went to great lengths to make women like Buddy Willard’s mother take great pride in their occupation, describing how a housewife is not just a housewife. She is also a cook, seamstress, nurse, chauffeur, interior decorator, accountant, teacher, private secretary and so on. No matter how the woman sighed of feeling unfulfilled – the magazines would remind her of her importance and success (Friedan 27–28). The women who suffered under the problem that has no name would open these magazines to find a number of false narratives on how happy they should be in their position. And so, the feminine mystique, with the assistance of women’s magazines, has established that having babies and being a housewife is the only way to be a heroine – and if she is not happy then it is her there is something wrong with. The influence of women’s magazines is particularly relevant for thesis because Esther is working at such a magazine in the beginning of the novel and wonders why she is not as fulfilled as her peers by the repetitive and uninteresting material she is to write about.

Lastly, Friedan also taps into the discussions of how the feminine mystique affected what it means to be a woman, and to be feminine. Friedan explains how the essence of femininity, according to the beauty myth, is to find a husband and bear children. Where their

mothers found it a great privilege to attend college, the daughters now attended college in hope of meeting a husband. Here, there is a significant regression, as women had recently gained greater access to education, and had taken a great step into the workforce during the war. These achievements were now disapproved of, and like the Victorian housewife should aspire to be bored and un-academic in her house, the American housewife should aspire to be uneducated and unemployed as the modern day upper-middle class Victorian. The pressure to be able to bear children was so strong that some women who suffered from cancer refused life-saving medicine, because they heard it would impact their fertility – and make them less of a woman.

The feminine mystique of the 50s and 60s eventually lost its grip on American women, but it would pave the way for and intersect with a new controlling female ideal: the beauty myth. In Naomi Wolf's seminal feminist work *The Beauty Myth* she explains how second wave feminism resulted in there being one area left to diminish women on – their appearances. In the early 1970s, Western women had championed for legal and reproductive rights, pursued higher education, entered various workplaces and changed the public opinion about their social role (Wolf 9). Wolf claims the beauty myth took over the ropes from the feminine mystique. From being advertised home appliances as a housewife, women were now in the workplace in addition to having a family and being advertised dietary supplements and beauty products (Wolf 11). Here, Naomi Wolf also acknowledges the influence women's magazines have on how women should live their lives. In terms of work, Wolf states that women's magazines promotes an aspirational ideology to women, providing a dream language of how they can achieve their dream body, have liability for their size and aging, and overall make them consume products that will earn men money (Wolf 29). On one side, women who were previously stripped of agency are now eagerly listening to the magazine's telling them everything they should do. On the other, the magazines are promoting a blame-the-victim mentality, making women feel that they have no one (or society) to blame but themselves if they are not successful, and do not 'make it' (Wolf 29). Once again, reinforcing ideals that make women feel unnatural if they do not adhere to them.

Both the feminine mystique and the beauty myth worked in a way that they presented these firm ideals to women, and conflict arises when women do not identify with how society expects them to be, and therefore they feel like unnatural women. *The Beauty Myth* is not solely focused on appearances, moreover. Wolf states that the beauty myth is about men's institutions and institutional power, and that the qualities a certain period deems beautiful in women are just symbols of the female behaviour the period considers desirable. It is more

about prescribing behaviour and not appearance. Wolf mentions youth and virginity as two examples of such behaviour – both of which appear as desirable features in women in *The Bell Jar*, in addition to passivity.

2.8 The Bell Jar

The Bell Jar is Sylvia Plath's only novel and is partially autobiographical. The novel's protagonist is Esther Greenwood, a young and academically gifted girl who is at the beginning of adulthood and finds herself paralysed in having to choose one narrow path for what to do with her adult life. Her opportunities are presented in a fig tree: she can accept Buddy Willard's proposal and become the housewife he and society want her to be, she can give up her femininity in pursuit of art, or she can adventure off to Europe. Wanting to live out the features in several of these paths, Esther chooses neither and suffers a mental break that sends her to experience institutionalization and shock therapy. Esther tries to commit suicide several times in the novel, and the novel itself was published just one month before Plath's suicide in 1963 (Badia 126). Due to its autobiographical features, Plath published it under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, to protect the people depicted in it. Plath's mother used the same reasoning, in addition to fearing its effects on Plath's reputation as a serious poet, to delay the novel's publication in the US, and so it was not published there until 1971 (Badia 126). The first publication in England did not harvest a great amount of praise or reactions, although it was described as a promising first novel by the author. When Plath was unveiled as the author in 1963 the response was entirely different, however. Reviewers found it difficult to not assess the novel in the context of Plath's poetry, and especially the poems in *Ariel*, which were published posthumously. The novel was criticised for being "uneven" and the late American publication also received a mixed response, but critics agreed that it was "full of truths" on the female condition for American women in the 50s (Badia 127-129). Since its publication it has, moreover, continued to be viewed as a novel that problematises the status of women in a meaningful way.

3. The Awakening

The Awakening by Kate Chopin is set in New Orleans and Grand Isle, Louisiana where Edna Pontellier is on holiday with her husband and two children. The holiday destination is in advertisement of the novel described as “sleepy” and exiting events are rare. That is, until Edna is acquainted with Robert Lebrun and friendly interactions turn into flirting, whereby Edna ends up breaking the rules – potentially for the first time in her adult life – and her symbolic wings are not strong enough to fly above prejudice and she drowns. The book was published in 1899 at a time where women were still struggling with restrictive gender roles. In this chapter I will explain how the parrot that opens the novel has many similarities to Edna and early 19th century women, how Edna is not a typical mother-woman and is a version of the new woman. I will also point out several small instances where Edna is slowly approaching her awakening, which culminates in her ending her own life by using her newfound skill of swimming to go far out in the symbolic sea. This tragic ending is predicted several times throughout the novel via foreshadowing. I have chosen to analyse these features of the novel due to their representation of how awakenings are not always great epiphanies, but sometimes they are a strange feeling to an accustomed situation that makes the mind stir. I will also occasionally comment on the function of the narrator in the novel, as the narrator often steps in to almost explain what Edna is feeling or going through, and hint at the process of awakening she is in.

Edna, and how she was received is discussed in the introduction to Kate Chopin in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* by Michael A. Elliott. It is easy to characterize Edna as a new woman simply because she goes against the conventions of her time, but Elliott points out that she is not, because she does not demand social, economic and political equality (Elliott 442). This may be why, Elliott suggests, that some critics stamped the book as vulgar, because Edna is an unrepenting (although potentially psychologically confused) sensualist. One critic even questioned why Chopin would spend her talents on writing about this unworthy topic (Elliott 442). I am on two minds about Elliott’s claim that Edna is not a new woman. On one hand, I agree that she does not speak directly on issues of equality like Elliott mentioned. On the other hand, I am not sure if it is fair to judge her character in that way due to the lack of education and opportunities she has. The domestic sphere is the only one she has trained to be in, and she has not been given any knowledge of the economics and politics in the outer sphere. Combine the fact that she does not know these things and the lack

of education for upper class women, and it will seem difficult for her to be an activist. Instead, Edna is a new woman in the ways available to her. She reads, paints, rejects visiting practices, spends time with people “below” her class and even finds an apartment for herself. Adding this to the most judged action of hers of all, the adultery, and I would argue that this is a woman that broke the roles she could, and a pioneer in refusing to just be another housewife.

Many of the people living in Louisiana and vacationing at Grand Isle are French speaking and refer to themselves as Creoles. There are several definitions of the noun, some of which are: someone of European descent born in the West Indies or Spanish America, or someone of mixed French or Spanish and Black descent that speaks a dialect of French or Spanish (‘Creole’). It is therefore important to note that the use of the word “Creole” in the novel and this thesis refers to a person descended from the original French and Spanish settlers of New Orleans, an aristocrat (Chopin 12).

The actual Grand Isle, was ravaged by a hurricane in 1893, a fact that both Chopin and her readers would have been aware of. Margo Culley, the editor of the Norton Critical edition of *The Awakening*, suggested that the choice of setting can be seen as a metaphor for the storm of social ferment that was changing the life of America and American women (Culley 142). In her introduction to the contexts section of the Norton Critical Edition, Culley describes the 1890s as a decade of social change and social tension. When *The Awakening* was published, the woman question had been publicly discussed in America for over fifty years. Upper-class white women had access to higher education, whilst lower class women had fully entered the workforce, but with poor salaries and working conditions. Although women’s independence was a frequent theme in Chopin’s fiction, she did not partake actively in any suffrage organization. She did, however, defy social conventions by smoking cigarettes, riding horseback in a bright-coloured costume, walking unsupervised, running her husband’s business after his death, refusing to remarry and “likely taking lovers” (Culley 140). Her diary tells of her swearing to avoid the “useless degrading life of most married ladies”, and her views on married life were carried on into *The Awakening*. Married women in Louisiana, like Edna, were the legal property of their husbands. Women had some control of inheritance they received before getting married, but after marriage all “accumulations” would be owned by her husbands. The husband was the legal guardian of their children, and would be granted full custody in the unlikely event of a divorce (Culley 141). A woman would have to get consent from her husband to sign any legal document, except from her own testament, and had poor legal rights in general. Louisiana was a predominantly Catholic state, and this reflected in the state’s views on divorce and infidelity. Chopin often wrote fictional

heroes that would test the limits of a woman of her social class and setting, and Edna and the Louisiana societies were an example of this. In Chopin's writing there is a conflict between the normalisation of female imprisonment and the kind of awakening that female characters like Edna experience.

That there is going to be an awakening is something that we see already in the title of this novel. All human beings go to sleep at some point in their day and wake up at another. This recurring event is not something we tend to make a big deal out of, and it can therefore be eliminated as the thought behind Chopin naming her novel *The Awakening*. Particularly, the fact that there is a "the" in front of "Awakening" signifies that this is an awakening that differs from the ones we experience every day, and that it is far more important and significant. The idea of an awakening can be linked to the literary device of the epiphany. An epiphany means a "manifestation" or "showing forth" and was originally used in a Christian context to refer to grand and divine manifestation of God's presence in the created world (Abrams and Harpham 114). In literary terms, however, it was first used by James Joyce in an early draft of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to "signify the sense of a sudden radiance and sudden revelation that occurs during the perception of a commonplace object" (Abrams and Harpham 114). Something or someone that was commonly perceived as ordinary, is suddenly brought into a new light, and the grounds of revelation. In Chopin's novel, the awakening refers to the epiphany that Edna experiences in relation to the female condition and her own position in society. She realises that she has been asleep to the reality of the limitations on her role as a female individual and as a married woman with children. That Edna has been unaware of her own condition can be suggested early on in the novel as Edna is merely following along in the life that others have structured for her, whether she is at Grand Isle or at home. Here, we see that not only Edna is "sleeping", but that the whole of society is also asleep in the sense that the ideals of society are dominating their lives, so that they don't choose the course of their own existence, but allow gender ideals and economic structures choose for them. When Edna transgresses against these ideals, which is discussed further down in this chapter, the people does not stop to wonder if it something wrong with their expectations and way of life. Instead, everyone assumes that something is wrong with Edna, proving that they remain asleep when Edna awakens.

A page from Chopin's notebook reveals that the original title for the novel was *A Solitary Soul* (Chopin 3). Both titles are closely linked to Edna's experiences in the novel, with *The Awakening* referring to her realization that she is not living the life she truly desires and has let societal expectations steer her. "A Solitary Soul" may then refer to the solitude she

experiences after her awakening, and how there is no one on the island or in Louisiana that understands how she feels or is willing to listen. The other married women are seemingly content in their marriages and would be appalled to hear of Edna's feelings – unless they by chance were thinking the same thing. This is one of the reasons why strict ideals like these have had such a strong hold on women, because they make rebellious women feel like solitary souls, like they are the only ones that feel this way and are abnormal because of it. When no one dares to speak about it, the problem is allowed to go on. This issue is also described by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, where she discusses the “problem that has no name” (Friedan, TFM 5). Although Friedan's study relates to a later period when the female condition had changed, the situation is identical in terms of the enforced silence that functions to make change difficult or even impossible. In both historical periods we know that a large number of women were feeling unsatisfied with the female condition at the same time as they believed that it was them themselves that were abnormal – because “everyone” else seem content. They are told that they should be grateful for their privileged lives, and so the problem that has no name lives on – until authors such as Chopin and Friedan put it into words. Chopin and Friedan are both a part of a process which is still not finished, and which has different challenges in different times. The solitude that Edna experiences after her awakening is not new, and is, to some extent, even evocative of Plato's cave parable as presented in his work *Republic*, which detailed the ideal society. Here, only one of the people chained in the cave come to realize the truth of what the outside, which means that only one of them experiences an awakening. When he returns, he is killed by the others when he tries to convince them of what lies outside the cave (D'Olimpio). Similarly, Edna is alone in her awakening and is consequently received as an improper and unnatural woman and suffers destitution.

3.1 The Parrot in the Gilded Cage

Both the opening line and the first page of the novel offer great foreshadowing of the events that are about to occur, however, these allusions can only be comprehended if the reader has some knowledge of the French language and opera. The very first line reads as follows: “A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door kept repeating over and over: ‘*Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!* That's all right!’” (Chopin 4). The bird is speaking French, and it translates to “Go Away! Go Away! For God's Sake!”. It then becomes relevant to discuss who or what the parrot wishes would leave. The novel is told in third person and the

one who is in the presence of the parrot is Mr Pontellier, who is annoyed by the parrot's shouting as he is trying to read his newspaper. Hence, he leaves. Mr Pontellier is, like most of the people vacationing at Grand Isle, Creole, and understands French. Here, it is possible to read the parrot as prematurely acting on behalf of Edna, as she has not yet awakened to her real feeling towards her husband and the institutions he represents. It is only later in the novel that Edna will come to realise that she, in fact, does not wish to be with her husband and that their marriage is one based on reason, convenience and social conventions.

It is also worth noting that the parrot is not a wild animal natural to the island, but is kept by the owner of the establishment, madam Lebrun. As such, the parrot's situation can be seen to reflect Edna's, in the sense that she is in many ways owned by her husband through the institution of marriage. Additionally, the bird has been put in a physical cage to contain it, whilst Edna is in the invisible cage her husband and society has put her in. Although its movements are restricted, however, the parrot is allowed to speak as much as it wishes because it is kept by the owner of the holiday property. No one pays attention to what the parrot is saying, however, due to the common conception that it is unintelligent and is just repeating random words and phrases it hears. It can be stated that Edna is in a similar position. Women like her would not need to work and would not have formal education. Most of the knowledge they had was what they heard from others. Thus, they were perceived to repeat what they had been told, just like the parrot.

The following pages make it even more clear how Edna in many ways is an object that is owned by her husband. One example is the passage where Edna has been at the beach with Robert Lebrun. When they return to Mr Pontellier, he criticises the hour of which they have decided to bathe, and further states "You are burnt beyond recognition,' [...] looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin 5). The narrator makes it very clear that Mr Pontellier tends to view Edna as an object that can be damaged, and he has a similar reaction to the one madam Lebrun would have if something happened to her parrot. Edna had been feeling giddy after their trip to the beach, but her husband's stark reactions instantly reminds her to put on her wedding ring, that she left behind. In some way, she is like a parrot that got out of its cage and is now being put back into the cage where it belongs. Her feelings of excitement over taking unconventional trips to the beach which result in her being late to lunch, is also the first of many actions towards becoming the unconventional woman she is towards the end of the novel.

The parallels between Edna and the parrot can also be seen in how her infidelity plays out. As mentioned, the parrot and a few other birds are owned by madam Lebrun and

although caged, are allowed to make as much noise as they want. Her marriage enables Edna to break the rules and act out against conventions of how married women should behave. Through her affair with Robert Lebrun, she is able to rebel and do what she wants, but all this disappears when he leaves her. In the same way as the parrot has been domesticated and depends on its madam for food and shelter, Edna depends on other men to be able to rebel against the female condition. When Lebrun leaves her and she stands alone, everything is lost. She can only rebel as long as she is in a relationship with another man, without him she is once again a solitary soul without access to society and culture.

A few lines down, it is noted that the birds have the privileged to make all the noise they desire, and Mr Pontellier has the privilege to quit their society when they cease to be entertaining. Mr Pontellier does the same with his wife. He goes swimming at a different time than her and is only in her company when it entertains him. Further down, Mr Pontellier is sitting outside his cottage and although he is no longer close to the parrot, he can still hear it and the other noises from the main house. In addition to the bird noises, a pair of twin girls is playing the French opera *Zampa* on the piano. This is a romantic opera by Ferdinand Hérold, which involves a lover's death in the sea. As we can see here, this is a foreshadowing of what will happen later in the novel and, as such, builds up towards Edna's awakening. There are many small events throughout the novel that build up to Edna's awakening. The elements of foreshadowing enable the reader to predict that there will be a love story which will end tragically with one of the involved dying at sea, and someone is feeling trapped in a marriage and asking Mr Pontellier to go away, for God's sake.

Chopin never explicitly states whose speech the parrot is repeating, but occasionally the Creole characters speak French, and Robert Lebrun says "Passez! Adieu! Allez-vous-en!" (Chopin 13). Given that Robert regularly lives on the island, it would not be strange to assume that the parrot is repeating something he once said. When Robert spoke French, he was telling a story of how Mrs Ratignolle asked him to go away when she met her husband. Before Mrs Ratignolle married him, Robert had followed her around and adored her like he does with Edna now, and like he has done with other women before her, most of them married women. It then becomes interesting to return to the opening image of Mr Pontellier and the bird, and how it is almost as if Edna's love interest is telling her husband to go away, or if the bird is actually repeating Mrs Ratignolle who did the conventionally proper thing in firmly rejecting Robert.

The imagery of the parrot, the wedding ring and what it may represent is also discussed by Jules Chametzky in her essay "Edna and the 'Woman Question'" in the Norton

Critical Edition of *The Awakening*. Chametzky discusses how Chopin shows the pressures working against a woman's true awakening to her condition, and what that condition is (Chametzky 236). Edna realizes that she has been caged in an unhappy marriage and does not wish to give in and take on the role of the angel in the house. Chametzky explains how the opening image of a caged bird and the wedding ring that she leaves behind when she goes swimming, but then puts back on again, both function to show how the Victorian woman is struggling to free herself from the ownership of others. Edna is experiencing the urge to break free from the cage her marriage has put her in. I agree that the images of the bird and the wedding ring are fitting images of the female condition of imprisonment of that era, and particularly that there are many similarities between the parrot and early 19th century women. When it comes to the ring, Edna, one evening after Mr Pontellier incessantly complains about their dinner, tries to destroy it. As he often does in the novel, Mr Pontellier is suddenly not content anymore with something he has acquired, this time it is the cook. He leaves to have his dinner at the club, and Edna is left to finish the unsatisfactory meal. Previously, she might have told off the cook or go and plan dinners that her husband would like, but this time she finishes her dinner and makes herself unavailable for visitors, her eyes "flamed with an inward desire that inward fire that lighted them" (Chopin 54). Instead of being angry with whatever her husband directs his bad mood towards, she has made a shift to instead being angry with him. Seeing that her husband is the root cause of his many bad moods, she flings her wedding ring on the floor and unsuccessfully tries to break it with the heel of her shoe. She then opts for breaking a glass instead, and a maid comes rushing in and finds her ring under a chair. Realizing that it is going to take more than that to break her gilded cage, Edna puts the ring back on.

3.2 The mother-woman vs. the artist – Edna as New Woman

Edna, as well as women in general, also share with the parrot that they are valued for their physical appearance. The parrot would not be as popular if it were not for its colourful feathers, and this is the reason why it is placed in a gilded cage. In eras like Chopin's, women's personalities would not be significant in a relationship, as the separate spheres of the husband and wife were prevalent. Therefore, a woman's appearance would be a more deciding factor for choosing her as a wife than her personality. The people on the Island ignore the blabbering from the parrot, because, as mentioned above, it just repeats what it has heard, it is pretty to look at, and it is owned by the madam of the resort. Similarly, whatever

the wife says it not important, so long as she sticks to her separate sphere and looks pretty. However, Edna is described as “rather handsome than beautiful” (Chopin 6). She has brown eyes and hair, and her face has subtle features but frank expressions. The use of “handsome” to complement Edna’s appearance is interesting, as it is an adjective more frequently used to describe beautiful men. The adjective has also had an interesting change in meaning over the years. In present day it is commonly used to describe masculinity, and Merriam-Webster defines it as “having a pleasing and usually impressive or dignified appearance”. In the beginning of the 15th century however, it was adopted into the English language as something “easy to handle or manoeuvre; suitable for handling” (Merriam-Webster). Whether it was intentional of the author or not, describing a woman as easy to handle or manoeuvre would not be outrageous in Chopin’s time. It is, however, especially in Mr. Pontellier’s opinion, an unfit way of describing Edna. After her awakening, she becomes an unruly woman, per the early 19th century standards. She refuses to sit pretty in her house every Tuesday to receive visitors and devotes most of her time to reading and painting. She only visits people she finds interesting, and enjoys betting on horses with her new flirt, Alcée Arobin. Mr Pontellier is so concerned with the mental state of his wife that he sees a doctor behind her back and invites him to dinner to evaluate Edna without her knowledge. Reverting to the present-day definition of “handsome”, it does not quite fit to describe her as dignified or impressive either. After her awakening she loses much of her dignity, embarrassing both herself and her husband through her deviant behaviour. However, it is the narrator that describes Edna as handsome, and perhaps it is Chopin herself, that deems it impressive and dignified, to live out one’s days doing what one pleases – as Chopin did herself. It could also be debated that Chopin chose that word to give Edna some masculine or un-feminine characteristics. After all, Edna’s behaviour would not be shocking if she was a man.

More traditional descriptors are used however, when comparing and describing the two women’s bodies as they head down to the sea. Mrs Ratignolles body is described as more “feminine and matronly” than Edna’s (Chopin 17), in other words, the body of a mother-woman. The narrator goes into far greater detail in describing Edna’s body, stating that it might not catch your attention at first, but when it does, it’s charm will steal “insensibly upon you” (Chopin 17). Her body consists of clean, long, and symmetrical lines, and it occasionally falls into splendid poses. It bears no trace of the “trim, stereotyped fashion-plate” (Chopin 17) about it. If one were fortunate enough to notice that Edna’s body was different than others, one would recognize “the noble beauty of its modelling, and the graceful severity of poise and movement” (Chopin 17). With these descriptors of grace and nobility, the Merriam-Webster

definition of “handsome” seems more probable, as it also deals with having a dignified appearance. The emphasis on her smooth lines makes it clear that at least physically, Edna is not rough around the edges – she appears to be a polished diamond. And describing Mrs Ratignolles figure as “matronly” implies that her being a mother may in some way be visible on her body, but it is still beautiful and feminine due to how important it was to be a mother at the time. Their outfits for the day also bear significance of their character. Mrs Ratignolle is weary of the sun and wears protective all-white clothing. Edna is also wearing white, but her muslin has a “waving vertical line of brown running through it” (Chopin 17). In a similar colour to her hair, the line abrupt the pure white, and symbolizes the desire that is blooming in Edna. The muslin would have been purely white had it not been for the line, and Edna would have been the perfect wife had it not been for her feelings toward Robert. This desire that is beginning to grow in her will by many of the readers of Chopin’s time be viewed as an impurity, like a stain on her dress, due to the fact that it is directed towards other men than her husband.

Although Edna is attractive, she is not a beautiful and dainty little bird, like her foil, Mrs Ratignolle. Wherever Edna has a flaw, Mrs Ratignolle excels. Adèle Ratignolle is graceful, has blond hair and blue eyes, and “her beauty is all there” (Chopin 11). Mr Pontellier reflects on where his wife makes mistakes as a mother and concludes that she is not a mother-woman (Chopin 11). The perfect example of a mother-woman is Mrs. Ratignolle, and the mother-woman is described in the following manner: “They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 11). Mr Pontellier thinks of many examples of where his wife fails as a traditional mother-woman and comparing her to Mrs. Ratignolle makes Edna’s errors even more evident. Mrs Ratignolle spends much of her time at Grand Isle on needlework and is currently working on a winter suit – which Edna does not see the point in making. Mr Pontellier also finds it worrisome that if one of the Pontellier boys were to fall and take a minor injury, they would just brush the sand off their knee and continue playing instead of seeking comfort from their mother. In contrast, Mrs Ratignolle is often weary of straying too far away from her husband and children for too long. The contrasts of what it takes to be a good father versus a good mother are stark, moreover. All Mr Pontellier has to do is send a bunch of bonbons to the island whilst he is working in the city, and, based on this, the women of Grand Isle concludes that he is the best husband and father there is.

Mr Pontellier describes Edna as the “sole object of his existence” (Chopin 8) which is another reason behind him being disappointed that she is not a better mother. There are two main points to take away from his thought: Edna is supposed to be an object – otherwise known as the mother-woman, and Mr Pontellier needs that object in order to exist. From his point of view, Edna’s purpose for existing is to be an item that sustains his existence. For what is a middle-aged man without a wife? Surely, he can be successful in his business, but he has failed to obtain a beautiful wife to look pretty on his arm and give birth to children. A young man is a bachelor, on the prowl for a potential mother-woman candidate when the time is ready, but once he passes a certain age he is deemed a failure in that area. Much like Victorian parents feared that their daughters would not secure a husband and become “spinsters”. The English language has not a word that bears the same connotations as spinster for men, however. The closest is “confirmed bachelor” which has far from the negative connotations as the same words for women. Instead, a confirmed bachelor is simply someone who has been a bachelor a long time and does not want to marry (‘Confirmed Bachelor’) That he thinks of her as an object, but also that he needs that object to exist and be a proper man is an example of how the patriarchy can also be a disadvantage to men in some areas of society.

Edna’s newfound autonomy leads her to making new and questionable friends, such as Alcée Arobin, a bachelor known for having relationships with married women. Edna and Arobin are chatting in her living room when Edna starts reflecting on what kind of woman she is. As mentioned, her husband finds her a failure at being the ideal mother-woman, and Edna is not blind to her errors in society’s perspective. Edna puts this clearly when she says “By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex” (Chopin 84). Edna has been through a process of awakening during the novel, and clearly sees that there are codes that she must follow in order to be a good woman. Instead of just accepting these codes as they are and following them, she knowingly deviates and is therefore a devilishly wicked specimen. Seeing herself as “devilish” may be linked to her Presbyterian upbringing, and also the general Christian and Catholic beliefs that were present in Louisiana society. Although the adultery is the obvious first reason as to why both she herself and society see her like that, there are several other things she does to deviate from the foils of Mrs Ratignolle and other mother-women.

Drawing on etiquette books of the period highlights many areas where Edna breach social rules other than adultery. She is not overbearing in the rearing of her children and the servants, she disregards her “duties” to her husband, walks alone, attends events with men other than her husband and forms “questionable cross-class friendships” (Culley 143). She

abandons her former acquaintances and prefers to visit i.e. mademoiselle Reisz. Mademoiselle Reisz is a foil of the complete deviant within high-class society that Edna is moving towards becoming. She spends most of her time alone, in her small and dirty apartment, and is brutally honest with everyone she interacts with. Her honesty shocks Edna the first few times when they talk, but the things she says “linger” and are thought-provoking (Chopin 85). Reisz speaks to both her and Edna’s perspective on life when she touches Edna’s shoulder blades to see if her wings are strong, and states that “The bird that would soar above the level of plain tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (Chopin 85). Chopin uses foreshadowing again to show that Edna must either fly above societal expectations and people’s opinion of her, or she will die, for there is no middle ground. If Edna wants to reject tradition and prejudice, she must be open to live like mademoiselle Reisz, the weird piano lady in the sketchy apartment. Jules Chametzky points out mademoiselle Reisz as someone who understands Edna’s struggles with awareness and a desire for independence. Where Edna tries to be both a mother and an artist, Reisz is absolute in that there is no middle ground. If she is to be a perfect mother like Mrs Ratignolle, she must give up her selfhood, which is her art. Reisz is dedicated to her piano and lives alone. Reisz demands a vow which Chametzky suggests is as selfless as the one she gave her husband at the altar – she must give up all human relations and give herself to her art. Demonstrating that Edna is not the selfless mother figure, Chametzky describes Edna’s views on her role as a mother, when mentioning how Edna “might” die for her children but would not give up her essential selfhood for them. Chametzky goes further on to conclude that it is Edna’s self-awareness and autonomy in conflict with her role as a mother that becomes her end.

The improper behaviours of both Edna and mademoiselle Reisz may be read as Chopin’s critique of the rigidity in society, and as inspired by her personal experiences with deviating from the ideals. Margot Culley discusses this in her chapter in the Norton Critical edition of *The Awakening*, noting that “The advice columns of Dorothy Dix and the social theory of Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Gilman) and Thorstein Veblen demonstrate that in her day Kate Chopin was not the only one challenging the prevailing gender ideology of the period” (Culley 143). After her husband died, Chopin continued to run his business for some time. She also expressed clearly that she did not want to marry again and disliked the social conventions that followed marriage, hence, she took lovers instead.

3.3 The sleeping and the awakening

Edna is asleep to the female condition in the beginning of the novel but throughout the novel she has several smaller moments of realization, influenced by her own reactions or interactions with others, that lead her to abandon her life as she knew it. I will refer to my own close readings, as well as a text by Elaine Showalter to describe these moments of awakening. The first one is on the night following the trip to the beach, Mr Pontellier has just returned and finds his family asleep. He believes that one of their sons has a fever and wakes Edna so that she can fix the situation he believes she failed to address earlier. Although he sees that there may be an issue with his son, he does not consider that he can take care of it himself, instead he directs the task to the boy's mother – as society has told him he should. Edna does not think that their son has a fever but is now unable to go back to sleep. Whilst Mr Pontellier sleeps, she sits on the porch of their cabin and cries whilst feeling “an indescribable oppression” (Chopin 9). We learn that this is not the first time the Pontellier's had a disagreement like this one, but Edna does not let it slide like she normally does. She puts out the candle that Mr Pontellier left burning and wonders why this argument affected her more than others. Mr Pontellier is responsible for the first awakening, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, and Edna has to literally put out his fire when he leaves the candle burning, for he knows that it is her responsibility to clean up after him. Whether she has a good night's sleep or not, is not something he concerns himself with.

In an excerpt in the *Norton Critical Edition of The Awakening*, Elaine Showalter discusses Chopin's writing style and the novel itself. Namely, Showalter points the first moment of awakening to later than the one mentioned above, and also discuss Edna's meeting and rejection of homosocial women's culture. Showalter quotes Sandra Gilbert as she describes Grand Isle as an “oasis of women's culture or a female colony”, which can be connected with my earlier comments on the ideals of society following them on vacation. Showalter attributes the beginning of Edna's awakening to Mrs Ratignolle, the empress of mother-women of the female colony (Showalter, ‘CAWW’ 294). Edna has not had a close relationship with a woman before and is initially attracted to Mrs Ratignolles excessive physical charm. Mrs Ratignolles physical affections awakens feelings which Chopin describes as something one may call love. On the other hand, Showalter also suggests that Mrs Ratignolle may be a mother surrogate for Edna, as her own mother is not alive (Showalter, ‘CAWW’ 294). Mrs Ratignolle maternally complements her art, and Edna seeks to her for

nurturance. Showalter points out that it is when Edna responds to Mrs Ratignolle's interests and begins to evaluate her own personality that she in the text becomes "Edna" instead of "Mrs Pontellier" (Showalter, 'CAWW' 295).

Another small moment of awakening occurs when Robert invites Edna to go to the beach again, and Edna is confused over her initial reaction to decline his offer and accepts. Whether it was the time of day that he asked or the fact that it was he who asked, there is some kind of decorum instilled in Edna that leads her to say no without thinking. Surprised by her response, she reconsiders. Edna feels that a light is beginning to dawn within her, and is slowly but surely waking up to the female condition, and the narrator describes it as "Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin 16). Robert is often present right before or during these short steps towards an awakening, and it is after they spent a whole day together on a different island that Edna reflects on how this summer at Grand Isle has differed from the previous. She feels that her present self is different from her other self, but the narrator explains that she has not yet realized that she is "seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment" (Chopin 42). She is using this new set of eyes to evaluate the smallest things, such as her response to the beach offer, and wondering why she feels the way she does. She is getting to know the conditions in her that has led to her life being what it is, and how she has passively let it play out before her. Instead of accepting behaviours such as the one mentioned in the first paragraph, she now reflects.

Showalter again believes that Edna's awakening is a process where she is guided by female mentors, and so she states that mademoiselle Reisz is responsible for the second stage of the awakening, and that she is a surrogate lover to Edna. Just like with Mrs Ratignolle, her relationship with Edna is more intense than a standard friendship, and Reisz introduces Edna into the world of art. Where Adele could be a surrogate for Edna's dead mother and the intimate friend she never had, mademoiselle Reisz may be a surrogate lover (Showalter, 'CAWW' 295). Showalter distinguishes the two by describing that Mrs Ratignolle had a maternal and womanly fondness for Edna, whilst mademoiselle Reisz's fondness is suggestively perverse. Showalter bases this off of Reisz's obsession over Edna's beauty and her figure, her saying that Edna has 'captivated her' and how she calls Edna 'ma belle' and 'ma reine' (my beauty, my queen). The contrasts between Reisz and Mrs Ratignolle is also clear in the sense that Mrs Ratignolle does everything 'right' in terms of society, whilst Reisz is "a renegade, self-assertive and outspoken" (Showalter, 'CAWW' 295). She refutes most

expectations of femininity and social rules, and to someone like Arobin she is so unappealing and unattractive that she seems 'partially demented'. Edna has the occasional stumble with mademoiselle Reisz's approach, but her voice still reaches her.

There may be several symbols that also led to her awakening. The ocean brings back memories of her youth, where she remembers being attracted to various men that made short appearances in her life. A cavalry officer visiting her father, a young man that was visiting the neighbouring plantation and a distant obsession over a well-known tragedian. In contrast, it was Mr Pontellier that fell in love with her and convinced her to marry him. Edna had a taste for defying convention back then as well, and her family's distaste towards her marrying a Catholic combined with the devotion he gave her, led her to accept his proposal. It is interesting that she had a rebellious youth, for it implies that it may have been marriage that put her to 'sleep', and that the rebellious nature that comes back to her is who she truly is. Edna eventually leaves all the past affections behind her, and grows fond of her husband, despite realizing that it is a passionless affection (Chopin 21).

While vacationing in Grand Isle that summer, the narrator notes that there have been both subtle and apparent influences on loosening the mantle of reserve that she found herself in – and one of the most prominent is the foil of the perfect mother-woman, Mrs Ratignolle. Edna had initially been attracted to her "excessive physical charm" (Chopin 16). But later realizes that Mrs Ratignolle is very different from her as she is wholly submerged in the ideal of the angel in the house. Domestic bliss as an alien way of living becomes even clearer to Edna after a visit to the Ratignolle's home in Louisiana. The Ratignolle's have perfected the art of domesticity and seem utterly content in their life with each other and their children. One might expect Edna to be jealous and wish that she and her husband would be as happy together as the Ratignolle's were, but instead she feels depressed after the visit for another reason. The glimpse of domestic harmony gave her "no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui" (Chopin 59). She further describes that way of living as "colorless" and that those who find happiness in it are blindly content. Once again, Edna has been presented with a foil of what she should be and feels no attraction towards it. She knows that it is not simply her husband that is the problem, it is the lifestyle itself. She had been blindly content herself, but now realizes that it is not what she desires at all.

Edna's unruly behaviour increases the more she awakens to what she really wants to do with her life, and her husband is becoming increasingly confused as to what could be wrong with her. Edna has stopped taking visitors and comes and goes as she pleases. She does

not make any efforts to be a good housewife, and Mr Pontellier loses his calm when his wife stops being as submissive as he prefers her to be. It bewilders him how she can spend days in her studio which would be better spent on her family, and her neglect towards visitors enrages him. He tells Edna not to “let the family go to the devil” (Chopin 59), fearing that her behaviour will make the family be viewed as less worthy and proper than others. Mr Pontellier starts to wonder if his wife is becoming mentally unbalanced, as it is clear that she is not herself. The narrator corrects him and points out that he is unable to see that she is slowly but surely becoming herself, which involves “casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (Chopin 59). It is far more convenient for Mr, Pontellier to assume that his wife is mentally ill than to realize that she is unhappy with the way society forces women to structure their lives. Therefore, he visits a friend who used to be a doctor for advice on how to get her back to her passive state, like someone would take a broken item to get fixed. He fumingly recounts how Edna told him that “marriage is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (Chopin 68), and the doctor explains that such a sensitive and highly organized woman as Mrs Pontellier is very peculiar and complicated to deal with. It may be difficult for ordinary men such as Mrs Pontellier and the doctor to get involved, and so his best advice is to leave her alone. The descriptions of men as the norm, and women as a peculiar and delicate subordinate further show the oppressive state that the institution of marriage and the view on women was at the time.

3.4 The sea and its seductive voice

The sea is a source of many flashbacks and revelations for Edna throughout the novel and ends up being her final destination. One of the moments of awakening being when Edna and Mrs Ratignolle are looking out on the sea, and Edna has a flashback to her childhood. The sea and the hot wind in her face brings her back to an afternoon where she ran through an ocean of grass, after fleeing from Presbyterian church service. She confides in Mrs Ratignolle and confesses that this summer feels at times like that day, and she is back at the green meadow, “idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (Chopin 19). Instead of running away from church, she is now running away from the pressures and prejudices of society. She is no longer under the firm hold of religion and has learnt to swim with the help of Robert Lebrun. She has a few aids in Robert that teaches her to swim and eventually mademoiselle Reisz as a foil of an independent woman, but she is walking a path of her own, for the first time in her

life. Previously she did not know how to swim and would only dip her toes in the men she was attracted to, but Robert has taught her how to swim and she is refusing to return to shore.

As it is the place where Edna and Robert spend time together, and where Edna spends her last moments, the sea is a central symbol in the novel. Historically, the symbolism of the sea has taken on various meanings through different mythologies and religions, but the central aspect of most of them is that it comprises a “symbol of the dynamism of life. Everything comes from the sea and everything returns to it” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, ‘Sea’). The sea both gives and takes life, and is a simultaneous image of life and death (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, ‘Sea’). Lastly, Chevalier and Gheerbrant refer to the tales of monsters rising from the depths of the sea, and how this show that the sea is also “an image of the unconscious which has currents of its own which may be either lethal or regenerative” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, ‘Sea’). In terms of *The Awakening*, the sea gives life in the sense that Edna learns to swim in it and feels powerful because of it. This also becomes her death, when she decides to swim out so far that she cannot return to shore. It is also clearly a symbol of Edna’s unconscious, because it is what gives her the lethal urge to swim so far.

Edna has taken a few small steps towards her awakening when she reflects over the way the sea makes her feel, and her thoughts are narrated as follows: “The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation” (Chopin 16). Her flashbacks on Grand Isle are part of what sends her into her own maze of inward contemplation – a maze she eventually gets lost in and dies. Shortly after learning to swim, she accidentally swims too far out and panics, but make it back to shore where her husband and Robert is waiting. She has yet to commit adultery against her husband, and it is almost as if she is given a second chance to choose between the two men at the beach. Although Robert makes the choice for her as he leaves her two times in the novel, her drowning may represent that she did not make the right choice by societies standards and so she drowns. At the end of the novel, she steadily walks out into the cold sea and swims as far as her strength takes her. The panic appears for a slight moment, but quickly fades as she accepts her fate. Before her swim, an almost identical description of the sea is read: “The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude.” (Chopin 106). There is no longer an inward maze to contemplate in, it has been replaced with an abyss of solitude for Edna to wander in. No one is waiting for her at the shore. Her husband is away on business and Robert has left her a second time despite confirming that he loves her.

Following the descriptions of the sea's seductive voice is the image of a bird, "with a broken wing (...) beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin 106). Edna is once again being compared to the bird, and this time it is the image that mademoiselle Reisz painted earlier, of the bird with too weak wings being unable to fly above the level of plain tradition and prejudice. Although she is still married to Mr Pontellier, Edna declares herself a free woman, breaking out of the gilded cage she realized she was in whilst at Grand Isle. However, like many domesticated animals that break free, she is unable to survive on her own.

Whether death is the only possible escape for both Edna and Kate Chopin herself is also discussed by Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar, in addition to Mrs Ratignolle and mademoiselle Reisz representing the two other options. Showalter states that the two women are not only mentors on the path to awakening, but also represent two alternate plots and endings to the novel (Showalter, 'CAWW' 296). Mrs Ratignolle is the plot where Edna cancels her rebellion, returns to love her husband and children, re-joins women's culture, and maybe even births another child. Mrs Reisz on the other hand, is the plot where she fully carries out her rebellion and is alienated from her family, and is a kind of "New Orleans nun" (Showalter, 'CAWW' 296). Showalter links this to Chopin's wish to reject these traditional literary endings and to depart from the literary traditions they signified, but she was not able to work out something new. In their seminal feminist work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (2000) Gilbert and Gubar discuss the three ways for women to escape in the nineteenth century, in a chapter titled "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress". Like Showalter discusses Chopin's dilemma, Gilbert and Gubar too suggest that Brontë "herself was unable clearly to envision viable solutions to the problem of patriarchal oppression" (Gilbert and Gubar 487). Gilbert and Gubar then note that the three methods for women of the Victorian era to escape is through oppression, starvation or madness (Gilbert and Gubar 466). Similar to the options presented by Showalter: Edna can go back to her husband and endure oppression, live on her own and be a starving spinster or she can be diagnosed as mentally ill for refusing to bend to the ideals presented by society. The question that is left to ask is then is if death is the only way to escape from these traditions? I struggle to think of any other solutions where Edna would be having both agency and following her female destiny. If one looks to the solution Brontë ended *Jane Eyre* with, it still depends on an inheritance and a man – and they live secluded from the judgement of society. Edna is unable to find a solution where she is

fulfilled and not depending on a man, and so death becomes her freedom as she does not wish to take up the fight against patriarchal ideals.

4. To the Lighthouse

To the Lighthouse is one of Virginia Woolf's most autobiographical novels, as two of its main characters, Mr and Mrs Ramsay are based on Woolf's parents and the novel as a whole is inspired by her upbringing. The Ramsay's do not leave their Victorian family structures at home and so the ideals still frame their holiday at Isle of Skye. Here, the Ramsay's and their eight children host various guests at their holiday home during the summer. While the Ramsays represent traditional gender roles, one of their guests, Lily Briscoe, represents the new woman, in the form of an artist who does not wish to marry. This is one of the ways in which Woolf problematises the Victorian perception of gender in this novel. Woolf also sought to distance her work from the Victorian period by rejecting the standard narrative and plot, which often involved a quest from point A to B. Instead, the novel's narration is in the style of stream-of-consciousness, which does not follow a strict plot order and focuses on the characters' thoughts and feelings.

Published in 1927, *To the Lighthouse* was a part of a changing gender conversation. A gender conversation that Woolf was very much involved in, by trying to have the career she wanted, and publishing her works both in fiction and non-fiction. For the non-fiction parts, she gave a speech that was later published as "Professions for Women", where she critiqued the ideal of the angel in the house and explained how it must be killed for her to be a writer. Secondly, *A Room of One's Own* further discusses what conditions must be met for women to write fiction – which is financial stability and a room to write in. Although the Victorian period was, in many ways, over, the ideals and expectations of how women should structure their lives still bore Victorian traits. One example is referred to by Gabrielle McIntire in her essay "Feminism and Gender in *To the Lighthouse*", where she presents the political intellectual landscape of Woolf's time, and explains how, although she gave lectures at Cambridge University, women could not become full members until 1948. She further states that "Woolf was thus writing in a climate in which women were literally forced into positions outside the regimes of the dialectic of knowledge and power that Michel Foucault and others

have so elegantly described” (McIntire 83). In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf awards a similar role to Lily Briscoe, painting outside the artist’s studio and the powerful circles of men.

In her essay, Gabrielle McIntire presents a full discussion of the gender landscape of the novel and how the Ramsays are modelled after Woolf’s parents. The tyrannical and emotionally distant philosopher Mr Ramsay is modelled after Woolf’s father, Sir Leslie Stephen, who McIntire refers to as an “eminent Victorian” (McIntire 81). Like Mrs Ramsay, Woolf’s mother died whilst her children were in their teens, and she is also modelled after the ideal of the angel in the house. Together, they represent the gendered role models of the Victorian culture which had yet to fade in the 1910s and 1920s. McIntire points out Lily as the visionary of the story, offering a glimpse of the newer roles for women (McIntire 81). She heroically paints outside due to not having a room of her own and is consequently at the mercy of men’s censorious glances. In contrast, Mrs Ramsay stays inside the house in her restrictive domestic sphere. The importance of the physical positioning of these two characters is signalled in the title of the first part, which is called “The Window”.

Consequently, I will employ the window to structure this chapter. I will firstly focus on Mrs Ramsay who stays on the inside of the house and looks out through the window, and secondly on Lily Briscoe who is positioned outside the window, looking in. Mr Ramsay is free to roam both spheres, and so he will be discussed in both parts.

4.1 Inside looking out

The character who spends the most time inside, looking out of the window, is Mrs Ramsay – the beautiful angel in the house. She does not have a room of her own, as her occupation is taking care of everyone inside and thus that becomes her office. Throughout her time in the novel, she is constantly analysing the moods and wishes of those around her and attempts to arrange for everyone to be happy. In many ways, she is the “glue” that keeps their family together, while also making sure that their guests have a pleasant stay in their home. She has a special sympathy for the many young men that guest their home, acquaintances of her husband, and it has gone so far as to protecting the entire male sex. As she puts it herself: “she could not bear uncivility to her guests, to young men in particular (...) Indeed, she had the whole of the other sex under her protection” (Woolf 5). She does not explain why she takes a special sympathy towards the young men, but perhaps it is an extension of the care she has for her husband. Many of them are his students and may bare some resemblance to Mr Ramsay. She is always watching her husband’s demeanour and looking for ways to calm him if

necessary. Her specific concern for the male gender is also probably related to the general patriarchal belief that men are more important than women, and so this point of view that Mrs Ramsay has internalised is also a political statement.

4.1.1 The angel in the house

The novel opens with the traditional Victorian family, Mr and Mrs Ramsay and their youngest son James, and gives an insight into the power dynamics between them. The very first line of the novel reads “Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow” said Mrs. Ramsay” (Woolf 3). James has once again asked if they can venture out to the lighthouse the next day, and his mother gives an optimistic maybe as a response, which excites young James. His joy is swiftly cut short however, by his principally honest father, who states that “it won’t be fine” (Woolf 3). These types of tensions appear regularly throughout the novel, where Mrs Ramsay does her best to soothe and remain optimistic with not just her children, but also the adults in their house. Mr Ramsay, however, is firm in his principles on standing with the truth and to not gloss over the weather report. His father’s brutal honesty enrages James, who thinks he might have killed his father had there been a weapon nearby. Mrs Ramsay is quick to the rescue and subdues her son’s anger by suggesting that it may be fine tomorrow, and that the weather report may be wrong. No matter how she must twist and turn on words, Mrs Ramsay will try as hard as she can to please her children.

One of the few she does not make too many efforts to please is Lily Briscoe, for she is an adult woman like Mrs Ramsay herself. Instead, Mrs Ramsay tries to make Lily become like her, a married woman trying to soothe her husband. At dinner, Mrs Ramsay wishes Lily would offer some pleasantries to Charles Tansley, and tries to force her non-verbally, by exchanging looks. Lily is fully aware of this, but hesitates, making Mrs Ramsay say with her eyes “unless you apply some balm to the anguish of this hour and say something nice to that young man over there, life will run upon the rocks” (Woolf 66). This leads Lily to yield her hostility towards the man whose voice often rings in her head, saying that women cannot write nor paint, for the sake of the dinner. Carrying the weight of protecting the entire other sex at the dinner table, Mrs Ramsey is looking to Lily for support, indicating that she is in fact not quite able to carry it entirely herself.

That politeness, selfishness and pleasantness were essential features of an angel such as Mrs Ramsay can be supported by looking to Sarah Stickney Ellis’s book on women’s education and domestic roles titled *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic*

Habits. In this book, Ellis discusses how the next generation of angels should not receive what we would today look at as education and should instead be educated in what she referred to as “the heart”. Ellis notes that in England, there are old customs of trusting women with the “high and holy” duty of treasuring and safe guarding the “minor morals of life” (Ellis 657). It is a long-standing tradition for women to devote themselves to caring for morals whether they concern them or not, and Ellis would like for it to remain this way. Her disinterested kindness is the greatest thing a woman could offer up to the opposite gender, and it is something Ellis believes a woman will be far more valued for than her ability to solve philosophical problems (Ellis 658). Lastly, Ellis raises her hope that the education of women be returned to the home, so it will fall natural upon her that the first inquiry she makes every day is to ask what she can do for the others in her house to make them more happy (Ellis 658). And Ellis would have been very satisfied with the education Mrs Ramsay must have received, for she seems to be a model student of Ellis – constantly putting the happiness and concerns of others before her own needs.

The gender decorum described by Ellis above also has great effect on the conversations of Mr and Mrs Ramsay and Charles Tansley. Because her gender forces her to always be optimistic, pleasant and hopeful, Mrs Ramsay is constantly trying to invent new ways to be positive about the weather when Mr Ramsay is not. Both Mr Ramsay and Charles Tansley are men and can be as blunt about the weather reports as they wish. The conversations in the Ramsay Isle of Skye home are so governed by the gender decorum that it is only the men that are allowed to speak the truth as it is, whilst Mrs Ramsay forces herself to spin the truth in a positive light. For Mrs Ramsay, being polite and pleasant are true feminine virtues, and they act on the expense of honesty.

Looking out at Lily painting outside the window, Mrs Ramsay further fantasizes about how she can improve her life by orchestrating a marriage between Lily and William Bankes, clearly stating that “William and Lily should marry” (Woolf 19). Whether or not this is something that Lily desires for herself is not something that Mrs Ramsay considers, as the desire for the marriage plot is a given in her Victorian mind. For a Victorian woman, the marriage plot is the ultimate goal of her life, and it gets full priority over any other aspect of her life. This stems from the tradition of middle to upper class women not working, and so they would have to secure a husband in order to avoid being a financial burden to their parents and being a spinster. William is old enough to be Lily’s father, but that would not matter, as from Mrs Ramsay’s perspective and from a typical Victorian viewpoint, it would save Lily from ending up as a spinster. The term ‘spinster’ derives from the 1300s in England,

where the women who spun yarn were commonly single and poor ('Spinster'). Parts of this term carried on, as in the Victorian era it was being used to describe women that were old enough to be married but were not and often living in poverty as well. Lily cannot afford to live on her own due to not being taken seriously as an artist, and so she is a financial burden to her father. Mrs Ramsay finds all the reasons she can think of to justify a marriage between the two and adds that his age and wisdom is a benefit because she believes that he is one of the few men that will be able to appreciate the charm in her "Chinese eyes" (Woolf 19). Mrs Ramsay comments on Lily's eyes several times, and this could be a portrayal of Victorian and western standard ideals of beauty, which Lily does not match. In her essay, McIntire points out the many criticisms on the institutions of marriage and family in Woolf's novel. Firstly, the many guests in the Ramsay residence are single, and Mrs Ramsay's mission to get Lily Briscoe to marry a man twice her age does not succeed. Mrs Ramsay herself is in an "incompatible union" with her husband, ending with her premature death. Although society is committed to marriage as a cultural imperative, the many failing marriages or would-be marriages of the novel mark the institutions' failures and casualties. The critique on the family institution, McIntire argues, is visible through James Ramsay's rage and murderous intent towards his father and is a Freudian-inflected critique. However, James realizes whilst travelling to the lighthouse that it is the destructive behaviour he wants to kill – and not his father. Much like Woolf killed the angel in the house, James has observed the same dysfunctional family roles as Woolf did and wishes to lighten his mother's burden through violence (McIntire 84–85).

4.1.2 The marriage plot

Mrs Ramsay has thoughts and opinions on everyone in the house, but they are only expressed as thoughts through the omniscient narrator. It is through one of these narrative sequences that Mrs Ramsay's many opinions on her children and the guests at the house become apparent to the reader. Mrs Ramsay worries about the personalities of her children and how their behaviour is revealing that they are more outspoken and active, instead of being passive like her. The children are critical of Charles Tansley, who they claim seeks to make every conversation about himself and is rather unpleasant to be around. Mrs Ramsay wonders why the children argue and act prejudiced, and thinks that "They were so critical, her children. They talked such nonsense" (Woolf 7). The other alternative to being critical is to be passive, like Mrs Ramsay. Perhaps she is foreshadowing that if the household does not have someone

who is passive, who soothes and preserves a pleasant mood, the family will distance themselves from each other and stop vacationing at the house. For when Mrs Ramsay dies in the middle of the novel, the holiday home is left to rot for ten years, and the remaining family members find it hard to relate to one another, especially Mr Ramsay to his children. The fact that Mr. Ramsay judges the critical behaviour of all her children, and not just the girls, indicates that there may be a generational shift afoot. A shift where women, like Virginia Woolf, have a greater opportunity to be critical alongside men. Mrs Ramsay's thoughts also echoes those of Sarah Stickney Ellis, and her wish for women to express disinterested kindness instead of being able to read Virgil without a dictionary (Ellis 658). These beliefs represent the general behaviour that was expected of women, that they should be passive and complacent instead of active and critical. Mrs Ramsay sees the active and critical traits in her children, and perhaps she also feels that she has failed as a mother because she has not encouraged the passive and complacent behaviours in her children.

However, Mrs Ramsay excels in the behavioural traits that she is supposed to portray herself, and she is the ideal mother and wife and is in many ways similar to Mrs Ratignolle of *The Awakening*. Unlike Mrs Ratignolle, Mrs Ramsay does not have a governess, and takes care of her eight children herself, which she herself acknowledges as time-consuming and tiring:

They came to her naturally, since she was a woman, all day long with this and that; one wanting this, another that; the children were growing up; she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 24)

Mrs Ramsay mostly speaks when it is to address the needs and wishes of others. Just like she supports James's wishes to travel to the lighthouse, she absorbs the feelings and frustrations of her children, and carries the emotional weight for them. A sponge can be anything from light to heavy depending on how much it has absorbed, and in Mrs Ramsay's case she has absorbed the feelings of everyone around her. Both her own feelings and the feelings of others are muddled together in this metaphorical sponge, and such a heavy sponge will be hard to carry around. Admitting to the heaviness of being the angel in the house may be one of the first steps to killing it, and to demonstrate how it is not a sustainable way for women to live.

Woolf goes further to prove that being the angel in the house is not a sustainable way to live by showing how Mrs Ramsay appreciates being alone and how she wishes she had seen more of the world. When the children go to bed and the living room is quiet and empty, Mrs Ramsay thinks that "it was a relief when they went to bed. For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the

need of – to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone.” (Woolf 45). It is not shocking for a mother to be relieved when her children go to sleep, and she gets time to herself. What stands out, however, is that it is only when she is alone that she can be herself. The angel is not her true personality, but an act she puts on for her children, husband, and guests. Also, it seems like she is saying that she needs this alone time more often now than before, making it clear that being the angel is wearing her out. Lastly, this time to herself depends on all her eight children sleeping simultaneously, and for no one else to want to occupy the same room as her. She enjoys being alone – but does not have a room for it like Mr Ramsay does.

The wish for something other than the domestic sphere is, as mentioned by McIntire, only expressed by Mrs Ramsay and her daughters in silence (McIntire 83). As is the occurring issue with being forced under strict ideals as these, they stay relevant due to women being afraid to speak up in fear of being labelled a deviant and closed off from society. Similarly, in 50s and 60s America there were endless narratives in women’s magazines and among women that the ultimate fulfilment would be achieved by being a housewife, which did not work for everyone. The women did not discuss their feelings however, because “She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it” (Friedan 8). Just like Friedan’s explanation of the problem that has no name, the Ramsay women’s thoughts of living a wilder life in Paris (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 5) will just remain dreams if they are not talked about. Mrs Ramsay never tells anyone how much she both enjoys and needs to be alone, and it most likely something she would have been judged for saying. After all, she has eight lovely children and an amazing husband that provides for them – so there would be no need for her to desire anything else.

4.1.3 The ending

Mrs Ramsay dies rather suddenly at the end of the first part of the novel, and her death is only described in a few sentences over the next two parts. Woolf talks of killing the angel in the house in *Professions for Women*, and that is precisely what she does in the novel. There are no details of how she dies, only that it was sudden, leaving the cause of death up to endless speculation. As the cause of death for Edna of *The Awakening* was suicide, and Esther of *The Bell Jar* attempts suicide, it is not out of the question that it could be the cause of death for Mrs Ramsay. Lily has pointed out that Mr Ramsay is exhausting his wife to death, and Mrs Ramsay herself has made it clear that she is weighed down, as a human sponge sopped

full of emotion and as a protector of the male sex. Woolf observed the strain the ideal bore on her mother and killed the angel in the house so it may not take the life of any more women in future generations. The sudden death of Mrs Ramsay can also be seen as a further abandonment of the Victorian novel, as the heroine dies in the middle instead of pursuing a quest until the end of the novel. Drawing back on Gilbert and Gubar's three ways out for the Victorian heroine: that Woolf avoids those three exits by killing off a protagonist in the middle further strengthens the suspicion that Mrs Ramsay's death is both a protest against the angel in the house and the plot-driven Victorian novel.

McIntire notes, however, that Mrs Ramsay is not to be fully written off as a passive angel in the house. As mentioned, she feels like a heavy sponge, and appreciates being alone in peace. McIntire adds that she craves her husband's negative judgement and withholds from telling him that she loves him (McIntire 88). Instead, she proves her love to her husband by capitulating to his desires. Withholding oral declarations of endearment is her only power, and her only way to stand up to the Victorian tyrant. Mrs Ramsay is Woolf's martyr, who must die, and the negative judgements from her husband are part of the abuse she endures and enjoys, to some extent (McIntire 89). Adding on to the ideas presented by McIntire, Mrs Ramsay is probably fully aware of the admiration she receives from the guests in their house, and how her children, especially James, adore her. Had she chosen to act out a rebellion through not being nice to the guests she doesn't like, it would have been a much greater act of deviancy. Withholding some elements of speech only hurts her husband, and in a way that goes unnoticed by society and those around her. Had she taken the route that Edna of *The Awakening* did, she would have been shut off from the people around them and potentially be viewed as mentally ill. However, both women still die, and the authors do this to underline that it is society itself that must make room for all kinds of women, both old and new.

Mrs Ramsay is not only recognized for her home and people skills, for she is also often credited for her immense beauty. She and Charles have taken a walk when he thinks to himself that "she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen" (Woolf 10), and just like nothing in the house is her own, neither is her beauty, for it serves to bring Charles a feeling of pride to be walking with a beautiful woman. Descriptions of her immense beauty appear several times whilst she is alive, and another comes after she ponders the lack of devotion one of the guests, Mr Carmichael, has for her: "She bore about with her, she could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty; she carried it erect into any room that she entered; and after all, veil it as she might, and shrink from the monotony of bearing that it imposed on her, her beauty was apparent" (Woolf 30). She is fully aware of her beauty and does not make any

attempts to hide it. For being beautiful is something that is deemed a natural and God-given feature in women, and Tansley cites the three Graces of Greek mythology for awarding her her beauty (Woolf 21). It is not something she has obtained herself in vanity, it is something she has been blessed with. Moreover, it then becomes relevant to look at precisely why Woolf would emphasise that she is so beautiful. It could be an homage to the looks of her own mother, whom Mrs Ramsay is based on, but it could also be another critique of the angel in the house. As mentioned, Woolf sought to kill off and criticise the ideal as it was unobtainable and exhausting for women to strive for. Mrs Ramsay's beauty is a feature she is praised for and being that cosmetic procedures had yet exist at that time, Mrs Ramsay's beauty adds another layer of unobtainability to her character. It says to those who still attempt to live up to the ideal: you can work as hard as you wish to be the best angel there ever was, but you will never be perfect if you are not immensely beautiful.

4.2 Outside looking in through the window

One of the characters that spend the most time on the outside, looking in on the domestic bliss inside, is Lily Briscoe. She is in her thirties in the first part of novel, and in her forties in the third and last part. She has chosen not to marry, and lives with her father at an undistinguished London address – and is thus not of a high standing in society. She is mostly focused on her art, and as society at the time is not structured for women to both have a career and also have a family, Lily chooses art. Lily finds herself in the same predicament as Esther of *The Bell Jar*, who also struggles with being forced to choose one “thing”, either domesticity or artistic endeavours. As women they have only one choice, whilst watching the men in their lives have many. However, Lily is multifaceted and does not dislike domesticity as much as Esther does at times. As she paints outside, she can see Mrs Ramsay reading to James through the window, and feels an urge to go in and tell her: “I’m in love with this all’ waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children?” (Woolf 14).

Lily paints outside in the garden, on the edge of the lawn, and this says a lot about the minor and major processes and reflections she goes through during the novel. Merriam-Webster has several definitions of what a garden is, the first one being “ a plot of ground where herbs, fruits, flowers, or vegetables are cultivated” (‘Garden’). A garden is a natural space but is also cultivated to grow and look a certain way. Another definition is “a public recreation area or park usually ornamented with plants and trees” (‘Garden’). Because the garden is an area often considered for enjoyment, what Lily does in the space is considered as

so and is not taken seriously – they believe that she is relaxing instead of working. Lastly, the garden is a place of ornament, and so Lily is also viewed as an ornament although she refuses to be one. *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* notes the many religious symbolisms connected to gardens, i.e., the Garden of Eden in Christianity (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 419). Also, in dreams, gardens are places “of growth and for the cultivation of vital internal phenomena”(Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* 420). Referring to the Christian symbolism, the garden is the location where Adam and Eve failed the tests set on them by God by taking a bite of the apple. Lily is the only woman outside in the garden and is only occasionally visited by male guests or Mr Ramsay. She has the free will to be out there, but there are moral tests on how she should behave. Lily walks a line between them – she is not as welcoming and nice to the men as she should be, but she does not insult them either. She does not stray so far away from the conventions of society that she is deemed a sinner and cast out from the garden. Moving over to the second symbolic definition, the garden can also be a place where she grows and experiences internal phenomena, or epiphanies. She spends a great amount of time studying the flowers and trees around her and wishes to portray nature as it is and not to alter it for the sake of her picture. She does a great deal of thinking on the smaller and greater aspects of life whilst painting, and the garden is the place where the novel concludes as she finishes her painting after finally having “had my vision” (Woolf 154).

The ways society views women versus men working is viewed by looking at how the people of the holiday home treat Lily and Mr Ramsay when they are outside. Mr Ramsay is used to getting sympathies from almost everyone in the house, and also to be left in peace when he is working in his study or pacing on the terrace. It is still not common for women to be working in the arts, and so Lily is not taken seriously as a painter. There is no room for her to paint in the house, and so she has to paint outside in the garden. Whilst painting outside she is often approached by the male guests of Mr Ramsay, who approach her painting as if she was a child trying out a new hobby for fun. Because they do not take her work seriously, they do not hesitate to invade her space and offer up their unsolicited critiques, the harshest one being Charles Tansley, a friend of Mr Ramsay who tries to enforce his masculinity by putting down Lily and the Ramsay children, who bluntly tells her “Women can’t write, women can’t paint” (Woolf 35). Lily is in her thirties at this point and has undoubtedly received plenty criticism already in her life for choosing to abandon the marriage plot in pursuit of art. Mr Ramsay also spends time outside, and the philosopher is seen pacing and thinking on the terrace – and is never interrupted. He is the provider in the family and a mentor to the men

visiting and is thus protected from the scrutiny and criticism that no one hesitates in giving to Lily. Even Mrs Ramsay indirectly offers her criticism, by thinking of Lily as “an independent little creature” (Woolf 13). As if her rejection of the marriage plot makes her less of a woman, she calls her a “creature” instead of “woman”. And although she is an adult, she is still “little”. Here, Mrs Ramsay is projecting the traditional Victorian thought that you are not a woman unless you are married to a man and let him provide for you.

In many ways, Lily Briscoe is Mrs Ramsay’s antagonist. The clear difference between them lies in their rejection or acceptance of the marriage plot, and how they treat the people around them. Mrs Ramsay is mostly inside the house in her safe domestic sphere, caring for the children, the guests, or her husband. Lily has declined to participate in domesticity, and is often on the outside, looking in on Mrs Ramsay and the others. Although they never communicate it, they both wish for the other to be relieved of the current situation they are in. As mentioned, Mrs. Ramsay wishes to “fix” Lily’s life by arranging a marriage between her and William. Lily, on the other hand, sees Mr Ramsay as the root of all evil in Mrs Ramsay’s life.

From her spot outside in the garden, Lily observes what happens inside through the window, and does not need to hear what is said in order to criticize Mr Ramsay and how he treats Mrs Ramsay. Lily thinks: “He is petty, selfish, vain, egotistical; he is spoilt; he is a tyrant; he wears Mrs Ramsay to death” (Woolf 18). Due to the autobiographical elements of the novel previously mentioned, it is also likely that these criticisms are shared by Virginia Woolf towards her own father. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter refers to an entry in Woolf’s diary, where she expressed the burden her father was on her own life, stating that “his life would have entirely ended mine” (Showalter, *ALTO*, 218). Questioning if she had written any books had he lived longer, Woolf felt his dominating presence drew the lifeblood from her veins – which one might say is the same for Mrs and Mr Ramsay. Showalter quotes biographer Michael Holroyd, who in his biography on Lytton Strachey described the relationship between Woolf and her father as a kind of possession (Showalter, *ALTO* 218). Woolf cared for her father during the long-lasting illness that became his end and lost her appetite for life in the process. The guilt of feeling liberated after his death also led to a major mental breakdown for Woolf (Showalter, *ALTO* 218). Regardless of if this was Woolf’s intention or not, Lily is emphasizing the strain a Victorian marriage places on the wife, or the caretaking daughter. Lily and the Ramsay children, the new generation, are the only ones that observe and criticise this behaviour, whilst the other guests either ignore it, or like Charles Tansley, try to replicate it. The fact that the novel does not specify what Mrs

Ramsay ends up dying from and only says that the death was sudden, leaves room for the possibility that Mr Ramsay's behaviour did lead to his wife's death to some degree.

Lily shares some similarities with mademoiselle Reisz of *The Awakening* but is far from being a foil of an independent artist like she is. They are both voluntarily unmarried and devoted to their art, but Lily is not as firm in her independence and rejection of societal norms. Whilst Reisz never bothers to be polite and is brutally honest, Lily keeps all her opinions to herself and only speaks if spoken to. Where mademoiselle Reisz did not care if her guests thought her small apartment was below their standards, Lily's humble residence with her father is only briefly mentioned and is never visited. They are both picky in who they like to spend their time with, however. Mademoiselle Reisz thinks Edna is the only one worth playing piano for, and Mrs Ramsay is one of the few people Lily expresses care for. The most prominent difference lies in how they have accepted their place in society, due to the standard marriage plots and domestic bliss not being for them. Mademoiselle Reisz is, as far as the reader knows, content in her life as a single elderly woman. She is able to support herself and can do what she pleases. Lily, on the other hand, realizes that marriage is not for her, but does not wish to live entirely on her own. Unfortunately for Lily, getting married seems to be the only solution. She is trying to envision a way of living in a relationship with someone without marriage.

A moment where Lily strays away from her personal convictions and yields to what is expected of her occurs when she gives in to Mr Ramsay's demand of sympathy towards the end of the novel. Lily initially refuses to offer pleasantries to men when seated near Charles Tansley at dinner in the first part of the novel. Although she senses that both he and Mrs Ramsay wants her to say something to him, she refuses. Mrs Ramsay is closely monitoring the mood of the entire dinner party and is frustrated with Lily's refusal in addition to Mr Ramsay's anger towards one of his slow-eating friends. When Lily and Mr Ramsay meet again at Isle of Skye ten years later, Lily is not as firm in her convictions:

this was one of those moments when an enormous need urged him, without being conscious what it was, to approach any woman, to force them, he did not care how, his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy (Woolf 113)

The narration makes it clear that Mr Ramsay wants words of sympathy, and that Lily knows it, but she does not give in. Mr. Ramsay is so frustrated with Lily's refusal to respond that he lets out a loud groan that Lily thinks would make any woman give in to his wishes. Lily, however, is so set against it that she thinks she is "not a woman" (Woolf 113). Instead, she refers to herself as an old maid. Referring to the discussion of what it means to be a woman in

the second chapter of this thesis, it may be linked to Lily not having reproduced, and thus internalizing the belief that being a woman means having children. And, further looking to the definitions by the dictionaries in the literary review chapter of this thesis that defined female as the sex that bears children, it is possible that some believe that choosing not to act out the reproductive capabilities is a rejection of the purpose of the sex. There were also those in Beauvoir's time that seemed to indicate that there are levels to being a woman and that some are more woman than others – and being a mother is one of the bare-minimum requirements for being recognised as a woman. In her thoughts of herself as “not a woman” it seems as though Lily has internalized these biological thoughts of what a woman is. Lastly, Lily is so set against giving into the set expectations of her gender that she feels her refusal sets her away from the gender itself. The altercation concludes on a pleasant note however, after she awkwardly compliments his boots. He is satisfied with this, and Lily is ashamed to have somewhat filled in for Mrs Ramsay in soothing Mr Ramsay's frustrations.

Lily also acts as a proxy for Mrs Ramsay towards the end of the novel, where she wishes the children would be more sympathetic towards their father, because she struggles to give him sympathy herself. Lily is revisiting her painting outside, whilst Mr Ramsay angrily paces back and forth while waiting for Cam and James to be ready to go to the lighthouse. At last they arrive and Lily reacts to their melancholic moods, noting that: “She could not help feeling annoyed with them; they might have come more cheerfully; they might have given him what, now that they were off, she would not have the chance of giving him” (Woolf 116). The scene gives *déjà vu* to an earlier chapter in the first part, when Mrs Ramsay wished her children would not be so opinionated and critical. Whilst she was alive, Mrs Ramsay would act out her role as the sponge in the house and absorb feelings and emotions of those around her and try to get everyone to get along. She is no longer around to gloss over any tensions that may occur, and Lily is the one who has to bear witness to the tensions between the living Ramsay's. Lily is unable to give Mr Ramsay the sympathies he wants and feels a maternal disappointment when Cam and James does not either. Perhaps it is Lily's earlier attractions towards domesticity that propels her to try to fill in for Mrs Ramsay, even though she is not related to the children by blood. Having previously seen both the good and the bad of the Ramsay household, Lily sees the massive hole that has been left by Mrs Ramsay's death, and makes an attempt to step in, in her own way.

4.3 A solution in an ideal world: the androgynous mind

Mrs Ramsay dies as an exhausted angel in the house, and Lily finishes her painting alone – is there a middle ground to these outcomes that would be a better solution? Or is Lily Briscoe the best possible outcome? In her non-fiction, Woolf ponders a potential solution, and an outcome that does not involve death, as happened to Edna of *The Awakening* when she strayed from being the angel in the house.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf discusses how women can write fiction, and presents the androgynous mind as a potential solution. However, it is important to note that it is a solution which is not connected to the ways in which society is structured as it is more targeted towards the mental. The concept of true androgyny is explained by Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* as “full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements” (Showalter, *ALTO* 216). Showalter also quotes an author that has shown that Woolf connected the female and maternal side of her life to the manic stages of her mental illness, and to the masculine and paternal side she attributed the depressive periods (Showalter, *ALTO* 217). In some ways, Lily has features similar to both Mr and Mrs Ramsay. Mrs Ramsay makes her offer sympathies to men, and when she is gone, Lily wishes her children would be nicer – like Mrs Ramsay did. From Mr Ramsay, Lily also shares the feature of refusing to tamper with the truth in her work. Whilst Mr Ramsay is brutally honest and disregards people's feelings, Lily focuses on being truthful to the things she depicts in her artworks and tries to accurately depict the colours of the nature around her.

Going back to *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf wonders if there are two sexes in the body that should be united in order to get comprehensive gratification and happiness (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 95). Woolf further reflects on what Coleridge meant when he stated that a great mind is androgynous, stating that perhaps he thought the androgenous mind to be “resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided.” (Woolf *A Room of One's Own* 95). Woolf does not explicitly say what the solution of the androgynous mind may be like, but Showalter explains that “The androgynous vision, in Woolf's terms, is a response to the dilemma of a woman writer embarrassed and alarmed by feelings too hot to handle without risking real rejection by her family, her audience, and her class.” (Showalter 234). Is it then, for the woman writer to write like a man, without fearing repercussion for acting out of her sex? Much like Lily would like to be offered the same respects as Mr Ramsay when he is working, and to not be

questioned of her abilities because she is a woman. Furthermore, Showalter states that the ideal Woolfian androgynous artist either transcends sex or has none (237).

5. The Bell Jar

The Bell Jar is an autobiographical novel by Sylvia Plath and takes place during the summer of 1953. Esther Greenwood is spending her summer as a guest editor for a fashionable women's magazine in New York and works alongside socialites, prom queens and soon-to-be housewives. Esther is an aspiring poet, she falls into a depressive spiral after the trials and tribulations of the summer, in addition to struggling with which of societies narrow paths for women she should take. Just like Plath herself, Esther spends several months in mental facilities and endures electrical shock-treatments after a suicide attempt. Throughout the novel she encounters foils for what type of woman she can be, and the feminine mystique is personified in her relationship with Buddy Willard and his mother. She does not comply with their strong advice and become his housewife, however, and the electric shock therapy she endures can be seen as a punished for the sexual dissidence she performs when losing her virginity before marriage. This act of dissidence, in addition to her ungratefulness for her opportunities and the questions she asks, are one of many ways she defies the American dream and narrative, just like the Rosenbergs did by acting on their communism – and dying by the electric chair.

Although Virginia Woolf killed the angel in the house almost 30 years ago, she seems to have regained some of her power over American women in the 50s and 60s, and the female condition for Esther and her peers is criticised by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* and Janet Badia. Women like Esther have more opportunities than ever but are still being called back into domesticity and not given the space to live a life that feels true to them. Additionally, the new opportunities have polarized themselves, leading to a divide between the housewife and the new woman – a depiction of feminist and educated women as ugly and lesser women. The other depiction of newer women presents itself as her co-editor Doreen, but where the ugly feminist lacks beauty, her beauty turns her into a great white macaw that exists purely for the entertainment and profit of others. In the way that Doreen is not taken seriously for her choices regarding her sexuality, Esther is not taken seriously as a poet because she is a woman. Instead, society would rather have a picture of her smiling with a paper rose in a magazine, as something for Esther to look back on after she gives up poetry, marries, and have children. Esther also experiences inequality in treatment of health, as she is called neurotic by Buddy for wanting more than one thing in her life, and the demise of her

mental health in the last half of the novel is a continuation of the patriarchy wanting to silence the women that opposed them by painting them as hysterics.

5.1 The angel in the house must be killed once more, this time by electricity

In a chapter on Friedan's *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter discusses the many ways in which a powerful female literature grew outside of the medical journals and psychiatric institutes by the 1960s, that showed the female experiences of passivity and confinement in the extremes of schizophrenia and institutionalization (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 219). Showalter particularly considers *The Bell Jar*'s accounts of schizophrenia as protests against the feminine mystique of the 1950s and explains how Esther fails to find her place in society as an educated woman. Like Edna of *The Awakening*, she is presented with two different foils, neither of which suits her. The educated working women in her life, her editor and professors seem sex-less and freakish. On the other side, housewives like her boyfriend's mother seem defeated and servile. Showalter states that her sexuality is one of the things that makes Esther feel the most trapped, and should she indulge in experimenting with it, she would further entrap herself with marriage and children. Esther wants to pursue writing poetry, and considers the possibility of doing so whilst being a mother impossible – reflecting what Showalter believes to be at the core of the novel – the split between creativity and femininity which is the basis of Esther's schizophrenia (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 216).

Speaking of the novel in the context of Jennifer Dawson's *The Ha-Ha* (1961) and Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water* (1961), Showalter described it as important in developing the parallels between schizophrenia and female identity in the 1960s, stating that:

While the earlier novels did not question the idea that madness was the woman's own fault, these novels place the blame for women's schizophrenic breakdowns on the limited and oppressive roles offered to women in modern society, and deal very specifically with institutionalization and shock treatment as metaphors for the social control of women. (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 213)

Showalter presents the many ways the novel makes metaphorical connections between electricity and death in addition to these themes being connected to female sexuality and creativity. The novel begins in “the summer they executed the Rosenbergs”, signalling that political dissidence and sexual dissidence both will be punished electrically (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 218). Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed by the electric chair for colluding to pass U.S atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, but never stopped stating their innocence (Rosenberg). Esther disagrees with not being able to act out her sexuality as she

pleases without repercussions, and so her sexual dissidence is punished with electricity.

Although the things they are being punished for are very different, the principle is the same – they both refuse to take part in the American narrative that is presented as the only acceptable one in the post-world war society. For Esther it is sexuality and career, for the Rosenbergs its communism. The American society in the post-war era wanted its people to love their country, not ask any questions, and be grateful. The Rosenbergs and Esther were some of the most offensive beings to the American dream, for they were communists and an ungrateful gifted woman – and this is what unites them.

The issue at hand for Woolf was the split between the feminine and masculine mind, and for Plath it is the split between creativity and femininity. It is a split that Plath struggled with herself, but she felt was resolved by shock therapy. Having initially tried to repress the memories of the treatments, Showalter recounts how Plath later described the treatments as leading to her rebirth. This birth however, she was born of man, not woman (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 217). The electroshock treatments, which are often conducted by a priestly masculine figure, purged Plath of the inheritance of female vulnerability. Plath further argued that the woman artist achieves her freedom and sanity “by transcending ordinary womanhood not just through madness but also through the terrifying and redemptive ordeal of ECT” (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 217). Showalter further explains why Plath would consider ECT as a form of being reborn by explaining how the process, for the patients, feels as if you are killing off the “bad” parts of the self, and leaving the “good”.

Esther’s path towards being creative, active and free in a society that does not wish for women to be these things, involves the same type of violence demonstrated by Woolf towards the angel in the house. Esther has to kill the female side of her psyche, which is controlled by social conventions, sexual desires and maternal virtues. Thus, a paradox exists in the sense that “a woman can free herself from the constraints of schizophrenic womanhood only by denying her solidarity and emotional bonds with other women” (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 218). Esther does this by speaking poorly of and distancing herself from the female side characters in the novel after she goes through various treatments. After the first insulin shock treatment, she says she hates her mother. After the first electroshock treatment, she is now repelled by the other women in her ward that used to be her friends. Esther walks in on two of the women in bed together and is further repelled. One of them, Joan, who Showalter claims is Esther’s alter ego in the novel, kills herself on the eve of Esther’s release from the asylum (Showalter 218). Esther’s feminist double, it seems, has to die for Esther to be free.

5.2 The fair young lady may only choose one fig

In the chapter titled “*The Bell Jar and Other Prose*” in the *Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, Janet Badia discusses the pop culture influence of the novel, its reception, and criticism. Badia highlights Esther’s preoccupation with control and self-determination as one of the core elements of the novel. Esther wants to control her own life instead of accepting the choices that society presents her with, which is the reasoning behind her relationships, experimentation with suicide methods, her fight to escape the bell jar and almost all other events in the novel (Badia 132). Esther has many identities. She is a daughter, successful student, young woman, patient, aspiring poet and a potential wife and mother. Badia suggests that it is possible to argue that it is Esther’s desire and wish for control that connects these threads together. The first example of Esther being controlled by society occurs at the very beginning of the novel. She has just arrived in New York and is made to feel grateful for her scholarship to Smith College and her guest editorship at a women’s magazine, opportunities every college girl would envy her for. Esther explains it herself, that a girl with these opportunities should be in full control of New York – something Esther does not feel she is at all. She quickly falls into a repetitive circle, going from her hotel room to the office, and then to parties and back to the hotel room again. Eventually, she feels paralysed by the minimal choices she has in her day, and coops up in her hotel room – refusing to make any choices at all (Badia 132). These feelings are shared by the many women that struggled under the feminine mystique. Like Friedan’s descriptions of the problem that has no name in the second chapter of this thesis, Esther feels that she is a misfit for not enjoying her summer. She sees Betsy and the other girls being grateful for their experiences, and does not understand why she feels differently, and wonders, why does she not have New York at her feet? For all she knows, Betsy and the others could be feeling the same, but no one talks about it, so it is never discussed. Esther feels unable to voice her feelings, and this causes an inner conflict that paralyses her.

Badia points out however, that Esther does have more opportunities to make choices than most 1950s women, and her choices are pictured in the well-know and central metaphor of the fig tree. Esther acknowledges that her success as a student has led to her having a higher social mobility than most women her age. She is only supported by her single mother who would not have the ability to send Esther to college without a scholarship. Esther imagines the different choices and life paths she may take as a fig tree. One of the branches is domesticity, and features a “husband and a happy home and children”(Badia 133). Another

branch represents “Europe” and others represent “an academic career, publishing, poetry” (Badia 133). There are other branches beyond these, but Esther is unable to make out what they say – potentially because they are choices she is unaware of, or paths not considered for herself. Esther is unable to make a choice, however, and is once again paralysed as she sits and watches the figs rot before her – for she fears losing the others if she chooses one (Badia 133)

That Esther would rather watch all the figs rot instead of choosing one is Plath’s way of criticising America’s desire for conformity – and to force women to be either mothers and wives or have a career (Badia 133). Esther has many choices and they all appeal to her – the problem is that she can only choose one. She can make any choices she wants, but the repercussions of her choices are out of her control. She could try to be both a mother and a poet, but Buddy Willard is the voice of society when he tells her that she may feel different about poetry, and might not wish to pursue it anymore after she has children (Badia 133). Badia describes Esther’s dilemma saying that “the process of choice for Esther has been circumscribed by societal rules and expectations – rules and expectations that tell her to be one, and only one, thing, despite her own inclinations.” (Badia 133). Esther is in many ways in the same predicament as Lily of *To the Lighthouse* and Edna of *The Awakening*, who feel forced to be either a mother or an artist. Lily sees the appeal in domesticity, but she chose art and is thus not allowed by society to be both an artist and a wife or mother. Edna had made the opposite choice, and when she tries to venture over to art whilst still being a married mother, it ends up killing her.

Buddy is once again the voice of the feminine mystique when Esther looks back at a time when he called her neurotic for wanting to live in both the city and the country, for just like Edna experienced, a woman is just supposed to choose one thing. Esther is visiting Buddy at the facility where he is treated for tuberculosis when Buddy asks Esther to marry him. Esther responds that she is never going to get married, and then Buddy calls her crazy and says that she will change her mind. She asks him if he remembers the night he called her neurotic for wanting to live both in the city and the country. In present time, she confirms his accusations, stating that she is in fact neurotic and that she cannot settle down either place. Esther elaborates that if wanting two mutually exclusive things at one time is being neurotic, then she is “neurotic as hell” (Plath 90). Her frustrations are similar to the ones Edna experienced, for Edna too was questioned of her mental sanity when she chose to spend her time and efforts on things that did not regard the home or her children. Whether it be the

angel in the house or the feminine mystique, in both cases, women who deviate from the strict ideals are questioned on their mental health.

Badia further explains how Esther is often denied the process of choice by discussing her struggle with her sexuality and her fear of pregnancy. This can also be seen in her interactions with Buddy Willard, where he often tries to paint Esther as the most sexually experienced of the two (Badia 134). This leads Esther to be surprised when she discovers that Buddy is not a virgin like her, and the most disturbing part of it is that Buddy has been able to control her sexual identity in their relationship, and to make her the butt of his jokes. When Buddy admits his affair, Esther thinks:

I almost fell over. From the first night Buddy Willard kissed me and said I must go out with a lot of boys, he made me feel I was much more sexy and experienced than he was and that everything he did like hugging and kissing and petting was simply what I made him feel like doing out of the blue, he couldn't help it and didn't know how it came about (Plath 65–66)

Esther keeps questioning him, and Buddy goes on to explain that it was not his fault because he was seduced, and that he and the waitress had sexual relations for the remainder of the summer (Plath 66). Although she was a virgin, Buddy had tried to paint her as the most experienced of the two, despite his summer with the waitress. And most likely, it was this waitress who taught him the “hugging, kissing and petting” that he claims came to him naturally.

Lastly, society's double standards become clear to Esther when she realizes that no one will bat an eye if they knew Buddy had had an affair with a waitress, but she would be considered promiscuous if she had the same sexual experience as Buddy (Badia 134). This prompts Esther to seek out control over her own sexuality and to lose her virginity with someone of her choice. A choice of which is threatened by Marco, the Cuban “woman hater”, who she fights off as he attempts to rape her. She finally achieves some control when she loses her virginity to Irwin, but Badia points out that she is never in full control as the possibility of getting pregnant looms over her like a bell jar. It is something that has been pointed out to her several times, such as when her mother sends her a women's magazine article that encourages chastity, where she reads that a husband may not want you if you are not a virgin, and that there is no sure way to avoid getting pregnant (Badia 134). Esther must then overcome several hurdles to be fitted with a diaphragm, as it is illegal in Massachusetts, and she does not have the money for it. Despite the difficult road to getting there, the birth control is viewed by Esther as her path to self-determination, and she feels that it gives her

freedom. As Esther puts it herself as she is on her way back to the asylum with the diaphragm “I was my own woman” (Plath 213).

The titular symbol of the novel is the bell jar, and it can represent several things, such as the narrative style of the novel or the vacuum that entraps Esther. Put simply, a bell jar is a glass jar shaped like a bell and is thus open at the bottom. For the narrative aspect, Badia asks if Plath attempted to present the world how it may be seen through the distorting glass of a bell jar, resulting in the novel's narration being somewhat stylistically uneven and flawed (Badia 130). The bell jar is also sometimes used in science to make a vacuum (‘Bell Jar’), and this may also have symbolic meaning to the vacuum Esther feels trapped in. A bell jar is mentioned in the text when Esther is being driven to a nice private hospital that a wealthy woman writer was financing for her. Esther knows she should be grateful but cannot feel a thing. For Esther, it would not have mattered even if she had flown her out to Paris, for she would still “be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air” (Plath 178). Esther does not explain what she means by her sour air, but given her earlier harsh criticisms of herself, it could simply be that she believes she is not pleasant to be around. She had been conspiring to jump from a bridge in the middle of the car ride, but she is sat between her mother and brother who lean forward like diagonal bars of a cell, keeping her locked in. Disappointed that she could not stir, Esther leans back in her seat and “the air of the bell jar wadded around me”(Plath 178). The air of the bell jar contains all her personal failures, and the sourness could be the smell of the figs she let turn black and remind her of the opportunities she let pass her by.

Whilst doing her guest editorship in New York, Esther is introduced to two different types of foils that show the limited opportunities she has as a woman. The first is Betsy, who is a representation of the female mystique. Betsy has enjoyed the newer educational opportunities for women but is planning on dropping it all to become a housewife back home in Kansas. The other, Doreen, is labelled as promiscuous for spending time with men and is mostly doing the editorship for the parties and gifts and does not take it seriously. Doreen is “the new woman” for she drinks, smokes, attends parties unchaperoned and does not save her virginity for marriage. Doreen represents a path Esther can take should she wish to experiment with her sexuality and to not take the work at the magazine as seriously. Esther thinks that Doreen wears dressing gowns “the color of sin” (Plath 5) and when they go to a bar with two men, Esther notices one of them “kept staring at her the way people stare at the great white macaw in the zoo, waiting for it to say something human”(Plath 10). Doreen does not mind, but Esther may not want to be seen as an animal. Just like the image of the parrot

that opens *The Awakening*, it is an imagery of how women are viewed by the patriarchy. The great white macaw is another variety of a beautiful bird, that people enjoy looking at – just like the men look at Doreen. People also enjoy listening to the macaw saying “something human”, when it is repeating what others have said to it, and people do not take the macaw’s words as its own - for it has none. The main difference between the parrot in *The Awakening* and the macaw in *The Bell Jar* is that now the bird is not just a pet, it is also being profited off of. People will pay money to enter the zoo and look at it, just like people will buy magazines to stare at conventionally beautiful women who have strict guidelines on what they can talk about and are not taken seriously when they do speak.

Later, when Esther is woken in the middle of the night to an overly drunk Doreen who eventually passes out in the hallway after Esther decides to not take her in her room, Esther decides to distance herself from her and everything she is. She vows to observe and listen to Doreen, but to have nothing to do with her – and to give her loyalty to Betsy and her innocent friends, whom she resembles at heart. When looking out at the stain in the hallway where Doreen had vomited, Esther thinks she almost expected to see Doreen being there still “in the pool of vomit like an ugly, concrete testimony to my own nature” (Plath 21). She recognizes that she and Doreen share some of the same natures, but she does not want to live it out, fearing being a lesser woman, an animal that is not capable of taking care of herself. The location of the vomit is also symbolic, as Esther has managed to keep it out of her room, her personal space, making it clear that she no longer partakes in Doreen’s life and nature.

Although she does not have a big part in the novel, Mrs Willard regularly makes an appearance in Esther’s mind, as if she is the personification of the feminine mystique, or the ghost of the angel in the house, like Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Willard are both dedicated housewives who like to engage in marriage schemes. Mrs Willard makes it even clearer than Mrs Ramsay however, and Esther is fully aware that she thinks she should marry her son. When Buddy contracts tuberculosis in his work as a medical student, Mrs Willard arranges for Esther to work at the facility where he is treated, so that she could be with him (Plath 18). Esther is not a fan of anyone making choices for her, and she does not want to marry Buddy, so she spends her summer in New York instead.

Whilst being the personification of the feminine mystique, Mrs Willard, like Doreen, serves as a foil of what Esther does not want to do with her life. When imagining married life, Esther thinks that it would be a “dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s” (Plath 80), but she thinks that that is just the way it is. Mrs Willard has been a private school teacher, but now spends all her days cooking and cleaning. Mrs Willard once

spent weeks making a rug out of strips of wool from Mr Willard's suit, only for it to become a kitchen mat that is stepped on and dirty (Plath 80). Esther feels she has seen the true nature of marriage and domesticity in the Willard's, and also in her own parents. When her parents left for their honeymoon, her father told her mother that they could finally drop the act and be themselves. Esther suspects this act in all men that she dates, that they will only shower her with love until they can convince her to marry them – then they will drop the act and wish for her to flatten under their feet like Mrs Willard's kitchen mat (Plath 80). Esther wonders if marriage is like being brainwashed, and if women, once married, walk around numb, like “a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (Plath 81). For Esther, the version of marriage presented to her by the people around her is like a totalitarian state that will make her its slave. To use the symbol of the bell jar, getting married would be like voluntarily setting oneself under the lid of the bell jar, and being trapped in the domestic sphere under it. Married women will mostly have their base in the house, and will not venture outside much, for the rest of the world is the sphere where the man ventures.

Another appearance of the feminine mystique in other women than Mrs Willard is when Esther is at her college and is suddenly respected by her seniors when they find out that she is going to the Yale Junior prom with Buddy. Yale is one of the senior girls' favourite places to visit during the weekends, and because Esther had not found out about his affair yet, she is hoping that the prom evening will lead to her spending her weekends there as well. The first senior that finds out about Esther's prom invitation treats Esther with “amazement and respect” (Plath 56). Firstly, she is surprised that Esther would be invited, and then surprised that she was. Esther finds it odd that things change in the house after her invitation. The senior girls start talking to Esther more. Previously they had not tried to conceal it when they loudly talked about her behind her back, as they would look down on Esther for spending her “golden college days with their noses stuck in a book” (Plath 57). Now, they talk directly to her instead of behind her back, and Esther notes that one of them would even answer the phone quite spontaneously (Plath 56–47). Esther is not awarded respect for pursuing her passions, instead she is only noticed when associated with a male Yale student.

It is interesting that the senior girls refer to their college days as “golden” in the above example, as if they subconsciously fear the feminine mystique that is looming ahead. They had far greater opportunities than their mothers to make choices on what to study and to take control of their days. They judge Esther for spending her time reading, for they believe that it is a waste of time as they will not use it to actually do any work, when they are stuck at home, cleaning and cooking whilst their husbands are out and putting to use the things he learned in

college. They may not see the value of their education and do not take it seriously, for they know that their goal is to not have to use it. If everything goes to plan, they will find their husband whilst spending the weekend visiting Yale, and he will take care of her and their children financially. Whilst at college, they have some slivers of freedom, but if they want to follow the path society and the feminine mystique wants them to take, they are actually at college to find a husband. Add this on to the burden of scholarship students like Esther, who must maintain good grades for her scholarship, and the days may not seem that golden after all.

The servitude of men seems to be at the core of society and the feminine mystique as Esther wishes to find a way of life that does not include it. She is fortunate enough to have been able to choose something she is interested in for her major but is told by her mother that she should learn shorthand – because nobody wants a “plain” English major. An English major that knows shorthand on the other hand, is in high demand, according to Esther’s mother. However, the career options that come from this does not appeal to Esther – for she would end up as some kind of secretary, writing “letter after thrilling letter” (Plath 72). She does not want to marry Buddy and become his servant, so the prospects of being a secretary to some other man are not any more appealing for Esther states that “the trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way” (Plath 72). Instead of reciting what a man says in a letter, Esther wants to write letters of her own, with her voice and her stories and opinions behind it. Esther’s mothers’ beliefs are once again in line with the feminine mystique: she wants her daughter to take on a passive job, one that would keep her as domestic as possible, retelling the adventures of a man instead of experiencing them herself.

One feature of the feminine mystique was how it preserved itself by presenting women with false narratives in women’s magazines, telling them what to do with their lives and to appreciate domesticity. Esther encounters one of the narratives when her mother sends her an article from Reader’s Digest, a family magazine that is currently celebrating its 100-year anniversary, which is titled “In Defence of Chastity” (Plath 76). The article lists reasons why girls, and not boys, should abstain from having sex until marriage. The article also enforces the Victorian beliefs that a man and a woman have different worlds, and their emotions are also different. Marriage is the unifying ceremony that brings the different worlds and emotions together (Plath 76). The woman lawyer that wrote the article goes on to say that the best men stayed pure for their wives, but even if they weren’t, they still wanted to teach their wives about sex. She finishes the article by suggesting that it is better to be safe than sorry. After reading it, Esther is left with a feeling of wondering why the article did not consider

how girls feel in all this. Although it was written by a woman, it solely focuses on the wishes of men, and what women can do to be pure for them. It is through articles like this the feminine mystique is able to carry on promoting purity as a desirable feature in women, and how it makes women like Esther's mother help enforce it on the next generation.

5.3 In work and in health – how men are taken more seriously than women

There are several instances in the novel where Esther is not being taken seriously in a situation that men commonly are, and the first is in her thoughts of becoming a poet: where she is not taken seriously as an artist, just like Lily Briscoe. There are two main components that suggest this in the last round of photographs that the guest editors have before the magazine goes to print, and the young women return to their homes. They are to be photographed with props that showed what they wanted to be. The selection of props and the career goals for the women demonstrate the limited options available for gifted girls like Esther. The feminine mystique is once again represented in Betsy, who is holding an ear of corn because she wants to be a farmer's wife (Plath 97). Hilda holds a head of a hatmakers dummy because she wants to design hats – a typically feminine craft turned into a profession. Doreen – the new woman - has creatively told the magazine that she wants to be a social worker in India because then she would pose with a sari, which she wanted for herself (Plath 97). Lastly, Esther has not become any wiser since her imagination of the fig tree and does not know what to answer when she is asked what she wants to be. After her editor Jay Cee wittily comments that Esther wants to be “everything”, Esther settles for poet (Plath 97). Their initial thought was to have Esther pose with a book of poetry, but the photographer deems it too obvious, and Esther finds herself with a paper rose in her hands instead.

That Esther is not taken seriously as an aspiring poet is clearly evidenced in the photo shoot by both the prop she is given and the directions the photographer gives her. Given the obvious props the other women were given, the excuse that a poetry book was too obvious for Esther seems a bit out of place. Books have historically been masculine objects, as the majority of its readers and writers were men. Having Esther pose with this masculine object makes her look too serious of a poet – a narrative that does not fit in a women's magazine in the 50s. So, she is given a paper rose instead, a typically feminine objects as i.e., women are often described as flowers. This puts her poetry aspirations back where society and Buddy Willard wants them – as a silly little occupation for Esther to have until she becomes a mother. The reasoning for the use of the flower is that her prop should be something that

inspires poems, instead of poems themselves. It is still a way of not taking Esther's poetry seriously, as it implies that women mostly write poems about the flowers they receive from men, or pretty flowers they see in gardens. Next, the directions the photographer give her further prove that she is not taken seriously. The scene of the photo shoot opens with the photographer telling Esther "Come on, give us a smile" (Plath 96) a command that women have had to endure ever since they stopped being polite and pleasant Victorians, and which Esther finds hard to follow as she is on the verge of tears. Esther does not know why she feels like crying but describes a feeling of tears in her like a glass that is unsteady and too full (Plath 96). Once Esther is posed in front of the bright lights with her paper flower, she is asked by the photographer who is still requiring a smile from her and asks her to "show us how happy it makes you to write a poem" (Plath 97). Just like Lily's painting, Esther's poetry is seen as something she does purely for entertainment and fun, something to pass the time. The photographer asks Esther to smile for a third time, and she smiles obediently. Victorian beauty ideals have lingered in the sense that women should appear pleasant and beautiful, something which the 50s society still believes a smile is necessary to do. If one compiles the elements that could have been present in this photo and imagines an unsmiling Esther with a poetry book in her hands, it is not an image anyone would associate with a woman's magazine in the 50s.

Another situation where Esther notices the differences between being a man and a woman is the treatment of illnesses, and the differences between the masculine physical health and the feminine mental health. Both Buddy and Esther are institutionalized for their illnesses, but their experiences and how they are viewed are drastically different. Buddy contracts tuberculosis whilst working as a medical student, and so how he became ill is morally correct in the eyes of society. Secondly, it is a physical illness that Buddy cannot control, and so he has to put his trust in the people that treat him to fix it. Esther, on the other hand, suffers from a mental illness and her suffering is not viewed as heroically and natural as Buddy's. Again, the American society of the 50s does not favour ungrateful people, and so in their eyes Esther's illness is seen as a weakness of her character, and her inability to be grateful for all the opportunities she has had to sort out her life.

Referring to the discussions of *The Female Malady* in the second chapter of this thesis about the history of women and psychiatric treatments, mental illness has historically been considered feminine illnesses, and women like Esther were submitted for treatment for even mild symptoms. Showalter further examines this in the sixth chapter of her book, titled *Feminism and Hysteria*, which discusses how the patriarchy feared the rise of feminist

movements and labelled the women they felt attacked by as hysteric (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 145). Several of the psychiatrists of this era meant that hysteria was prominent in women that were more independent and assertive than the “ordinary” woman, and they were also often unconventional women such as artists and writers (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 145). Showalter tells the story of Edith Lancaster, who was a gifted young woman like Esther, an honours student at London university, a politically active feminist, and a secretary to Eleanor Marx. Edith met and in 1895 moved in with a man, fully disregarding the marriage plot. This led to her family kidnapping her and putting her in a private asylum, and a doctor blamed her “over education” as the cause of her insanity, and that her opposition to marriage showed that she cannot take care of herself (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 146). After a vigil outside the asylum, Edith was released and able to continue her work and her relationship. Showalter notes however, that these Darwinian practices of psychiatry lead to fear among the women’s suffrage movement for being labelled a hysteric after transgressing your destined role in society (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 147). Eventually, the weaknesses of the Darwinian practices became evident, as Leonard Woolf visited five London psychiatrists to figure out how to “cure” his wife, just like Mr Pontellier did in *The Awakening*, and concluded that they had “no real or scientific knowledge”, and their knowledge of insanity was “desperately meagre” and “primitive and chaotic” (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 164).

It then becomes relevant to once again review Gilbert and Gubar’s three potential ways for women to escape patriarchal structures (Gilbert and Gubar 466). Esther endures the shock treatments and institutionalization, and thus overcomes madness. She avoids oppression by refusing Buddy Willard’s proposal to be his submissive housewife and by taking agency in her sexuality through acquiring birth control and losing her virginity. The last method then is starvation. It is important to note that several of the obstacles Esther overcomes is because she is financially supported by a writer that took pity in the mentally ill aspiring poet. What sets the financial support apart from novels such as *Jane Eyre*, is that said writer is a woman. So, even though Esther does not overcome starvation on her own, the female condition has advanced because women are now able to provide for other women. I believe that Esther possessed an anger similar to the one *Jane Eyre* was criticised for having, which led to her wanting to fight against patriarchal structures instead of yielding to suicide like Edna did. Of course, Esther does attempt suicide, but that her attempt is not successful may be the authors wish to still pursue other options, or to push Esther further to find the will to fight. The novel cuts off shortly after Esther’s freedom from institutionalization, so what she does next we do

not know. However, we do know that she is able to live by overcoming starvation, madness, and oppression – and she has agency as she goes on to pursue her female destiny.

6. Conclusion

“A century ago, Nora slammed the door of the doll’s house; a generation ago, women turned their backs on the consumer heaven of the isolated multiapplianced home; but where women are trapped today, there is no door to slam.”

Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (1990, 19)

This thesis has been a comparative analysis of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, where I have placed a particular focus on investigating how the Victorian, Modernist and Post-war societies pressure women to conform to ideal mothers and wives, and how four different female protagonists give into or fight against these ideals. I have shown how restrictive these ideals can be, and how little room they leave for women to deviate from the foil of an ideal woman, such as the angel in the house. In sum, the women protagonists discussed in this thesis had to either suffer oppression by conforming to being the ideal woman or be punished for refusing to put on what Beauvoir described as a blind bondage.

I aimed to investigate whether the female protagonists accept or refute these ideals and found that there is only one of them that accept, but it even that comes at a cost. Mrs Ramsay serves her duty as the angel in the house up until her sudden death, and although she is admired by her guests, she is exhausted, and Lily believes that she is being worn to death by her duties. If the angel in the house works herself to death, what other options are there? As mentioned, becoming a deviant devil of sorts was one other way out for women, but their lives did not end much better. In fact, Lily and Esther are the only ones alive at the end of their novels. Edna, and Chopin herself, cannot find a solution that does not involve being either an angel or an outcast, and so Edna, too, suffers a fatal ending to her story. Woolf’s Lily has been hovering around domestic bliss but not sought it out for herself and has continued to live as a spinster, whilst Esther has gone through shock treatments that seem to punish her for not being able to select a fig from the tree she imagines. *The Bell Jar* ends when Esther is released, and what becomes of her afterwards is left to the imagination. Although it was a painful journey getting there, Esther has the happiest outcome of the novels – which is fitting given that it is the most recent. That the protagonist, or heroine even, is now able to survive even though she refuses to be either an angel or a devil signals that the times are changing and newer roles for women are coming.

Another aim that I sought to investigate is how women were not taken as seriously as men, which several of the protagonists experienced, one example being how two of the women were viewed as parrots that could be owned and only spoke in repetition. Both Lily

Briscoe and Esther Greenwood are not taken seriously in their career aspirations and, in the eyes of the men around them, their attempts at making careers are seen as playing with a new hobby, as is signalled in their being asked to describe how it makes them feel, as having strong emotions is a stereotypically woman feature. Although both women are fictional, their experiences reflect their times in a realistic manner. What is more, women still experience being looked down on in their work and viewed as creatures that are more emotional and less rational than men. A recent example of this can be found in the case of investigative journalist Suki Kim, who was told by her publisher that her forthcoming book, “Without You, There Is No US: My secret life teaching sons of North Korea’s elite”, on North Korea that she had spent ten years writing undercover would be published as a memoir – a genre of emotion and personal reflections (Kim). At first glance it may seem trivial that Kim did not get to publish in the genre she wanted, but the effects it had upon publication were extreme. Where fellow journalists were praised for their undercover work, Kim was slandered for what people argued were unethical practices. She was exempted from receiving any journalistic award for her decade-long research due to it not being under the category of journalism. Kim also experienced that several men felt the need to disregard her work and claim that they knew better, and she was wrong. Looking back to the Victorian era, it seems as if some men still feel that they should be the experts on the outer spheres and everything that is going on in the world, whilst Kim, who is just “telling the story of her home” (she is South Korean, not North Korean) should remain in the domestic sphere as an emotional woman. Additionally, the publishers and those who criticized Kim’s work are reminiscent of the fictional men discussed in this thesis, as they are dictating a woman’s speech and deciding that her speech is not worthy, and not allowing her to take full ownership of her work.

That the image of a bird appeared in the first novel written in 1899 and is still present in the third novel written in 1963 shows that this aspect has not changed for women. Women are still to some degree being viewed as objects or servants when they get married, and their speech is still not taken seriously. In present day, there is a common misconception that women talk more than men, which may be true in private settings, but not in work settings, such as meetings. Linguistics professor Deborah Tannen points out in an article titled “The Truth About How Much Women Talk – and Whether Men Listen” that men tend to talk far more than women in public speaking settings (Tannen). Tannen argues that women’s wishes to not be perceived as aggressive and taking up a lot of space may be some of the reasons why. Of course, it is a great step in the right direction that women are more than ever present in meeting, lectures etc. but that women either consciously or subconsciously limit their

speech whilst their male peers have never thought about doing so proves that there is room for further advances to be made in this area. And research as the one Tanner is pursuing is proving that although some would argue that women and men are equal, there are still some discrepancies.

Describing discrepancies between men and women was also a feature of Chopin, Woolf and Plath, as they described the female condition of their time and opened up for women who had the same struggles as the protagonists to feel less alone. With several waves of feminism having passed, women are now more than ever able to speak out on how equality is still not achieved – one of them being Caitlin Moran and her memoir *How to Be a Woman* (2011). She spends two chapters discussing whether or not one should have children, and opens her thirteenth chapter, «Why you shouldn't have children», by noting that having children can also be an easy way out – because then people will stop asking you when you are going to have children. The conventional way to become a parent is with a loved one, and so this means that a woman should be looking for a partner to ensure that she can have children before her biological clock stops ticking (Moran 236). Friedan noted that the age of which women were getting married was lower, and when Esther goes to college she experienced that her seniors are more worried about finding a husband than the answers to the next exam. For how is a woman to become a mother if she does not have a husband? And is she truly a woman if she does not have children?

Moran herself worked at a magazine and wonders why female celebrities are asked when they are going to have children, but male celebrities are not. Moran suggests that a potential reason for this is that men's lives will not change much should they decide to become fathers. Moran also states that there is more to it than just asking “when are you going to have children?” In fact, they are asking “when are you going to fuck it all up by having kids?” (Moran 240). Coincidentally, the age of which the female body is in its prime for birth giving, is also the time in which women are peaking in their careers. They have high ambitions, are creative and freshly out of college – just like Esther. Not all women are going to be too interested in having months or years without work on their resume, and not being able to function at the same capacity once they are able to return to work afterwards. Asking a working woman when she is going to become a mother, Moran argues, is the same as asking her “when are you going to leave?” (Moran 240).

Another hidden message behind the question “when are you going to have children?” is that it does not take into consideration if the woman wants to have children at all. Moran emphasizes the pressures of “the biological clock” and female fertility being presented as

something limited that must be used at some point. She suggest that it may be so pressuring that it will lead women who actually do not want to have children, to become mothers (Moran 240), much like Edna. Moran concludes that women and men alike have convinced themselves that a woman is not complete until she becomes a mother. It is more complicated than the simple biological need to reproduce, it has evolved to become something of a status symbol. A woman should have children herself to become a respectable ‘elder’ that has influence in society (Moran 241). Moran further notes that women are not valued when they get old, and “the peak of your respectability and wisdom is seen to come in the years you’re still fertile, holding down a family and, increasingly, a job at the same time” (Moran 242). The images of the childless spinster linger, and the ideals of the angel in the house has morphed into now being an angel both at home and at work.

Moran’s examples of how there still are discrepancies between the male and female experience is one of the several arguments that prove that this thesis discusses issues that are still relevant for women in 2022. I have talked about novels from different time periods where women ask themselves some of the same questions as they do today: what does it mean to be a woman? And does my objection to the status quo of what a woman is mean that I am less of a woman? Women are still being policed through i.e., the beauty myth, which still serves as an extension of the feminine mystique as a means for the patriarchy to have a hold on women. The concept of domesticity is also still relevant, as women such as Moran, decide to become mothers without being the passive other, the angel, and are fighting to keep their individuality as both a woman and a mother.

The ideal of the angel discussed in this thesis and the issues of beauty and domesticity discussed above is not descriptive of the struggles that all women of the Victorian to post-war eras experienced, as the ideal of the angel did mostly apply to white and middle to upper-class women. If the questions raised in the thesis could have been taken further, it would be an option to look at feminism through an intersectional lens and explore how social identities overlap and how people of colour or LGBTQIA+ people experience compound discrimination – i.e., being discriminated against on the basis of both race and gender (UN Women). I have discussed the descriptions of beauty in several of the novels, and Lily’s appearance and her “Chinese eyes” is something that could have been further investigated had the thesis taken a different direction, also in combination with Suki Kim’s experience of Orientalism and not being taken seriously as an investigative journalist. Kim has experienced that “[a]s an Asian female, I find that people rarely assume I’m an investigative journalist; even after I tell them, they often forget” (Kim). She has often experienced compound discrimination as an Asian

woman, and that is something that would be interesting to research further. There are also several queer features in the novels discussed in this thesis which could have been pursued further: from the fact that Virginia Woolf herself had a female lover to the lesbians Esther meets at the asylum. Additionally, another aspect of the novels that I did not investigate too deeply in this thesis is the sexual attraction between some of the female characters. Showalter attributed some of Edna's awakening to her attraction to Mrs Ratignolle, and Lily's affections toward Mrs Ramsay can also be interpreted as queer. Some novels that could be interesting and relevant to discuss in this context are *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid and *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid. The first deals with modern day racism and interracial relationships, whilst the other is a queer love story that also features race, sexualisation and objectification of women set in Hollywood in the 50s. Both the suggested novels and the ones discussed in this thesis bring forward important topics, that impacted the female condition – and still does.

Improvement of the female condition is a common feature from the three periods as women gradually acquired more legal or educational rights, i.e., the right to own property in the Victorian era or the access to education post-war. One of the events that interested me the most during the writing of this thesis was the way society took a step backwards in the mentioned improvements, and women had to halt their path out of domesticity in the post-war era, as the men returned from war and needed their wives to confine themselves in the domestic sphere again. Every generation of women tend to feel grateful that they have more opportunities than their mothers, and it is important to be aware of that the patriarchy may find itself in the position to take said opportunities away again. An example of this happening in present time has become even more clear, as it was recently revealed in a leaked draft that the American supreme court is moving to overturn *Roe V. Wade* (Gerstein and Ward), and to restrict women's right to abortion in some American states. The news paints a stark contrast to just a few weeks earlier, when Ketanji Brown Jackson was appointed as the first black woman to serve on the supreme court (Hurley et al.), and is a brutal reminder for women all over the world that although we are seemingly making progress, we must never take it for granted.

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