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Abstract

This thesis is a comparative study of the female discourse in three different literary texts, from different periods, with a focus on how they represent and present identity in different ideological contexts. Historically, there have been social norms and implicit rules of what it meant to be a woman and thus, women have felt pressured to conform to these ideals. Even though women have the same rights as men today in many cultures, there are still issues that need to be addressed.

The present study has conducted close readings and comparative analyses of three texts in order to see how ideology has affected female identity, from early twentieth century and up until contemporary. The textual framework is Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996). Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe and Esther Greenwood tried to uncover their own self-identities in societies that were extremely patriarchal. In order to see how these texts relate to the contemporary, the character of Bridget Jones has also been included.

All three texts from different periods approach the problem with the concept of "woman", from different perspectives. The Victorian image of the ideal woman or wife came to be known as "the angel in the house". As the angel, women became an object, only there to be displayed and desired. During the turn of the century, the New Woman emerged as a response to these Victorian ideals. The early women rights movement resulted in a vast number of opportunities for women within work force and education. However, while women gained more rights as a result of the first wave of feminism, the post-war America represented a change in the concept of "woman" as many returned to the domestic sphere. In this ideological setting, young girls and women were taught to be ideal housewives. The maintenance of the house and the care of the family were women's main priorities. Women resumed to the roles as mothers and wives, which resembled the Victorian ideal. Through the second wave of feminism, these ideals were once again challenged. In the contemporary society women are liberated and free to do what they want. However, even though women today have equal rights, concerning education, politics and the work force, there are still images of "woman" that need to be confronted. All the female characters are trying to search for a self that is not governed by the ideological concept of "woman".

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1 Introduction

“I am not one and simple, but complex and many.”

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (1964: 64)

This thesis is a comparative study of the female discourse in three different literary texts, from different periods, with focus on how they represent, present and investigate identity in different ideological contexts. When dealing with identity, Woolf’s quote “I am not one and simple, but complex and many” from *The Waves* (1931) seems relevant. Historically, there have been social norms and implicit rules of what it meant to be a woman and thus, women have felt pressured to conform to these ideals. Women have been put into categories that limit a person’s capacity to define a sense of “me”, underlining Woolf’s words from *The Waves*. This has in result created a conflict of identity, between individual women’s sense of self and the concept of “woman” constructed by the dominant ideology. Even though women have the same rights as men today in many cultures, there are still issues that need to be addressed.

The question of identity is something that affects and concerns both men and women on a daily basis, and according to Anthony Giddens in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) the question of self- identity is an inescapable issue:

What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone [...] - and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour.

(Giddens, 1991: 70)

Identity is something that develops through the length of one’s entire life. It may include aspects beyond control, such as skin color or place of birth, but it may also entail personal choices such as time management and choice of a personal belief system. In order to investigate identity, one has to incorporate the social structure, that is, the framework it consists in. Therefore, both micro and macro aspects need to be included in order to provide a genuine result.

In similar terms as Giddens, Judith Butler stresses in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) that the individual cannot be studied outside its social

framework, as it is closely defined in terms of it. She proposes that the concept of “gender” is socially constructed, in the way that it entails acts that are repeated and constantly outworked.

Butler’s main project is to prove that human beings are not born “feminine” or “masculine”, but shaped by a vast number of external processes. One might argue that characters in literature in many ways represent general rules of the expected behavior of their time. By investigating human beings in a specific social context, we can see how the roles they play become an intertwined part of their identity. It represents how other people expect them to be, and thus, they start to define themselves in terms of the general characteristics of their time. Their identity become associated with the roles they have chosen or are “forced” to play. One of the reasons for investigating identity is to explore the idea that female identity, in many circumstances, is socially constructed.

The reason for choosing this topic is because it is interesting to explore how identity is so closely connected to the social context in which it consists. Both male and female identity are influenced, shaped and developed in terms of a social framework. Prior to this writing process, I thought that the crisis of identity mainly concerned women, that the society was a restrictive system only in terms of female identity. My belief was that women today were more liberated than ever, and that equality served more and more as a foundation for human beings. However, I came across an article in *The New York Times*, and realized that this was not entirely the case. Richard A. Shweder’s “What Do Men Want? A Reading List For the Male Identity Crisis” gave an insight in how men too are affected and influenced by the implicit rules of the social framework in which they exist. In similar terms as women, men are also in some sense trapped in the category of gender. Shweder further argues that

[t]he many boundaries and clear resonances of a gendered world built around the opposition of work and family -- production versus reproduction, salaried work versus unsalaried, outdoors versus indoors, competitive versus cooperative, hard versus soft -- have been blurred, and men have been told that the time has come for them to choose to be someone else.
(Shweder, 1994)

In our media-governed society, we are presented and offered personhoods that do not always fit into our comprehension of us, and in result, there might occur identity crises. In similar terms, Heather Boushey, cited in Ray Williams’ article “Our male identity crisis: What will happen to men?” (2010), consider the implicating of shifting gender roles and notes that “girls today grow up in a post-feminist environment, being told they can do whatever they want in life. [...] It’s a huge shift, when you think that a generation and a half ago our attitudes for what roles women and men could play in our society were entirely different that they are

today”. With this in mind, Williams argues that in our environment, the world is lacking “clear-cut borders and distinctions”. Thus, it has been challenging to know what it means to be a man and even harder to feel good about being one (Williams, 2010).

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the questions concerning identity influence both men and women in society, but due to the scope of this thesis I have chosen to delimit my investigation to the notion of female identity. The roles of men and women are made possible by, and even restricted by, ideological structure in a society. Terry Eagleton proposes that ideology is always “most effective when invisible” (2007: xvii), and this thesis seeks to explore how implicit ideology influence how women construct their identity. As this thesis concerns an investigation of literary texts, a historical survey analysis will not be conducted, but instead, the focus will be on analyzing three particular literary female identities. Nonetheless, the social framework these female identities exist in plays an important role and will therefore be included as a part of the analysis. The thesis will explore female characters within a patriarchal framework, and focus on how their identity has been restricted as a result of the roles made available to them.

In order to address these issues, I have chosen to investigate three particular literary female identities in three novels. Even though the texts are different in form, content and context, they all question female identity in relation to its social framework. The present study will conduct close readings and comparative analyses of three texts in order to see how ideology has affected female identity, from early twentieth century and up until contemporary. Starting with Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* (1927) and followed by Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), the thesis will investigate how the female characters seek to uncover their own self-identities in societies that can be deemed as highly patriarchal. In order to see how these texts relate to the contemporary, Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) will also be analyzed. The motivation behind this thesis is to investigate and unpack what the concept of “me” consists of in order to see how Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, Esther and Bridget form and evolve their identity, in concord, or in conflict with the dominant ideology in their time. The thesis will explore how there are traces of patriarchal ideology in literature, namely in the textual framework, and how the female characters are either challenging or upholding it.

As a preliminary conclusion, one might claim that what has been emphasized in all three texts, and what is also the main focus in this thesis, is that they all attempt to both adapt and challenge the concept of “woman” in their time. Woolf wrote, “I am not one and simple, but complex and many”, and the thesis aims to provide a better understanding of female

identity in relation to Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, Esther and Bridget. They might appear to be simple images of their society, but are in fact much more complex.

2 How Shall I live?

”But I knew very well how the persona you chose to present to the world could be very different from what was inside.” Jojo Moyes, *After You* (2015: 136)

The concept of “woman” has changed according to the dominant ideology of the time, and has frequently caused challenges for females. According to Lucinda Joy Peach in *Women in culture: A Women`s Studies Anthology* (1998), “cultural institutions [...] contribute to the construction and maintenance of gender roles and the gendered hierarchy that privileges males over females” (Peach, 1998: 16). As a result of the gendered ideology and its hierarchy, women have throughout history struggled in order to be culturally and socially accepted. Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, Esther and Bridget all deal with this pressure, which in result compromises their own self-identity.

2.1 Identity

Identity has through history demonstrated its power as one of the main concerns in writing. According to Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle in *Literature, Criticism and Theory* (1995), the question of identity (“who do you think you are?”) is often raised and explored in works of literature. *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines the term of *identity* as “the qualities, beliefs, etc., that makes a particular person or group different from others”. Moreover, Richard Jenkins in *Social Identity* (2004) asserts that identity involves “knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are” (Jenkins, 2004: 6). As we see here, identity is a term that deals with social interaction with others as well. Jenkins argues that identity is not something one can possess, as it is rather a process or something that one does (ibid). In similar terms, Giddens argues that self-identity is not a set of traits, or even a collection of traits, but a person`s own reflexive understanding of their biography. Self-identity can then be understood as having continuity, that is, “continuity across time and space” (Giddens, 1991: 53).

Furthermore, Giddens proposes that the fundamental question concerning identity is

“How shall I live”, and that this has to be answered in order to decide how to behave, what to wear and what to eat, “as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity” (Giddens, 1991: 14). He argues that one cannot investigate the self only in terms of the individual acts, but also in relation to the social forces. This is important when dealing with the female characters in this study. The characters cannot merely be investigated in terms of their individual acts, but must also be viewed in relation to the dominant ideology. One might argue that the reason for this is that there are many layers to the concept of identity. The day-to-day choices can seem insignificant and unimportant in some sense, but are really a part of one’s identity. In addition to these choices, the society and the context that one belongs to, plays a crucial part in how one conceives oneself. Furthermore, Giddens notes that acknowledging what is not-me, is an important part of discovering one’s true identity (1991: 42). By distancing oneself from what is not a part of one’s own identity, there is also something said about it as well. This is important when dealing with the characters, as they might conform to some of the aspects within the patriarchy, but they are also trying to challenge it.

According to David Gauntlett in *Media, Gender and Identity* (2002), Giddens sees connections between the “micro” aspects of society, in addition to the “macro” picture. These levels have traditionally been studied separately, but according to Giddens, they cannot be understood in isolation (Gauntlett, 2008: 106). Thus, the concept of identity has to be investigated in relation to social forces, not only in terms of the individual. Furthermore, Gauntlett claims that often in a dominant ideology “choices are already prescribed by the traditions and customs” (2008: 104). In societies that are well developed, it is impossible to escape the concept of self-identity. Even those who claim they have never given any thought to questions or anxieties concerning their own self-identity, will “inevitabl[y] have been compelled to make significant choices throughout their lives, from everyday questions about clothing, appearance and leisure to high-impact decisions about relationships, beliefs and occupations” (2008: 105). Social forces that bring by changes will also influence how individuals view life. Gauntless argues that “[t]hese developments are also a product of changes in the laws relating to marriage and sexuality (macro); but the demand for these changes came from the level of everyday lives (micro) (2008: 107). Previous societies had much more fixed identities provided for women, compared to the contemporary society. Although Gauntlett acknowledges that the mass media influences the choice of lifestyles, he claims that identities are more “up for grabs” and less predictable today (2008: 106).

Giddens too emphasizes the mass media and how it is likely to influence individuals

and their self-identity. He claims that media conveys ideals that many individuals think of as impossible to achieve. Magazines, self-help books and movies demonstrate how relationships are supposed to be, while news and factual media inform us “about the findings of lifestyle research, and actual social changes in family life” (Gauntlett, 2008: 107). In similar terms, Gauntlett argues that

[t]he mass media suggests lifestyles, forms of self-representation and ways to find happiness. [...] This narrative will also be influenced by perspectives which we have adopted from the media. Our relationship with our bodies, our sexual partners and our own emotional needs, will also be influenced by media representation.

(Gauntlett, 2008: 123)

In result, messages sent out by the media do not only reflect the society, but it also contributes to its shape. In similar terms, cited in Giddens (1991: 54), Charles Taylor argues that “[i]n order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going”. It is therefore important to incorporate both the “macro” and “micro” aspect when investigating the female characters` identity. Therefore, the present study will make use of the social framework that surrounds the female characters, in order to provide a more genuine result.

2.2 Sex and Gender

The terms *sex* and *gender* provide the basic framework for much feminist theory and are often seen as ways of describing the differences between women and men. The two terms seem to be forever changing, always on the move and often producing new inflections of meaning (Glover & Kaplan, 2009: 1). Toril Moi notes that since the 1960s, English-speaking feminists have distinguished between *sex* as a biological and *gender* as a social or cultural category (Moi, 1999: 2). According to the World Health Organization, “female” and “male” are sex categories, while “feminine” and “masculine” are gender categories (WHO, 2015). Aspects of gender do vary greatly between different human societies, while aspects of sex do not. These two terms are often used interchangeably, but many scholars argue that the usage is quite

distinct. The American Psychological Association (2011) states that “sex refers to a person’s biological status and is typically categorized as male, female, or intersex”. *Gender*, on the other hand, refers to the attitudes, feelings and behaviors that a particular society associates with a person’s biological sex. Gender plays an important part in the life of all human beings, from the moment one is born. From that moment, one is provided with either a pink or a blue blanket, depending on the gender. In many ways, we are sent forward on a path that will turn us into what our culture and society considers proper men or women.

2.2.1 Trouble with Gender

Butler proposes that how we think and talk about gender and sex, tend to “presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture” (Butler, 2002: 13). She argues that “our bodies are clothed and even altered in line” (Lodge & Wood, 1988: 607) with the expectations we meet in the daily life, or as Gauntlett states, “constrained by existing discourses” (Gauntlett, 2008: 150). While some believe that gender is fixed and permanent, installed by culture, Butler prefers “those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts” (Butler, 2002: 15). In other words, gender should be seen as fluid rather than fixed, something that can change in different contexts. According to Gauntlett, “[g]ender, then, is a *performance* – and nothing more” (Gauntlett, 2008: 150). Butler asserts that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 2002: 33). Consequently, we do not have a gender identity that informs our identity, “on the contrary, that behaviour is all that our gender is” (Gauntlett, 2008: 150).

Gender, then, is what human beings do at particular times. Individuals can become familiar with different identity patterns, but they are not fixed or predetermined (Gauntlett, 2008: 151). In similar terms to Butler’s gender theory, Gauntlett claims that gender is a performance, “something which is learned and policed, and which has to be constantly worked on and monitored (2008: 104). Comparable to both Gauntlett and Butler, Giddens argues that “[n]othing is clearer than that gender is a matter of learning and continuous ‘work’, rather than a simple extension of biologically given sexual differences” (Giddens, 1991: 63).

In an introductory note to Judith Butler’s “Critically Queer” in *Modern Criticism and Theory* (1988) David Lodge and Nigel Wood further elaborate on Butler and her theory that

deals with gender and performance. They proposes that “gender might be the site of `performance` both in the sense of acting the part and also how through `performative acts` we actually become the gender we impersonate, to the point where there is little conscious distinction left between the act and deeper impulses” (Lodge & Wood, 1988: 607-608). Therefore, repetition creates an object, as we find the need to conform socially. In *Bodies That Matters* (1993), Butler confirms that

[p]erformativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that “performance” is not singular “act” or event, but a ritualized production.

(Butler, 1993: 95)

Thus, Butler claims that “the quest should be for how `performance` might open and split accepted gender division” (Lodge & Wood, 1988: 608). She emphasizes, much like Giddens, that gender and the individual cannot be studied outside the social context and that identity is brought to life through discourse.

Furthermore, Butler argues that femininity is not a choice, “but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline regulation punishment” (Butler, 1993: 232). Women do not consciously make the decision to be “feminine”, as the path towards being culturally accepted women is in some sense already set for them:

To enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification is not a choice, for the “I” that might enter is always already inside: there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have. The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.

(Butler, 2002: 189)

This seems to be Butler’s main project, as she stresses that identity is not fixed. If we give a different shape to our daily performance of identity, we can, in result, change the gender norms and its split understanding of femininity and masculinity. In other words, the current understanding of gender is indeed possible to challenge and subvert “through alternative performance of identity” (Gauntlett, 2008: 153).

In similar terms, Simone de Beauvoir claims, “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Reid, 2008: xvi). She distinguishes sex from gender, and suggests that gender is an

aspect of identity gradually acquired. The concept of “woman”, then, is not a product of biology, but a social construction. She stresses that how we understand our bodies as male or female, is in fact shaped by our cultural and social context. De Beauvoir also describes women’s subordination in terms of how they in history have been viewed as “the other”. Women are always defined in relation to something else, that is, as what men are not (Beauvoir, 2015: 9). According to Peach, for de Beauvoir, an essential characteristic of being a woman is considering oneself to be Other to men (Peach, 1998: 20). In the sense that “gender” is a cultural construct, we can say that it is also highly ideological. But what, really, is ideology?

2.3 Ideologies

The question “how shall I live?” is never asked in a vacuum, it is always asked in a context and it is this context we frequently refer to as ideology. *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines ideology as “the set of ideas and beliefs of a group or a political party”. This definition is, however, too limited and general for our purpose. According to Terry Eagleton in *Ideology* (1991), there is no single adequate definition of ideology, but the term has a whole range of useful meanings. Eagleton lists definitions of ideology that are currently in circulation, such as e.g. “a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class”, “ideas which help to legitimate a dominant power” and “identity thinking” (Eagleton, 2007: 1). He stresses that these points may not be compatible with one another, that they might be both pejorative and ambiguously. However, ideology does not only make reference to belief systems, but also to question of *power* (2007: 5). Ideology is very often referred to “the ways in which signs, meanings and values help to reproduce a dominant social power” (2007: 221). Ideology, then, has to do with how a dominant group or class legitimates its own place and power, a definition that is useful for this thesis and its purpose.

Language can reinforce, reproduce and challenge ideology. Norman Fairclough proposes in *Language and Power* (1989) that “ideologies are closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behavior” (Fairclough, 2001: 2). Language, then, helps maintain and reproduce the social power that dominates a society. Authors, and perhaps especially female writers, have through history used writing and language as a tool both to uphold and to break free from ideology. Ideology also uses language to keep captive and Bennett and Royle argue that literary texts do not offer an

escape from ideology. However, it can be a place where “the structures and fractures of it are both produced and reproduced” (Bennett & Royle, 2009: 206). Literary texts are sites of “conflict and difference, places where values and preconceptions, beliefs and prejudices, knowledge and social structures are represented and, in the process, opened to transformation” (ibid). Therefore, writing has been used in order to make sense of one's own reality and, in result, a place where writers produce identity. Even though the present study's main focus is not on the female authors, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge their place in the analysis. They have all felt the need to produce writing in order to “survive” in their social context. Consequently, they have challenged the dominant ideology and the concept of “woman” during their time.

In all three books, the female characters demonstrate a feeling of anxiety towards their contemporary environment, in terms of how they are supposed to act, live and behave. Giddens suggests that “anxiety is a generalized state of the emotions of the individual” (Giddens, 1991: 43). Anxiety occurs when a person is not able or prevented to carry out the behavior in question. When individuals are not able to live up to the standards of a society or do not feel any feeling of accomplishment, there will occur anxiety (1991: 44). Individuals are dependent on a certain amount of validation and social accept in order to know they are behaving in a way that is accepted by society. Even though the dominant culture continues to stretch and grow, both individuals and groups can feel outside of the norm. The validation that people want can be hard to find, perhaps especially within one's self, but it is nevertheless important to one's own existence as an individual. To find validation and acceptance by a larger group, one has to feel validated in one's own choices. The female characters in the literary texts feel themselves to be on the outside of the society and its concept of “woman”. However, they all have a desire to be understood and validated as well.

Furthermore, in this context, it seems natural to clarify the term *patriarchy*. The three main literary texts studied in this thesis, all present female identity in societies that have been patriarchal to different degrees. Even though Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, Esther and Bridget derive from different societies, they all demonstrate a feeling of anxiety towards their social structure. *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines *patriarchy* as “a family, group, or government controlled by a man or a group of men”. R. J. Barry Jones in *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy: Entries P-Z* (2001) suggests that a *patriarchal* ideology or society is often defined in terms of gendered dichotomies. He claims that “[p]atriarchal thinking is based on socially constructed gendered dichotomies such as reason/emotion, culture/nature, independent/dependent and public/private” (Jones, 2001:

1198). The first terms in these pairs are often associated with men, while the latter with women. Consequently, women have been placed and assigned to reproductive and maintenance tasks in the private sphere, while men have their predominance in the public sphere.

Feminists believe that this distinction began in the seventeenth century, at the same time as the birth of modern states and capitalism. This marked a shift in the households, which were “legally headed by men”, and where “women became vulnerable and dependent on fathers and husbands” (Jones, 2001: 1198). Even though there have been a vast number of changes concerning the gender discussion since then, one might argue that socially constructed gendered dichotomies are still an inherent basis for the social structures that surround us today. Jones asserts that “revealing and critically analyzing patriarchy’s various manifestations can contribute to ending it” (2001: 1197). The next section will therefore discuss the role of patriarchy during the Victorian era, post-war America and the contemporary environment.

2.3.1 The Angel of the House: *To The Lighthouse*

In the Victorian period, which lasted from 1837 to 1901, the ideology was strictly patriarchal. During this era, the differences between men and women became rather obvious. The husband was the head of the household and the moral leader of the family. He was the protector and the guardian of the family members, and able to be a part of both spheres, namely the private and public. Men could work and make money, while women were often placed at home in the domestic sphere. According to Lynn Abrams in “Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain”, domesticity and motherhood “were considered by society at large to be a sufficient emotional fulfillment for females” (Abrams, 2001). These constructions of the ideal woman kept women away from the public sphere, which was viewed as unsuitable, both mentally and physically. The increasingly physical separation of the home and the workplace resulted in many women losing touch with production, and consequently, came to fashion an identity merely within the domestic sphere (ibid). Women were considered to be good and virtuous beings, but whose lives revolved entirely around their family. There was no place for women who did not want to fulfill these expectations and ideals.

Furthermore, the Victorian image of the ideal woman or wife came to be known as “the angel in the house”, possibly the most popular term used to describe women in this era.

According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), the concept originated from Coventry Patmore's poem from 1854, in which he sees his wife as an angel and a model for all women (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 65): "For she's so simply, subtly sweet, My deepest rapture does her wrong. Yet is it now my chosen task. To sing her worth as Maid and Wife; Nor happier post than this I ask, To live her laureate all my life".¹ According to Patmore's poem, women should obey and adore their husband. They are portrayed as passive, pure and unintellectual beings, whose lives only revolve around the domestic sphere and religion.

In 1931, Woolf referred to this poem during a lecture to the Women's Service League. In this lecture, called "Professions for Women", Woolf told her audience that "killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Woolf, 1974: 238). She further describes both the angel in the house and the Victorian woman in the following way:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draft she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel.

(Woolf, 1974: 237)

Women in the Victorian era integrated the angel as a part of their own identity, as it was so ingrained in the society. This echoes Butler's view on gender, as she proposes that gender is a performance, that is, an act that has been rehearsed, repeated and worked on. She describes performativity as "that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains (Butler, 1993: 2). Woolf wrote *To The Lighthouse* in 1927 and even though the Victorian era was over, she and other women were deeply influenced by the ideology and its concept of "woman". The society's ideals and attitudes were not easy to dismiss or reject, as they were so deeply rooted in the British society. Butler asserts that gender is performed without one knowing it, that the acts does not originate from one's personhood, but rather, from social norms. Thus, at the same time as women acted as the angel, they were also upholding the dominant ideology.

¹ <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4099/4099-h/4099-h.htm>

According to Nicola Bradbury in her introduction (1994) to *To The Lighthouse*, the novel signals modernism in its shift from family as a subject, “towards a concern so unprecedented that it has no name” (Bradbury, 1994: vi). The concern is similar to what they experienced in the 1950s, named by Friedan as “the problem that has no name”. It was a problem that no women talked about, but suffered with alone. Women in the Victorian era also experienced similar kinds of anxieties, as they felt like they did not fit into the categories made available to them by the ideology, that is the category of the angel. Gilbert and Gubar claim that the Victorian woman felt as she was caught and trapped inside a mirror, that she was “driven inward, obsessively studying self-images as if seeking a viable self” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 24). She was described as childlike and submissive, a heroine of a life that has no story. As the angel, women became an object, only there to be displayed and desired. In *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf challenges the role of the Victorian woman. Her ideas of women, their role and identity become obvious in the text. Woolf employs her female characters to shed light on women’s reality during early 20th century. This was a time when women tried to get out of the Victorian ideals, but did not get the support from society that they needed.

2.3.2 The Feminine Mystique: *The Bell Jar*

The second text the thesis is going to study is *The Bell Jar* (1963), which asks many of the same questions that we find in *To The Lighthouse*, but in a different context and from a different perspective. Like Woolf’s England of the 1920s, the society that Sylvia Plath grew up in was also strongly patriarchal. While women gained more rights as a result of the first wave of feminism, the post-war America represented a change in the concept of “woman” as many returned to the domestic sphere.

As a consequence of the participation in WWII, the gender roles changed once again. As the men went to war, women filled in the production and wage earning gaps, as it was seen as a national necessity and duty. According to Kimberly Radek in her article “Women in the Twentieth Century”, media worked to convince women that they could keep their femininity and still hold men’s jobs. By the end of the 40s, however, the war ended and the soldiers wanted their jobs back. Three million American and one million British women were fired or quit their jobs, and consequently, became resentful. Women had found a degree of self-definition they had not previously known (Radek, 2001), and now they were once again to fashion an identity solely within the domestic sphere.

Naomi Wolf emphasizes the magazines' role in terms of developing the concept of "woman". In *The Beauty Myth* (1991), she notes that after the war had ended, the magazines swung again. They moved their focus back to domesticity, as a result of the shift from public to private sphere. Wolf argues that even [t]hough many writers have pointed out that women's magazines reflect historical change, fewer examine how part of their job is to determine historical change as well" (Wolf, 2015: 64). Women's magazines have served as one of the most powerful agents for changing women's role. They are always aware of what social roles are demanded of women, in order to serve the interest of those who sponsor their publication. Wolf stresses that magazines over and over again "glamorized whatever the economy, their advertisers, and, during wartime, the government, needed at that moment from women" (ibid). By time the war ended, the traditional women's magazine's role was once again reestablished.

America in the 1950s was a great era of consumerism. Items were marketed towards women and the idea of providing them with more time and freedom. Items, such as e.g. vacuum cleaners, toasters and washing machines, would satisfy their needs and help them become more efficient as a domestic manager. While men earned the money, women stayed home and worked to create a "haven" for their family (Radek, 2001). In this ideological setting, young girls and women were taught to be ideal housewives. The maintenance of the house and the care of the family were women's main priorities. "Have dinner ready, prepare yourself, prepare the children, minimize all noise, be happy to see him, listen to him, make the evening his" is what young girls and women were taught in schools in the 1950s (Mikkelsen, 2015). The days consisted of preparing meals, taking care of both house and children, helping with homework, being the ideal wife, doing the dishes and the laundry, at the same time while remaining elegant.

According to Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the American housewife was thoroughly described in the media. The image involved women who were depicted as "healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home" (Friedan, 2010: 7). Friedan questions why women decided to go back home, when not long ago they fought for their own place in the world (2010: 24). Gradually, housewives all over America had a growing feeling, but unable to describe it: "Is this all?" (2010: 51). Friedan wrote her book in order to give an account of how the female role had developed during the 50s and 60s, with a focus on American women and their everyday lives:

The problem was dismissed by telling the housewife that she doesn't realize how lucky she is – her own boss, no time clock, no junior executive gunning for her job. What if she isn't happy – does she think men are happy in this world? Does she really, secretly, still want to be a man? Doesn't she know yet how lucky she is to be a woman?

(Friedan, 2010: 13)

The society did not recognize the growing feeling of anxiety that American women had, as they were convinced that women had all that they could ask for and nothing to complain about. However, women still felt an urge for something more, but when they tried to take the step outside of the home sphere, they also had to approach the question of identity. When women worked during WWII, they suddenly had the chance to develop their self-identity in other terms than previously known. As they were forced back to the domestic sphere, they were once again depended on the ideological messages conveyed by e.g. cookbooks, television and magazines. They presented images of happy housewives in kitchens, which in result made women believe that this was reality.

Much like women in the Victorian era, women in the 1950s America internalized the womanhood presented to them through different mediums. Ann Oakley, cited in Naomi Wolf (2015: 64), writes in *Housewife*: “In psychological terms, [...] they enabled the harassed mother, the overburdened housewife, to make contact with her ideal self: that self which aspires to be a good wife, a good mother, and an efficient homemaker [...] Women's expected role in society [was] to strive after perfection in all three roles.” Women were handed a womanhood, which was said to fulfill them. However, this was for many, not the case. *The Bell Jar* addresses many of these issues and perhaps especially the question of self-identity. This text can be considered “a statement of what happens to a woman's hopes and ambitions in a society that has no interest in taking female ideas and aspirations seriously” (Höhn, 2007: 34). Plath's project is to unpack Esther's concept of “me” in order to see how it evolves in relation to the social convention in the 1950s America. Much like the Victorian era, this was a time when women tried to get out of these stereotypical ideals, but did not get the support from society that they needed.

2.3.3 The Myth of Self-Perfection: *Bridget Jones's Diary*

The third text that the thesis deals with dates from a period that came after the third wave of feminism, when patriarchy was weakened or, at least, took on more subtle forms. In this period, Helen Fielding wrote and published *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996). Even though

women had much better conditions regarding education, work and legal rights compared to the previous periods, there were still many aspects of the gender role discussion that needed to be improved.

According to Radek, the third wave of feminism began in the mid-1990s and has been characterized by great changes in gender definition (Radek, 2001). In this phase, feminists tried to confront what they perceived as a universal womanhood, that is, a universal female identity. Concepts that the first two movements identified with male oppression, such as body, gender and sexuality, were further confronted and discussed. According to Martha Rampton in her article “Three Waves of Feminism”, women of this phase “stepped onto the stage as strong and empowered”, and tried to avoid the role of victims by defining feminine beauty for themselves in order to become subjects, rather than objects of a sexist patriarchy (Rampton, 2008). Furthermore, much like in the previous periods, the mass media has been an important source of influence to the contemporary image of “woman”. Media, such as magazines, newspaper and television, has played a vast role in all periods, but in the contemporary environment the Internet has also opened up a new world (ibid).

Sonia Pressman Fuentes claims that women have come a long way, but there are still challenges that need to be confronted in the contemporary environment. In her article “Top 18 Issues Challenging Women Today”, she stresses that “[m]any people think that women [...] have achieved all their goals- but that is very far from the truth” (Fuentes, 2014). Fuentes discusses eighteen challenges women have to overcome today, such as e.g. the continuing gender wage gap, the severe continued under-representation of women in political life and discrimination in Academia. She confirms the latter by stating that “recent statistics show that only 26 percent of college presidents are women despite the fact that more than 57 percent of the college and university student population is female” (ibid). Moreover, Fuentes acknowledges that women have come a long way in the last fifty years, but that they still have a very long way to go as many problems still remain. She confirms this by quoting an old African American slave preacher: “Lord, we ain’t what we want to be. We ain’t what we ought to be. We ain’t what we gonna be. But, thank God, we ain’t what we was” (ibid).

In similar terms, Naomi Wolf also acknowledges that some of the problematic aspects from the past are still evident in the contemporary society. In *The Beauty Myth*, she states that many women in the 1960s released themselves from the domestic sphere and the roles as mothers and wives. Consequently, something else had to gain control over them. The beauty myth was born after the second wave of feminism, when women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity. Wolf asserts that the myth emerged because there was a

need for an ideology that made women feel less worth, “to counteract the way feminism had begun to make us feel worth more” (2015: 18). Women in all ages told her about their fear of not conforming to the standards. The ideal was to be tall, thin, white and blonde, “a face without pores, asymmetry, or flaws, someone wholly “perfect,” and someone whom they felt, in one way or another, they were not” (Wolf, 2015: 1).

All periods in this thesis have had to fight its version of the beauty myth. While the demands of becoming a socially accepted woman have been different in the various periods, it is nevertheless a demand that has tried to internalize something that is perhaps not a part of women’s identity. They all had to deal with different ideals of beauty, as this is not only a curse of *our* time. According to Wolf, the myth of today is one of the last successful systems in place to keep male dominance (Wolf, 2015: 10). Kelly Marsh, in her article “Contextualizing Bridget Jones”, recognizes this myth as the myth of self-perfection. She asserts that it is a myth that conveys a message to women that they can completely remake themselves, in order to become a socially accepted woman (Marsh, 2004). Like many ideologies of femininity, the myth “mutates to meet new circumstances and checkmates women’s attempts to increase their power” (Wolf, 2015: 7). Wolf further elaborates: “More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves *physically*, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers” (2015: 10). Women in the contemporary environment suffer with much of the same issues as women in the two previous periods. They too struggle to meet the demands of the ideals presented to them, which is being tall, thin, white and blonde. Obviously, many women do not fit into these categories and the ideals are always something they are not.

Similarly to the female characters, Caitlin Moran in *How to Be a Woman* (2011) wants to know how to be a socially accepted woman and does whatever it takes. Moran is a British feminist, who is known for writing columns in *The Times* and more recently for her books *How To Be a Woman* (2011) and *Moranthology* (2012). She employs humor as a technique in order to question the social forces that help shape the ideals and images that surround women today. Moran deals with what Marsh refers to as the myth of self-perfection, and tries to remake herself in order to “fit in” and become accepted. She analyses her own life experiences in retrospect in order to understand herself as a woman. Moran deals with issues such as abortion, marriage and children, to provide a genuine picture of how it is to be a woman today. These are issues that all the female characters have dealt with, not only Bridget. Moran’s main purpose in life is to figure out how to become what she thinks is a

complete woman. Much like Lily, Esther and Bridget, she gradually realizes that there is a gap between who she thinks she is and how she should be: “[o]h God. I just don’t have a clue. I don’t have a clue how I will ever be a woman” (Moran, 2012: 8). She comes to this realization at the age of thirteen, and through her life experiences acknowledges that she just wants to be “one of the guys” (2012: 309). She gradually turns away from what Butler referred to as gender performance, as she argues that being what the society want, is not what *she* wants.

Moran also advocates the need for feminism in the contemporary environment, and her mission is to “reclaim the word `feminism`” (Moran, 2012: 80). She furthermore refers to a survey that found that only 29 percent of American women and only 42 per cent of British women would describe themselves feminists: “Do you have a vagina?” and “Do you want to be in charge of it?” If you said yes to both, Congratulations! You’re a feminist” (2012: 79-80). She further addresses the respondents:

What do you think feminism IS, ladies? What part of “liberation for women” is not for you? Is it freedom to vote? The right not to be owned by the man you marry? The campaign for equal pay? “Vogue,” by Madonna? Jeans? Did all that good shit GET ON YOUR NERVES? Or were you just DRUNK AT THE TIME OF SURVEY?

(Moran, 2012: 80)

Moran, just like Wolf and Fuentes, acknowledges that the 21th century is a good time for women. The different waves of feminism have granted women a vast number of opportunities and rights, within e.g. education and work force. However, feminism still has value because women in the contemporary still encounter patriarchy, which is not dealt with by women unless “they are very, very, very drunk” (2012: 11). The next part of the thesis will seek to investigate the concept of “woman” in three different societies. Similar to Moran, the female characters have felt a conflict in relation to their identity, a gap between who they are and what they are offered by ideology. They all try to deconstruct what it means to be a woman, namely what it means to be “me”. Therefore, the thesis will explore if the female characters are embodying and reinforcing the dominant ideology, or if they are challenging it.

3 Virginia Woolf: *To The Lighthouse*

“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will”

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (2001: 216).

3.1 The Victorian Era

3.1.1 The Separate Spheres

The Victorian era (1837-1901) is often characterized as the domestic age. According Abrams, Queen Victoria came to represent a femininity that revolved entirely around the family and motherhood. She was seen as a model of marital stability and domestic virtue. During this era, the public and the private sphere were defined by its ideas of gender. The lives of many women in Britain revolved entirely around motherhood, home and family. The ideology regarded the house as a haven, a private domain where women had the main responsibility, in contrast to the public sphere, where men worked and earned money (Abrams, 2001). Queen Victoria had what we today would term a rather strict anti-feminist idea of what women`s lives should contain, and stated: “Let women be what God intended, a helpmate for a man – but with totally different duties and vocations”.²

According to Richard Altick in *Victorian People and Ideas* (1973), women`s role started to change as a result of the nation`s growing wealth and economy. In the seventeenth century women managed their family`s household and estate, and in the eighteenth, there had been a vast number of middle-class businesswomen who were engaged in a variety of occupations. However, it grew a notion that one had to possess a peculiarly masculine gift, and therefore, this had to be handled by men. Gradually, women were deprived of all responsibility outside the home (Altick, 1973: 50-51). Even though many women wanted to step outside the home, it was made impossible due to two reigning assumptions: “the female

² <http://feminisminthe20thcentury.weebly.com/women-in-the-world-wars.html>

brain was not equal to the demands of commerce or the professions, and women, simply by virtue of their sex, had no business mingling with men in a man`s world” (1973: 54).

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, women outside the working class abstained from employment, except in cases of extreme necessity. The way of life led by these women included activities like

[...] needlework, making boxes from shells collected at the seaside, sketching and watercolor painting, flower arrangement, strumming at the piano or harp. Their only faintly constructive deeds, apart from supervising the household staff, involved charity- taking blankets and basins of soup to the unfortunates on the estate, visiting the local school the family supported.

(Altick, 1973: 52)

The society was governed by the idea of utility as the supreme value, but the upper-class women “made uselessness the test of almost any activity” (1973: 51). Altick argues that women may or may not have wanted to occupy their time so flabbily, but they had no choice. Their place was in the home and not in the world affairs. Furthermore, many women were for a long time angels in the house, a term coined by Coventry Patmore. “The Angel in the House” was a popular “praise of domestic sainthood and the mystical, non-fleshly institution of marriage” (1973: 53), and long after the end of Queen Victoria`s rule, the vast majority wanted to maintain the image of women as the angel. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Jane Austen explains these expectations towards the Victorian angel:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half- deserved.

(Austen, 2006: 35)

According to Kathryn Hughes in her article “Gender roles in the 19th century”, women had to require a new kind of education in order to prepare them for the role of the angel. It was important that women acted in a certain way, all with a graceful, feminine and respectful manner. Women did not want to be considered unfeminine and were therefore quite engaged in becoming what the Victorian society idealized (Hughes, 2014).

3.1.2 Books and Magazines

During the 19th century, handbooks and etiquette manuals provided women with advice on how to be good housewives and mothers. Several publications of books and magazines told women how to act and behave, in order to be what the Victorian society idealized. They urged young girls to “submissiveness, modesty, selflessness; reminding all women that they should be angelic” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 23). The authors of these conduct books stated that “there are rules for all our actions, even down to sleeping with a good grace” (ibid).

According to these books, a woman should be

[...] the least engaged of any member of the household, a woman of right feeling should devote herself to the good of others. And she should do this silently, without calling attention to her exertions because all that would tend to draw away her thoughts from others and fix them on herself, ought to be avoided as an evil to her.

(Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 24)

These manuals were very detailed and gave exact information on for instance “the way cards were to be left, the official timetable for visiting [and] the duration and content for calls” (Langland 1995: 293-294). *Mrs. Beeton`s Book of Household Management* was published in 1861 and became a bestseller for nearly fifty years. It included advice on how to be a perfect wife and how to create a perfect, cosy and welcoming home for the man of the house (1995: 293). *The Christian Miscellany and Family Visitor* (1890), cited in Abrams (2001), wrote in its “Hints for Home Life” column:

She [the housewife] is the architect of home, and it depends on her skill, her foresight, her soft arranging touches whether it shall be the “lodestar to all hearts”, or whether it shall be a house from which husband and children are glad to escape either to the street, the theatre, or the tavern.

(Abrams, 2001)

The lack of individualism made the domestic sphere the only refuge for women. However, even though they had the main responsibility of this sphere, they were not entirely free inside the home either. The etiquette manuals and magazines helped shape a collective identity that prevented women from being free. There were so many rules involved in the role of the “domestic manager” that they did not have any sanctuary.

3.1.3 Education, Marriage and Motherhood

According to Altick, strong-willed women who wanted to use their minds were considered unpleasant and even alarming by the Victorian society (Altick, 1973: 54). Hughes states that women, who had devoted themselves too enthusiastically to intellectual pursuits, were called “blue stocking”. Some doctors even reported that too much study actually had a damaging effect on the ovaries. Later in the 19th century, when Oxford and Cambridge opened their doors to women, many families refused to let their daughters attend, as they would make themselves unmarriageable. Therefore, the education that these girls received was devoid of intellectual content and challenge. Women learned at a young age that they were to get married and have children, and were taught to pity childless, unmarried women. Marriage was to many women the major goal, and staying single meant that they would lose their social position. Women were to desire marriage because it allowed them to “become mothers rather than to pursue sexual or emotional satisfaction” (Hughes, 2014).

A great proportion of girls’ education included domestic duties such as sewing and preparing for marriage. Girls did not have many choices available when it came to employment, which meant that marriage was one of the few options they had to have a respectable life. The education they received was limited to helping them to get a husband and then, after the primary goal was reached, to provide a perfect home and “to maintain its separation from the gritty worlds of affairs” (Altick, 1973: 54). According to Thomas Henry Huxley, cited in Altick (1973: 54-55), girls were educated “to be either drudges or toys beneath man, or a sort of angel above him” with few privileges and little freedom. A woman’s role in her marriage was to love, honor and obey her husband, something that their marriage vows specifically stated. Women were not unimportant, but secondary to their husbands. When a woman got married, her identity ceased to exist, and in some sense, she and her husband became one person.

The role of the mother had since early 19th century been idealized. According to Abrams, motherhood was the heart of the domestic ideal and the main goal of marriage. It was no longer a reproduction function, but gave a picture of one’s status. She further explains that “[d]omesticity and motherhood were portrayed as sufficient emotional fulfillment for women and many middle-class women regarded motherhood and domestic life as a ‘sweet vocation’, a substitute for women’s productive role” (Abrams, 2001). As stated before, women who did not have children became figures to be pitied, and regarded as abnormal and a failure. Middle-class women spent a lot more time with their children than their

predecessors. A common belief was that women would achieve true womanhood if they responded emotionally and bonded with their infants through breast-feeding and constant presence. Motherhood became a vast part of their identity and it was seen as an affirmation of it. Marriage would signify maturity and respectability, but motherhood was the main goal, as women then had entered the world of womanly virtue and female fulfillment (ibid).

3.2 The Emergence of The New Woman

It is important to remember that this is not a complete account of how women lived during the 19th century. Many women lived a different life, which not only revolved around the household, motherhood and marriage. A lot depended on their class and social status. Working class women did not have any choice but to work and therefore they became part of both spheres. They worked by their husbands' sides in the shops and factories (Altick, 1973: 56-57), as life was very different in this class, compared to middle- and upper class.

3.2.1 The New Woman: Fiction and Suffrage

In the late Victorian period, women started to become more independent. They began to include themselves in the public sphere and fought for the right to e.g. vote and get divorced.³ At the end of the 19th century, the New Woman became a familiar figure in social commentary, papers and in fiction (Altick, 1973: 59). According to Lyn Pykett in *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (1992), these were novels "by a woman about women from the standpoint of Woman (Pykett, 2003: 5). The new "genre" often expressed dissatisfaction with the treatment of women in the Victorian society. It also represented and presented new female heroines who fought against the traditional Victorian perceptive of women, namely the angel. Lyn Pykett furthermore states that

The New Woman novels [...] were much more directly linked to contemporary controversies surrounding the Woman Question, and to the various discourses within which they were produced and mediated. Many of the New Woman novelists were also prominent contributors to the debates on 'woman' in the newspaper and periodical press, and the New Woman fiction

³ <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/thevote/>

was sometimes reviewed alongside sociological and other polemical works, as if it were part of a seamless discourse on the Woman Question

(Pykett, 2003: 7)

The New Woman became a significant cultural icon, which tried to move away from the stereotypical Victorian woman. In contrast to the Victorian angel, the New Woman was intelligent and educated, in addition to independent and self-supporting. It was a feminist ideal that emerged in line with the increasing wish for gender equality. The term was used to describe women who were fighting for change, and pushing against the limits which society imposed on women. In her book *Woman in Modern Drama*, Gail Finney describes the new female ideal:

The New Woman typically values self-fulfillment and independence rather than the stereotypically feminine ideal of self-sacrifice; believes in legal and sexual equality; often remains single because of the difficulty of combining such equality with marriage; is more open about her sexuality than the 'Old Woman'; is well-educated and reads a great deal; has a job; is athletic or otherwise physically vigorous and, accordingly, prefers comfortable clothes (sometimes male attire) to traditional female garb.

(Finney, 2003: 95-96)

The New Woman wanted equal moral standards and equal rights. She wanted to dress differently and most importantly, making her own respectable living in whatever occupation she wished for (Altick, 1973: 59).

According to *BBC* in an article called "Women's suffrage movement", women had no place in the national politics during the Victorian era. They were not allowed to vote, since their husband would take responsibility in political matters. As stated before, a woman's role was to be child rearing and taking care of the home. However, in 1866, organized campaigns for women's suffrage started to appear, and from 1888, women could vote in many local council elections. Feminists in the 19th century talked about what they called "The Cause", and by the end of the century the issue of the vote became the main focus of women's struggle for equality.⁴ However, it took almost 30 years from that point before women would get the right to vote. It was not until the "Equal Franchise Act" was passed in 1928, that women had won the same voting acts as men.⁵

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/higher/history/britsuff/suffrage/revision/1/>

⁵ <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/campaign/>

3.3 Virginia Woolf: The Victorian Daughter

Virginia Woolf was born during the last decade of this era into a privileged home. Her parents were Leslie Stephen (1832-1904) and Julia Duckworth Stephen (1846-1895), and she grew up with four siblings in addition to children from her parents' previous marriages. Woolf's own thoughts about her family are described in "Sketch of the Past" (1939): "born into a large connection, born not of rich parents but of well-to-do parents, born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth century world" (Virginia Woolf cited in Harris, 2011: 11). Stephen was an historian and an author and considered a prominent figure in the Victorian era. While his wife was out doing rounds of visiting, Stephen was in his study at the top of the house. This was where he wrote the books that made him into "a major figure of nineteenth-century culture" (2011: 16). Because of his connections to several known authors, his children were raised in an environment filled with the influences of the Victorian literary society. Virginia's mother, Julia Stephen, was equally well connected, both socially and artistically. She was born in India and had later served as a model and muse of Pre-Raphaelite painters (2011: 14). Stephen was a hard-working woman with a large family to look after. She cared about anyone who needed it, whether rich or poor, relative or stranger (ibid).

In addition to these influences, was the enormous library at Stephen's house, from which Woolf and her sister Vanessa were taught the classics and English literature. They were educated at home, while their brothers were sent to school at Cambridge, a difference Woolf resented (Harris, 2011: 18-19). She started to enjoy writing at an early stage and when she was ten, Woolf and her siblings delivered to their parents "newspaper records the competitive, industrious life of the Stephen children" (2011: 18). In the years following her father's death, Woolf became a part of the intellectual circle known as the "Bloomsbury Group" (2011: 39). It was in this group she met her future husband, Leonard Woolf (2011: 47). As Woolf was born into a well-off upper-middle-class family and later became a member of the exclusive Bloomsbury group, she could easily become snobbish and high-handed. However, she taught courses for working class men and women, opened her house for political meetings and cared about the lives of "common people" (Eagleton, 2009: 308). Woolf published her first novel *The Voyage Out* in 1915 and in 1927 she published *To The Lighthouse*, a book "about inheritance, asking how much is set down from the start and how far we are free to invent ourselves" (Harris, 2011: 103).

Some of the themes that Woolf deals with symbolically in *To The Lighthouse* are also dealt with explicitly in many of her essays. She comments on some of these issues, such as the ideals faced by a Victorian woman. She wrote feminist texts about education, employment and the female identity. Woolf rebelled against the patriarchal society and did it symbolically through her texts. Even though Woolf grew up according to these Victorian values, her own ideals were quite different. When investigating her feminist texts, her attitude towards the Victorian era and her family is perceived as of resistance and anger.

In “Professions for Women”, an essay published in the collection *The Death of the Moth*, she explicitly states that: “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (Woolf, 1974: 238). For Woolf, the repressive ideal of the Victorian angel was very potent. She distinguishes her role clearly from the male writer and goes on by saying that she “heard the rustling of her skirts in the room” (1974: 237). Woolf is implying that society’s expectations were quite different for women than for men as male writers could write more or less without any hindrances. In the same essay, Woolf further explains these expectations towards women: “Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure” (ibid). Woolf wanted to break free from these expectations and limitations. Her ideas about the concept of “woman” become very clear in these texts. She was not only trying to redefine the gender roles, but she also raised her own voice, namely a female one, in order to free herself and her mind. By putting these thoughts and attitudes down in writing, Woolf was challenging the patriarchy of the Victorian era.

Woolf did not like the word “feminist”, “but wrote one of the most magnificent essays on women in the twentieth century” (Eagleton, 2009: 308). In her perhaps biggest contribution to feminist writing, “A Room of One’s Own” (1929), Woolf argues that every woman needs a room of her own, in order to produce writing. The essay explores the history of women in literature and Woolf argues that the playing field is not fair. Because of the treatment of women and the expectations during the Victorian era, it was not possible that they could have exceeded men in literary achievements, or in anything else. Woolf cites Sir Egerton Brydges who claimed that “female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex” (Woolf, 2012: 92). Woolf explains that this was *not* written in 1828, but in 1928. Even though she admits that these attitudes towards female writers and women in general were more prominent in the 19th century, Woolf points out that this still represents a vast body of opinion (ibid).

In *Three Guineas* (1938) her ideas about equality, women’s rights and their position in

society are reinforced. She discusses a variety of topics, which are divided into three parts: education, professions and the rights of the New Woman. Woolf states that there is no reason why women have become oppressed and further claims that it is the Victorian ideology that has created this role: “When we meet in the flesh we speak with the same accent; use knives and forks in the same way” (Woolf, 1963: 4). She is also criticizing the problems that derived from the class system. The middle- and upper class was a huge part of the creation of the Victorian Angel. They held so strongly on to it for many years and therefore maintained the gender inequality. Woolf knew that in order for the New Woman to emerge, these Victorian ideals and values had to be destroyed.

3.4 Female Identity in *To The Lighthouse*

3.4.1 Mrs. Ramsay: The Victorian Angel

In *To The Lighthouse* Woolf narrates a story about two women, namely Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, who both have trouble finding their place in a society where there were explicit categories made available for women. In the text, Woolf juxtaposes the two voices of the Victorian Woman and the New Woman. The text demonstrates the redefinition of the concept of “woman” in a time when the role was changing. Through the stream-of-consciousness literary technique that Woolf employs, the reader centers on the Ramsays and especially Mrs. Ramsay. She is the heart of *To The Lighthouse* as she represents the traditional Victorian woman who devotes her life to eight children and her husband. Julia Briggs in *Reading Virginia Woolf* (2006), describes her as “a eternal mother, pink-lined, birth-giving – with fragility and, ultimately, emptiness” (Briggs, 2006: 147). Mrs. Ramsay is an image of the Victorian angel, a woman of great tolerance, kindness and purity, portrayed as a selfless and a loving mother (Woolf, 1994: 4).

Mrs. Ramsay serves in many ways as an image of Julia Stephen, and the character creates an atmosphere and a center of gravity in *To The Lighthouse*. According to Harris, Woolf acknowledged that the novel “was a lying to rest of ghosts from her family past” (Harris, 2011: 91): “I wrote the book very quickly and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her”. Woolf’s sister, Vanessa Bell also referred to Mrs. Ramsay as a portrait of their mother: “Anyhow it seemed to me [...] you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever

have conceived of as possible” (Bell, 1976: 128). Julia Stephen was always busy, which made Woolf aware of her more as a “general presence” than a “particular person”. This was a presence Woolf would feel for the rest of her life, as she kept trying to understand who this “powerful, complicated woman was” (Harris, 2011: 14).

In the beginning of the novel, Lily is trying to paint Mrs. Ramsay, but even though she is meant to be sitting for her portrait, “she moves head to tend to her son and her visitors” (Harris, 2011: 16). The task of painting Mrs. Ramsay turns out to be rather difficult. One might argue that it serves as an image and preview of how complex the character of Mrs. Ramsay really is. She is idealized and mythologized by others in the text, but is by no means uncriticized. In contrast with her author, “she believes firmly in the traditional roles of wife and mother”, and Eagleton describes her as “meddlesome, uninformed and emotionally inhibited” (Eagleton, 2009: 326). As she might be perceived as an image of the traditional Victorian woman, one can argue that her identity turns out to be much more complex.

3.4.2 Beauty

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf states that the quality we call beauty is not “universal or changeless”, and that the ideal change “at a pace more rapid than that of the evolution of species (Wolf, 2015: 12). The notion of beauty is also evident in *To The Lighthouse*, and is presented through art and the female characters. The novel presents a traditional ideal of feminine beauty through Mrs. Ramsay, that is, how the Victorian society mediated how women were supposed to behave and look. According to Eagleton, it is Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty that makes people obey her, while Mr. Ramsay is the image of the “hollowness of the patriarchal law” (Eagleton, 2009: 326). Lily Briscoe, the New Woman, serves as Mrs. Ramsay’s opposite. She is a young, single painter, passionate about her work. The notion of beauty is presented through the first pages of the novel as Mrs. Ramsay comments on Lily’s appearance, stating that she does not hold the Victorian ideal of beauty: “With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry” (Woolf, 1994: 13). The idea of beauty has an effect throughout the novel, as Mrs. Ramsay indicates that in order to become a complete and socially accepted woman, Lily has to be the ideal beauty in terms of what the Victorian society idealized.

Lily, on the other hand, captures what she sees around her in paintings, rather than words. In fact, the portrait plays an important part in understanding both Lily and Mrs. Ramsay. They both represent beauty in different ways. Where Lily’s beauty lies in her

artwork, and thus, in her independence, Mrs. Ramsay presents the stereotypical, ideal beauty. However, they both desire each other for this exact beauty. One might argue that Woolf is deconstructing the feminine ideal of beauty through Lily. It can be read as a criticism towards the Victorian ideology, which in some sense forced women into internalizing the ideal of beauty. Women were taught to define themselves only in terms of their ability to behave and look in a certain way. Even though it is Mr. Ramsay who serves as the image of the “hollowness of the patriarchal law”, Mrs. Ramsay also plays a part in upholding the implicit rules of the society concerning beauty. She has strong beliefs and attitudes when it comes to appearance, but does not seem to be aware of them, as they are so deeply ingrained.

3.4.3 The Victorian Marriage

Mrs. Ramsay serves as the traditional Victorian angel, but she also presents an identity with several layers. The idea of the inferior and submissive Victorian woman can be seen in Mrs. Ramsay's relationship to her husband. At first glance the Ramsays seem like the typical Victorian couple. At one time, Mr. Ramsay tells his son that there “wasn't a slightest possible chance that they could go to the lighthouse” (Woolf, 1994: 23). When Mrs. Ramsay objects to this comment and asks him how he would know, Mr. Ramsay gets angry and stamps his foot. Instead of getting into an argument, Mrs. Ramsay

bent her head as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked. There was nothing to be said. [...] There was nobody whom she revered as she revered him. [...] She was not good enough to tie his shoe strings, she felt.
(Woolf, 1994: 23-24)

Woolf emphasizes that Mrs. Ramsay is inferior to her husband, and that in fact, she is not worth the same, in terms of the Victorian values. She relies on her husband's feelings, as if they were one person. One might argue that she wants him to be happy in the same way she wants her children to be happy. In some degree she is treating Mr. Ramsay as one of the children, even though he is grand in terms of his mind. However, his personality is treated as that of a child. Furthermore, the complexity of her character emerges even more when she is acting out as the dominant part in her marriage to Mr. Ramsay. Even though the angel was supposed to be submissive and passive, it was not always as clear-cut. The angel of house cannot be translated directly into reality of the actual woman in the Victorian era. The angel

of the house is a generalized term, and Woolf tried to demonstrate that reality is much more complex than what was mediated by the Victorian fiction and dominant ideology. There are several layers to the concept of the angel, which makes Mrs. Ramsay's character both complex and realistic. Mr. Ramsay repeatedly tells his wife that he is a failure: "He wanted sympathy. He was a failure, he said. Mrs. Ramsay flashed her needles. Mr. Ramsay repeated, never taking his eyes from her face, that he was a failure" (Woolf, 1994: 27). He is in need of sympathy and reassurance from his wife, and she tells him "if he put implicit faith in her, nothing should hurt him; however deep he buried himself or climbed high, not for a second should he find himself without her" (1994: 28). This makes Mrs. Ramsay to appear as the stronger part of their relationship, as the Victorian woman was supposed to be mother to all, including the husband.

However, Mrs. Ramsay also tells Mr. Ramsay what he wants to hear, as she sacrifices herself in order to satisfy him. Several times during the text, Mrs. Ramsay feels that she is not able to tell her husband her true feelings: "But then again, it was the other thing too—not being able to tell him the truth [...] all this diminished the entire joy, the pure joy, of the two notes sounding together, and let the sound die on her ear now with a dismal flatness" (Woolf, 1994: 29). Mrs. Ramsay only gives her husband answers that would please or reassure him. On one hand, it seems to indicate her true love for him, but at the same time she is not able to be her true self. There is something lurking around in their marriage, something that keeps her from being truly happy.

According to this line of reasoning one might argue that Mrs. Ramsay is performing the role as the Victorian angel. It is important to emphasize that the Victorian society's ideals of motherhood and marriage is a natural part of Mrs. Ramsay, which she has subconsciously ingrained. As mentioned before, women in the Victorian era internalized the angel so that it became a part of their identity. Mrs. Ramsay is repeating the acts, much in terms of what Butler claims to be gender performance. Butler stresses that these acts are not always done consciously, as they originate from social norms. Mrs. Ramsay is performing gender, that is, what is expected from her as a woman, mother and wife. She knows what it means to play these roles. By acting as the angel, she is also upholding the dominant ideology. However, Mrs. Ramsay sees no other option than to continue to mimic, in concord with the Victorian ideology. In result, this creates a conflict within herself, as she knows that this is not a true part of her identity. While some of these aspects also come naturally, e.g. caring for her children, she is, however, having trouble with being what the Victorian society idealized.

Furthermore, as the novel tries to move beyond the concept of the angel, it presents a new feminine ideal through other characters. According to Allison Pease in *The Cambridge Companion to To The Lighthouse* (Pease, 2015: 129), even though Mrs. Ramsay is never directly referred to as an angel as her actions speak for themselves, Woolf refers to the angel through Mrs. Ramsay's daughter Prue who dies in childbirth: "Prue, a perfect angel with the others, and sometimes now, at night especially, she took one's breath away with her beauty" (Woolf, 1994: 42). Pease claims that none of Mrs. Ramsay daughters or women she cares for, Lily and Minta, will ever be angels, as they paths are leading them in different ways. She notes that "Cam fights against (patriarchal) tyranny; Rose will presumably be an artist; Lily becomes a painter; and Minta looks for happiness outside home" (Pease, 2015: 129). Therefore, *To The Lighthouse* "indicates the new generation's desire to break free from the idea of the Victorian marriage (ibid).

Even though the angel was presented and perceived as powerless, Mrs. Ramsay is quite able to reflect upon her own life. She is capable of thinking for herself, which becomes obvious several times in the text. Even though she insists that she is no thinker, she often reflects on different aspects of life. However, she does not want to express these ideas and feelings to other people and, therefore, in some degree upholds the Victorian, traditional gender roles. When she is reading the story of *The Fisherman and his Wife* to her children, she reflects about her marriage with Mr. Ramsay: "Not that [...] she knew precisely what it came from; nor did she let herself put into words her dissatisfaction when she realized [...] how it came from this: she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband" (Woolf, 1994: 28). The tale is about greed and dissatisfaction, and Mrs. Ramsay feels not only "physical fatigue" but also some "faintly disagreeable sensation" (ibid). She realizes that she is disturbed by her husband's dependence on her, and the burden it puts upon her. Mrs. Ramsay is protecting her husband, the same way she would protect her children. She is driven to conceal the truth, and perhaps in some occasions even tell lies. Mrs. Ramsay becomes a tool to mediate Woolf's criticism of how women were limiting their ability to fully be themselves. As a result of the patriarchal society and its restrictive feminine role, Mrs. Ramsay is not able to presents herself as she really is. However, these feelings she has towards her husband seems quite ambivalent. She is scared of the changes that concern women and therefore still lives her Victorian life. Mrs. Ramsay is engaged in being a respected and socially accepted woman, something she can only achieve when being the ideal Victorian woman:

but it was their relation, and his coming to her like that, openly, so that anyone could see, that discomposed her; for then people said he depended on her, when they must know that of the two he was infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with that he gave, negligible.

(Woolf, 1994: 29)

Again, this supports the idea of the complex character of Mrs. Ramsay, as it is challenging to understand what she wants and feels. She feels finer than her husband, but at the same time she moves quickly from the idea by emphasizing that he is far more important. At this point, it is clear that Woolf emphasizes the idea of several layers of identity. By making Mrs. Ramsay into such complex character, by being both inferior and dominant, Woolf adds realness and credibility. Even though Mrs. Ramsay is living according to the Victorian ideals and values, there are aspects and thoughts that go against the Victorian ideology, as it is impossible to always be the angel in the house. Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts of rebellion seem to be feelings she is trying to shake off. Even though these thoughts often occur, she does not want to acknowledge them.

3.4.4 The Dinner Party

The scene of the dinner party is in some sense the heart of the novel, as Mrs. Ramsay moves from chaos to order. Eagleton argues that in similar terms as Lily, Mrs. Ramsay can also be considered an artist. He depicts her as a maternal artist, a skilled creator of harmonies and “a domestic negotiator who reconciles the contentions around her by her radiant resourcefulness of being” (Eagleton, 2009: 323). Mrs. Ramsay's artwork is the dinner party and the meal, even though she does not cook the meal herself. As the notion of beauty was previously dealt with in relation to Lily, Mrs. Ramsay also emphasizes this in her dinner party. It serves as her own artwork, which she stresses the perfection in all the elements involved. Eagleton proposes that parties and meals are artwork because they are carefully crafted compositions. The queen and angel of the house want to create something that is remembered, and not fleeting. However, a painting will remain, but the dinner party will pass.

Mrs. Ramsay holds the role as the worrying housewife, which is also a part of the “queen”: “There was a smell of burning. Could they have left the Boeuf en Daube overboil, she wondered? pray heaven not!” (Woolf, 1994: 60). Mrs. Ramsay has a desire to control everything revolving this dinner party, in order for it to become perfect. She is not pleased with late guests and wants everything to be perfect and in order. When the guests finally start

to arrive, Mrs. Ramsay takes on her role again, calm and happy. As she walks downstairs, she feels “like some queen who, finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down upon them, and descends among them, and acknowledges their tributes silently, and accepts their prostration before her” (Woolf, 1994: 59). She wants to create a moment of perfection that her guests will remember in the future. However, she does not seem satisfied and her ideas of order and harmony are not how she imagined: “There was no beauty anywhere. Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her” (ibid). Mrs. Ramsay wants to prove that she can succeed in the domestic sphere as the “domestic manager” and therefore she is doing her best to make a perfect party. The Victorian society romanticized women who were able to create a perfect atmosphere at home, and Mrs. Ramsay feels like she has accomplished this at some point: “the candles were lit [...] and they were all conscious of making a party together” (1994: 70). Mrs. Ramsay does not want to fail in these expectations, as she believes that it is the only way of becoming a truly happy and complete woman.

3.4.5 Mrs. Ramsay and The New Woman

Mrs. Ramsay`s first encounter with the New Woman is through a scornful remark on Lily`s occupation as an artist. The only way Mrs. Ramsay knows how to be happy is through what the Victorian era idealized: finding a man, getting married and having children, that is, being the angel. This was the only path to happiness presented to women in this period. Mrs. Ramsay is greatly invested in the ideology stressing the importance of marriage between a man and a woman, and she even plays the role of a matchmaker when she tries to pair off her guests at the dinner party: “people must marry; people must have children” (Woolf, 1994: 44). The idea reoccurs when Mrs. Ramsay encourages Lily to abandon her art and painting. On one hand, it seems like Mrs. Ramsay believes that getting married is the only option in life, but at the same time she is also acknowledging Lily`s independence: “she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; she was an independent little creature, and Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it” (1994: 13). It mediates that Mrs. Ramsay admires Lily for being independent, but at the same time fears that no one would marry her and make her happy (1994: 75). According to Mrs. Ramsay, there cannot be independence and marriage at the same time. Lily would have to lose her independence in order to get a husband, which is

in accordance to the Victorian values. Even though the Victorian era was over, its values and ideals still remained long into the Edwardian era which followed Queen Victoria's reign.

It is clear that Mrs. Ramsay has a traditional Victorian way of thinking about the institution of marriage, which puts women in a position inferior to their husbands. Lily considers herself an artist, which Mrs. Ramsay does not acknowledge as an occupation, and certainly not something that could replace her life as a wife or a mother. However, at some point, it seems like she herself is longing for the independence that Lily has, but as the angel she is, she would never truly admit it. Even though her thoughts reveal attitudes that are in fact against the Victorian ideals, she still acts as the angel. By doing this, she is upholding and maintaining the ideology of her time, which partly echoes what Butler stresses when discussing the act of performing gender.

3.4.6 Time Passes: Killing of the Angel

In the middle section called "Time passes" the novel's development drastically changes. In this section, according to Eagleton, "we observe the gradual decay of a whole class, not just of a house or a family" (Eagleton, 2009: 322). Briggs argue that, "Time Passes" is the novel's place for "absence and emptiness" (Briggs, 2006: 143). Several characters from the first section have disappeared and the reader gets a brief insight in what has happened to Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf only provides two sentences in brackets in order to narrate what has happened: "(Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.)" (Woolf, 1994: 95). Any detail of her death is not mentioned and it brings a strong sense of emptiness to the reader. The dinner guests are separated and the harmony is gone.

One could argue that Mrs. Ramsay's death indicates the death of the Victorian angel and its womanhood. It is tempting to interpret her death as Woolf's way of leaving the Victorian angel behind. Woolf specifically stated in "Professions for Women" that one must kill the angel in order to write (Woolf, 1974: 238). According to Eagleton, however, the death of Mrs. Ramsay, though only described shortly in the text, conveys a deeper meaning. Just as Eagleton explains the dinner party as just exciting for itself, he also conveys the same meaning concerning death. Death is more real than life, as it is more "final and dramatic". It is also a kind of vacancy, which Lily mediates so painfully in the last part of the novel. Mrs. Ramsay's death is announced in a "calculated casual parenthesis" (Eagleton, 2009: 323), and

Woolf demonstrates that life will pass, but death will not. It represents an absolute and finality. Woolf, as other modernists, was in general taken by the idea of something that is stable and eternal. Lily feels the presence of this absolute, which is “the heart of reality which only the absence known as death can truly signify” (2009: 324). Mrs. Ramsay’s death seems to “fall outside the realm of meaning” and Lily, just like the reader, has to make sense of it, not as some simple-minded symbol. Lily creates a distance, which allows her to resolve her ambivalent feelings towards Mrs. Ramsay and her death. But the absence Lily has to confront “is not only that of death, but of desire” and “pure, contentless longing, one which defeats language” (2009: 325). It does not defeat language by being too full of words, “but by being too empty”. This is an emptiness the reader experiences as well. Lily desired and loved Mrs. Ramsay as a mother, but since she is now dead, Lily is left with no object to desire. She is only left with the desire at its “most pure and real” (ibid). Lily puts her desire into her painting, which is not just an image of how Mrs. Ramsay looked, but the way she felt. Lily is using that feeling in order to present her own experience of Mrs. Ramsay, but in a more abstract way. She is then able to see Mrs. Ramsay as something more than just a Victorian angel and woman.

3.4.7 Lily Briscoe: The New Woman

Lily Briscoe represents the other voice in *To The Lighthouse* and provides a completely different choice of living during a time of change. The late Victorian era witnessed a shift in attitudes and views regarding gender roles, and especially the feminine. The shift concerned a move away from the pattern of patriarchal male supremacy, and one of the aspects of this movement was the emergence of the New Woman. Single women were perceived as growing problem in Victorian England and William Rathbone Greg described this phenomenon in his essay “Why Are Woman Redundant?” in 1862. He predicted a miserable life of “celibacy, struggle and privation” to women who did not want to marry (Greg, 1863: 17).

Lily serves in many ways as an opponent to Mrs. Ramsay and the Victorian Woman, and she desires the newfound female power. According to Peter Brooks in *Reading for the plot* (1992), Lily represents a “narrative desire” in *To The Lighthouse* as her “presence in the text creates and sustains narrative movement through the forward march of desire, projecting the self onto the world through scenarios of desire imagined and then acted upon” (Brooks, 2002: 39-40). Harris asserts that Lily “became the central orchestrating figure, the woman who is trying to understand herself and her relation to the whole Ramsay family by painting a

portrait of Mrs. Ramsay [...]” (Harris, 2011: 95). Eagleton depicts Lily as both insider and outsider, “a woman who has become complicit with the ruling of the social order but who is conscious of this, and who still feels some underground springs of rebellion” (Eagleton, 2009: 322). However, even though she desires this newfound feminine power, she still has struggles. By being both an insider and outsider, Lily has conflicts, concerning both the society and herself.

Lily lives an independent life as a painter and does not believe in what the Victorian values. She resists the thought of marriage, children and the domestic sphere being life’s only choice. This creates a conflict in her life, as she is not taken seriously by the society and the other guests at Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party. This is emphasized at the beginning of the novel, when the reader first encounters Lily. Mrs. Ramsay claims that: “one could not take her painting very seriously” (Woolf, 1994: 13). This is an idea that is shared by the society as well. In addition to the conflict with the society, Lily is having a conflict within herself as well. This is an inner conflict that concerns how she should live, which similar to Giddens fundamental question concerning identity, and she is often insecure about her choice of lifestyle. Lily suffers from a moral crisis regarding her love for art and the desire to pursue it as an occupation. She tries to move beyond “the blast of doubt” (1994: 119), that both the society and biology has forced upon her. She feels powerless and judged by the society because of her occupation. Lily’s feelings could be interpreted in light of more than just her art. It is not just the painting itself, but Lily feels that someone is observing her:

[H]e would not stand still and look at her picture. And that was what Lily Briscoe could not have endured. Even while she looked at the mass, at the line, at the colour [...] she kept a feeler on her surroundings lest some one should creep up, and suddenly she should find her picture looked at.

(Woolf, 1994: 13)

This partly echoes Christina Rossetti’s famous poem “In an Artist’s Studio” (1896), where the female model is merely perceived as an object. She is portrayed according to traits that are superficial and convey more or less the same meaning. According to Simon Avery in his article “Christina Rossetti: gender and power”, “[t]he model’s actual identity is lost and she is subsequently reconstructed as various female icons” such as queen, saint, angel or as a nameless girl (Avery, 2014). According to the Victorian society and its ideals, women were supposed to be passive and powerless, only an object to be viewed. Their identity did in some terms cease to exist, as “the lady of the house was seen only as she appeared in each room, according to the nature of the lord of the room” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 3). Lily’s lack of

self-confidence comes from the society's expectations and rules concerning how to be the ideal woman, which she cannot conform to.

The anxiety that Lily feels is emphasized by one of the dinner guests, Mr. Tansley who comments "women can't paint, women can't write..." (Woolf, 1994: 35). Lily takes these words to heart, believing that this claim is the general truth. She also takes it personally, meaning that *she* cannot write or paint. Lily is unsure if "her anxieties stem from her biological sex as a female, or from her gendered and socialized nature as a woman" (Fennelly, 2004: 2). She struggles between what she is told by others, especially men and what she herself believes, that women *can* paint, women *can* write (ibid). These critical words and thoughts seems to occur in Lily's mind whenever she is feeling vulnerable about her occupation as an artist. This happens mostly in the first part of the novel, when she is in a place of progress and change. There seems to be a tension between the biology and the society, which Lily demonstrates throughout the novel. She is confronted and presented with images of femininity and womanhood, but does not see herself in any of these categories. Mr. Tansley is mocking Lily's painting, and represents in many ways a typical ideal of masculinity during the Victorian era. He believes that she should behave according to the Victorian values and certainly not be a painter. Lily does not agree with this mindset, and believes that he was "the most uncharming human being she had ever met" (Woolf, 1994: 62). She further emphasizing this later in the same chapter:

She would never know him [Mr. Tansley]. He would never know her. Human relations were all like that, she thought, and the worst (if it had not been for Mr Bankes) were between men and women. Inevitably these were extremely insincere she thought.

(Woolf, 1994: 67)

Lily acts differently towards Mr. Tansley and the other men in the text, compared to Mrs. Ramsay. However, Mrs. Ramsay too thinks that Mr. Tansley is "an awful prig" (1994: 9), but does not express it openly. Woolf clearly emphasizes Lily's idea of living an independent life, a life she cannot find in a marriage or in a relationship to men. Only once can Lily been seen as feminine when she is expressing sympathy towards Mr. Tansley. Though only after Mrs. Ramsay asks her to be nicer to him:

Will you take me, Mr Tansley? said Lily, quickly, kindly, for [...] Mrs. Ramsay said to her [...] Unless you apply some balm to the anguish of this hour and say something nice to that young man there, life will run upon the rocks.

(Woolf, 1994: 66)

According to the American poet and novelist Gertrude Stein, the new female power caused anxiety among men. She explains that “[i]n the nineteenth century men were confident, [and] [...] women were not, but in the twentieth century the men have no confidence” (Evans, 2009). Men experienced an age of anxiety, while women cherished the newfound power. Eventually, women tried to step out of the domestic sphere, and gradually the traditional, Victorian woman ceased to exist. Many men felt powerless and the male writer David Herbert Lawrence describes this in his essay “Matriarchy” from 1929: “The modern young man talks rather feebly about man being master again. He knows perfectly well that he will never be master again” (Lawrence, 2004: 103).

Lily is able to form friendships with some of the dinner guests. Mr. Bankes and Lily seem to form a special connection: “They both smiled, standing there. They both felt a common hilarity, excited by the moving waves” (Woolf, 1994: 15). He is also the only one Lily is willing to show her paintings to (1994: 13). Lily and Mr. Bankes share common opinions and perspectives in life, which allow them to have some form of equality between them in their relation. Instead of viewing each other as man and woman, one being inferior to the other, they seem to perceive each other as human beings, both being equal. Where Mr. Ramsay and other masculine aspects of the society patronizes Lily and her choice of living, Mr. Bankes respects her, even though he might not understand every aspect of it:

He was anxious for the sake of this friendship [with Lily Briscoe] and perhaps too in order to clear himself in his own mind from the imputation of having dried and shrunk – for Ramsay lived in a welter of children, whereas Bankes was childless and a widower – he was anxious that Lily Briscoe should not disparage Ramsay (a great man in his own way) yet should understand how things stood between them.

(Woolf, 1994: 16)

Mr. Bankes is able to have conversation with Lily about her painting without mediating what society really thinks. He is not being hostile or cruel, and this mindset comforts Lily, as it shows that her occupation and painting can be significant across gender:

But William, she remembered, had listened to her with his wise child’s eyes when she explained how it was not irreverence [...] Thanks to his scientific mind he understood – a proof of disinterested intelligence which had pleased her and comforted her enormously. One could talk of painting then seriously to a man.

(Woolf, 1994: 131)

However, Lily does not hold the same friendship with Mr. Ramsay, whose relationship seems to involve a “put on” behavior. She feels forced to behave in a certain way in front of him,

who serves as the masculine aspect, the “hollowness of the patriarchal law” (Eagleton, 2009: 326), at least in the first part of the novel. Mr. Ramsay is perceived as all knowing and selfish, which were traits of the Victorian man. Woolf describes him as “lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one [...]” (1994: 3), which mediate both his physical presence and the sharpness of his personality. He tries to make it impossible for Lily to pursue a career as a painter:

“Let [Mr. Ramsay] be fifty feet away, let him not even speak to you, let him not even see you, he permeated, he prevailed, he imposed himself. He changed everything. [...] But he’ll be down on me in a moment, demanding – something she could not give him.”
(Woolf, 1994: 112)

Mr. Ramsay has a social authority and serves as the moral leader of the family, something Lily resents. One could argue that he crushes the life out of all the people in his life: his children, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. However, in similar terms as Mrs. Ramsay, he too has an identity with several layers. At the end of the novel, Lily overcomes her feelings towards Mr. Ramsay, and what he represents.

3.4.8 Lily and The Victorian Woman

Lily and Mrs. Ramsay serve as two very different women, as their ideas about gender, marriage, children and lifestyle are very conflictive. However, they are able to find a connection despite gender, as there is an admiration that goes both ways. Mrs. Ramsay admires Lily for being independent, while Lily admires Mrs. Ramsay for her femininity. Lily loves Mrs. Ramsay like a mother, but resents her for her ideals and values. Early in the text, Lily acknowledges this admiration: “to control her impulse to fling herself (thank heaven she had always resisted so far) at Mrs. Ramsay’s knee and say to her – but what could one say to her? ‘I’m in love with you?’” (Woolf, 1994: 14). Even though Lily wants very different things in life than Mrs. Ramsay, she clearly feels some affection towards her as well. This might seem a bit contradicting, as Lily is trying to live an independent life as a painter. At some point, she is also questioning her own lifestyle and perhaps longing for love and affection: “she must, Minta must, they all must marry, [...] there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman (she slightly took her [Mrs. Ramsay’s] hand for a moment), an unmarried woman has missed the best of life” (1994: 36). Mrs. Ramsay has a strong influence on Lily, as well as the other characters in the text. Whenever Lily is together with Mrs. Ramsay, she is

vulnerable and longing for something more. This feeling of ambivalence concerning love and marriage is also expressed towards the relationship between Paul and Minta: “It is so beautiful, so exciting, this love, that I tremble on the verge of it [...]; also it is the stupidest, the most barbaric of human passion, and turns a nice young man with a profile a gem’s [...] into a bully with a crowbar (1994: 74).

Lily is longing for love, but at the same time she knows that it would mean her giving up her independence. A man would be superior to her and she would have to return to the domestic sphere, not being able to continue as a painter. For Lily, love seems to be closely connected to inferiority and lack of independency and therefore she tries to escape from it. She is quite relieved when realizing that she does not have to get married and sacrifice her independence: “she need not marry, thank heaven: she need not undergo that degradation” (Woolf, 1994: 74). Even though Lily is secretly longing for someone to share her life with, in a choice between love and independence, there is no doubt what she would choose.

3.4.9 Lily’s Art and Vision

In the first part of the novel, Lily is confused and not able to identify with the significant female categories made available to her. Chaos governs her mind, as she wants validation, but gets rejected every time. As many women would eventually give up and live according to the society and its implicit rules, Lily seems to thrive on the idea of change. Even though she struggles with these thoughts of chaos in the beginning, she seems to cherish her role at the end.

In the last part of the novel, “The Lighthouse”, Lily’s ideas of gender roles and the Victorian values become even more obvious. Ten years have passed since the death of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily is still an unmarried painter. Briggs refers to this section as a “world that is bare and empty, with a hole at the centre corresponding to the gap at the centre of Lily’s painting” (Briggs, 2006: 159). She claims that this emptiness can only be filled by the vision of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily wants to find motivation to finish her painting, but finds it difficult, as she feels lost without her presence. Eagleton argues that Lily is having trouble with her painting because of nature of art. He claims that composition will never be final because there is no total harmony:

Always (it was in her nature, or in her sex, she did not know which) before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt.

(Woolf, 1994: 118-119)

Situated in the final part of *To The Lighthouse*, this excerpt reveals Lily's feelings and anxieties towards her own situation. There is still an intensive personal struggle with both her self and her art. Giddens proposes that there will occur anxiety when a person is not able to conform to the social framework's expectations (Giddens, 1991: 44), and Lily does not feel any feeling of accomplishment, and is therefore having an inner crisis. Even though Lily considers herself a strong, independent woman, she still feels fear. She tries to move beyond "the blast of doubt", beyond the implicit rules and attitudes that still surround her. However, even though Mrs. Ramsay is dead, she still pervades the whole text. Her influence is still very significant, especially towards Lily. Mrs. Ramsay is often present in Lily's conciseness, and it is this image that helps Lily to complete her painting after ten years.

Because of Mrs. Ramsay's death, Mr. Ramsay is in need of female comforting. Lily is angry with Mrs. Ramsay for dying as now she "would be forced to give" (Woolf, 1994: 112) what Mrs. Ramsay had given Mr. Ramsay. Lily feels an obligation to be there for Mr. Ramsay, but she is afraid of having to occupy the role as the Victorian angel, just like Mrs. Ramsay. However, at the last part of this section, Lily realizes that she can feel sympathy towards Mr. Ramsay and still keep her independence: "Why [...] should she be so tormented with sympathy for him [...] immediately finding the sympathy which she had not been asked to give troubling her for expression" (1994: 115-116). Lily needs to overcome her negative feelings towards Mr. Ramsay in order to proceed with her painting. She has also overcome Mr. Tansley's remark about women and painting: "[Mr. Tansley] who had stood behind her smoking shag [...] and making it his business to tell her women can't write, women can't paint, not so much that he believed it, as that for some odd reason he wished it?" (1994: 146). Lily realizes that Mr. Tansley's thoughts and opinions might have represented the truth, but not anymore. Mr. Tansley is rather disturbed by Lily and her ideals, which was a representation of a new female identity. His feelings echo Stein's claim concerning the male anxiety.

After Lily manage to move beyond these attitudes and ideals, she is finally able to

work with her painting, more productively than ten years ago. She is capable of distancing herself from the image of Mrs. Ramsay, while acknowledging her influence as well. Eagleton notes that “[h]er art allows her to do both, drawing the image of Mrs. Ramsay closer yet also “placing” her, and so in a way triumphing over her” (Eagleton, 2009: 326). He claims that this illustrates a more general truth. In order to free ourselves, we have to acknowledge the sources of our being. Lily feels that she has “triumphed” (Woolf, 1994: 130) over Mrs. Ramsay and her “limited, old-fashioned ideas” (ibid), as she has kept her own ideals, in conflict with the Victorian ideology. As mentioned earlier, Mrs. Ramsay internalized the angel as a part of her own identity. However, Lily is able to stand up against this notion that was so deeply ingrained in the society. This is equivalent to her having found her role and identity, in a social framework that tried so hard to shape women into its ideal image of “woman”. Lily also acknowledges that her “life has changed completely” (ibid), as the ideas of gender have changed. The society accepts her and the new image of womanhood, perhaps not completely, but more than ten years ago: “It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (Woolf, 1994: 154). It is a climax when Lily is able to complete her painting. She has overcome the categories created by the male-dominant society and she has provided a new path to happiness. Lily has proven that women do not need to conform to the traditional gender roles, in order to become happy and socially accepted. She is in concord with her self, something she has been striving for a long time.

Lily and Mrs. Ramsay both serve as artists, but in different ways. Mrs. Ramsay’s art is the stereotypical feminine kind, the one that is not recognized and considered as art. Mrs. Ramsay does, however, consider this art, and a very important one. She is the one who balances rooms, making people make conversation, decorating tables and fixing flowers. Compared to Lily’s painting, Mrs. Ramsay’s art is fleeting and will eventually disappear. Lily is producing something that will not vanish. However, she is doing something that is considered to be a male occupation, and thus, is not taken seriously by the society, and even Mrs. Ramsay refuses the thought of a woman being a painter (1994: 13). If Lily was a male writer, she would have been taken seriously, and people would praise her art. Poet Adrienne Rich opens up questions about the “woman-artist”. In her poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law” (1958-1960), she explores “what it could possibly mean to be a woman and an artist in one body” (Fennelly, 2004: 3). Lily and Mrs. Ramsay are women and artists, but struggle with being both inside one body. There is a tension between society and biology. Woolf captures their struggle within the female self, both in their body and spirit. This conflict arises

when the “woman-artist” is confronted with socially expected roles of femininity and womanhood (ibid).

For Lily it is important to be recognized by the society as a human being, as she does not merely represent the New Woman or the Victorian angel. When she feels validated in all her complexity and aspects of her identity, she is finally at peace. Lily is deconstructing the concept of beauty, and perhaps more important, she is deconstructing what it means to be a woman. Eagleton claims that Lily achieves some sort of reconciliation by the end of the novel (Eagleton, 2009: 327). Moreover, Woolf demonstrates that there is not only one side or self of each character. Women saw each other as only women, not as complex human beings, which was one of the trappings of patriarchy. At the end of the text, Lily realizes that there was more to Mrs. Ramsay than only these traditional ideas and ideals. Mrs. Ramsay was not only a Victorian angel, who represented the femininity conveyed by the patriarchy. Lily now understands Mrs. Ramsay’s complexity, even though “fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought” (Woolf, 1994: 147).

Mrs. Ramsay’s and Lily Briscoe’s main project is to find a “me” that is not in conflict with neither themselves nor the society they live in. To say that Mrs. Ramsay is merely an image of the Victorian angel or that Lily is not affected by the Victorian society at all is impossible. Woolf is not criticizing the individual in the ideology and its social structures, but the ideals and rules made by the patriarchal society. The problems are identified by her, a female writer and from a female perspective. Woolf demonstrates a break from the male-dominated society and gives the female characters the chance to provide meaning, both from Mrs. Ramsay’s and Lily’s perspective. Both characters want validation from the social structure they exist in. Mrs. Ramsay is validated by the society as the angel, but it is clear that she questions the social structure as well. Lily wants to feel validated and socially accepted, a female who is in concord with the culture she lives in. However, this does not mean that she is willing to internalize the angel and other aspects of the patriarchy, as it is compromising her own self-identity. She gradually realizes that she does not want this at all, and moves away from what Butler referred to as gender performance and the society’s concept of the ideal “woman”.

4 Sylvia Plath: *The Bell Jar*

“It is easier to live through someone else than to complete yourself.”

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (2010: 274)

4.1 *The Bell Jar*

The Bell Jar is set in post-war America in 1953. Esther Greenwood, a college student from Massachusetts, goes to New York to work at a fashion magazine for a month as a guest editor. She lives at a women's hotel together with eleven other college girls. She knows she should be having the time of her life, but she feels depressed. Esther is always worrying about her abilities and what she will do after college. She thinks about marriage and kids, wonders if she should marry and live a conventional domestic life, or perhaps attempt to satisfy her own needs and ambitions. Buddy Willard, her college boyfriend, seems to be the ideal mate. He is portrayed as handsome, intelligent and ambitious, and wants to marry Esther, claiming that women want infinite security. However, he does not understand Esther's desire to write poetry, as he wants a housewife, only caring about family and household. When Esther returns home to Boston, she discovers that she has not been accepted to the writing class she had planned to take. She tries to use the summer to write a novel, but finds the feelings she experienced in New York coming back again. Dr. Gordon, a psychiatrist, prescribes her electric shock therapy. In result of this treatment, Esther becomes increasingly unstable and eventually, she decides to kill herself. Esther survives her suicide attempt and is sent to a private hospital in order to heal. At the end of the novel, when Esther leaves the mental hospital to start college again, she believes that she has regained a slightly grasp on sanity, but she is scared that the bell jar of her madness will descend again.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther finds it more and more difficult to connect her inner identity with her outer reality. She feels like she is “being stuffed farther and farther into a black airless sack with no way out” (Plath, 2013: 123). Unable to deal with the reality and environment around her, Esther feels helpless and powerless by the glass walls surrounding her. She becomes passive and unable to be the agent of her life. Eventually, Esther feels like

her only option is total withdrawals. “To the person in the bell jar [...], the world itself is the bad dream” (2013: 127). She wants to escape from the present reality and its impossible demands and expectations. Caroline King Bernard in *Sylvia Plath* (1978) states that after Esther has attempted suicide, she realizes that her struggle is not just hers alone, “but generally characteristic of the human condition” (Bernard, 1978:31). Other women “too, sat under bell jar of a sort” (Plath, 2013: 227). According to Susan Bassnett in *Sylvia Plath* (1987), Esther tries to value her self as a person, “rather than as a set of constructed images, designed to please someone else” (Bassnett, 1987: 95). However, as she leaves the hospital at the end of the novel, she still has no answers: “all I could see were question marks” (Plath, 2013: 233).

4.2 Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1932, to her parents Aurelia Schober and Otto Emil Plath. Otto Plath was a professor of biology and German at Boston University. He was of German decent, having emigrated from Grabow when he was fifteen (Bernard, 1978: 13). Her mother was a first generation American, born in Boston. When Sylvia Plath was eight years old, her father died from undiagnosed diabetes. Plath and her mother then moved to Wellesley, Massachusetts, where Plath went to school and her mother went to work (1978: 15). During Plath`s eight years in Wellesley, writing and academic achievements became very important to her (ibid). In 1950, “And Summer Will Not Come Again” was published in the August issue of *Seventeen*. The same year, the magazine also published Plath`s poem “Ode on a Bitten Plum”. Even though Plath started to achieve success in the world of literature, her mother recalls that her writing began to reveal “an examination and analysis of the darker recesses of self” (1978: 16).

In September 1950, Plath entered Smith College, the same college as Betty Friedan attended. Here she thrived both socially and academically, and continued to write poems and stories. Plath enjoyed success with publications and prizes, in magazines such as *Mademoiselle*, *Seventeen* and *Harper* (Bernard, 1978: 17). In the summer of 1953, she won a guest editorship in *Mademoiselle* and went to New York, along with nineteenth other female college students. She confessed her feelings in a letter to her brother: “I can`t think logically about who I am or where I am going. I have been very ecstatic, horribly depressed, shocked, elated, enlightened, and enervated” (1978: 18). Plath left New York for Boston, depressed and exhausted: “I will let you know what train my coffin will come in on” (ibid). After a couple of

months, back home in Boston, Plath attempted suicide, which led to a stay at a private hospital. Plath's experiences in New York and the following months are portrayed in her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* (ibid). During the years of 1961 and 1962, "a period of great personal difficulty and great creative productivity", Plath worked on and finished her novel (1978: 24).

4.3 Female Identity in *The Bell Jar*

4.3.1 The American Ideal Woman: The Double Life

In *The Bell Jar* and its post-war American society, it was either double life or no life at all. Individuals felt forced to conform to social conventions, and in result people led double lives. They tried to keep up appearance or they became like Esther, sitting behind the glass walls watching the unsympathetic society. In the decades that followed Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and the Second World War, women's emancipation resulted in a vast number of opportunities. Women had to work during the two world wars, and had become used to a life outside the domestic sphere. However, when the men came back from war, they wanted their jobs back. In result, working women had to return home (Ciment & Russell, 2007: 497).

Like the Victorian Britain of the 19th century, post-war America was also defined by the idea of gendered spheres. Magazines and books presented glossy images, embraced by the society, of how women were to seek fulfillment in the domestic sphere as housewives. According to Jennifer Holt in her article "The Ideal Woman" (2006), the ideology regarded the house as a domestic haven in which women were "domestic managers". The world of work was defined as male, while the world of home was defined as female. This separation was largely based on the assumption that men and women were different, and that women were both physically and mentally inferior. Even though women's role was of much importance, it was not considered to be on the same level as their husbands. The American woman was expected to be a domestic goddess, making a quiet haven of peace for her man. She was supposed to be the domestic caregiver with "sole responsibility for the home and child rearing", while her husband "brought home the bacon" (Holt, 2006). According to Glenna Matthews in *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (1989), while this image of the "ideal woman" made women create and form their identity around

these ideas and values, many women also began to feel like servants to their children and husbands (Matthews, 1989: 212). Many feared a lifetime of domestic imprisonment.

4.3.2 Esther, Elly and Elaine: “I am, I am, I am”

Women in post-war America were presented with an ideal that was in many ways impossible to achieve, and they realized that their self and “me” did not fit into these categories. As a result, many women felt the need to create a double in order to survive in the patriarchal society. Plath was interested in the double as she wrote her honor thesis about the topic in 1954. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath creates and provides a “fictional realization of the device” (Bernard, 1978: 24-25). In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler provides an understanding of the fantasy that occurs when the individual feels unable to conform to the implicit rules of the society:

The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.

(Butler, 2004: 29)

Butler states that to fantasize provides us the means to survive, as it “present into a realm of possibility” (2004: 28). In similar terms, Giddens states that anxiety occurs when we are not able or prevented to carry out the behavior in question (Giddens, 1991: 44). Esther is dependent on a certain amount of validation and acceptance that she is doing something right. However, she does not find this in either her personal or professional life. She cannot figure out who she is, having been offered several types of womanhood of who she *should* be. She does not know what or who to choose, as she cannot work towards any of them. Consequently, she feels split in two, to the point that she is a stranger to herself. She is divided between her inner self and the outer reality, and does not know how to conform to either. Much like Lily in the beginning of *To The Lighthouse*, it creates chaos inside her mind, which results in both an outer and inner crisis.

Esther expresses her inner division by inventing doubles or alter egos for herself, such as “Elly Higginbottom” and a fictional heroine named “Elaine”. Elly Higginbottom serves as the embodiment of the person Esther wants to be, or at least thinks she wants to be. For a little

while, Esther is able to be someone else, a female who does not care to conform to the societal rules. Elly is the total contrast to Esther, which makes her forget about the troubles and concerns in her real life. Bernard states that “[w]hatever Esther Greenwood is, Elly represents the Other” (Bernard, 1978: 25): Esther is insecure of her self, while Elly seems to be self-confident. Esther comes from Boston, “a place where she feels constrained by people like her mother and Mrs. Willard to be sexually proper and conventional” (ibid). Elly comes from Chicago, “the sort of place where unconventional, mixed up people would come from” (Plath, 2013: 127). Esther is a student from a “big eastern women’s college” who reads and writes “long papers on the twins in James Joyce” (ibid), and is terrified of becoming a married housewife, while Elly is not a student, nor is she afraid of getting married: “And one day I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family” (ibid).

Esther creates a second identity for her self, a fictional identity named Elaine: “My heroine would be myself, only in disguise” (Plath, 2013: 116). So when Esther decides to spend the summer writing a novel, she sees herself from another perspective: “From another, distanced mind, I saw myself sitting on the breezeway, [...] small as a doll in a doll’s house” (ibid). According to Richard Altick, women in the Victorian period were seen as a doll in a doll’s house, only an angelic object to be viewed. Both Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend* and Nora Helmer in *A Doll’s House* wanted out of the doll’s house: “I want to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll’s house” (Altick, 1973: 54). One might argue that the same aspect and anxiety echoes in *The Bell Jar* and its post-war American society. Esther’s behavior, just like many women in post-war America, fits a doll’s description. A doll is passive and considered an object. Esther is unable to make independent decisions and therefore could be described as a doll to be “played with” and used by other people. She prefers to be the passive part rather than the active: “I liked looking on other people in crucial situations. [...] I certainly learned a lot of things I never would have learned otherwise this way” (Plath, 2013: 12). Bella, Nora and Esther all wanted out of the categories they were put in, but none of them were allowed such privileges. Elaine is the image of the expectations that derives from both Esther herself and the society. Elaine is not, however, a heroine, but the one who eventually places the bell jar on Esther, which gradually suffocates her.

The question of self-identity becomes important when dealing with Esther’s divided self. It represents an escape from all the pressure and expectations that originates from society, but it also makes Esther lose herself more and more, in result of her “acting” towards other. She is never able to be herself or establish a self-identity, because she is always relying on expectations from others (Bernard, 1978: 25). Even though the divided self might

represents who Esther thinks she wants to be, it is also destroying Esther and her “me”. Butler argues that “[w]e act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman”.⁶ Similar to Mrs. Ramsay and the concept of the angel, Esther is performing what she believes is expected from her as a woman. She is acting out an ideal of femininity that is not a part of her own personhood, but established as social norms. As women in the Victorian era internalized the angel, Esther has, or at least tried to, internalize the implicit rules of her time, in order to be what the social framework wants her to be.

Esther alienates herself more and more from the reality and herself. By being a part of her identity, both “Elly” and “Elaine” are also making it cease to exist. Although Esther tries to conform to the society, she gradually withdraws from it, and perhaps more significantly, from herself. In result, she becomes more depressed and trapped inside the bell jar. It is Esther’s inner conflicts between the different parts of herself that leads to her mental breakdown. According to Brandon Torres in his article “Descent Into Insanity: Life Under ‘The Bell Jar’ of Sylvia Plath”, it is the “paradox of infinite possibilities and limitations that drives Esther Greenwood [...] into a paralysis which only suicide is the only escape” (Torres, 2015). When Esther realizes exactly how limited the world is concerning the ideology of gender, she grows more and more apathetic towards the world. As the glass walls gradually descend, Esther loses touch with the reality. She has no desire being an agent in her life and she is left with no identity for self: “I am an observer” (Plath, 2013: 100).

4.3.3 Books, Magazines and Beauty

After working women became redundant in the years after the Second World War, many turned to the media to determine how to look, act and behave. Women did not know who they were anymore and became so unsure of who they should be, that they looked to the “glossy public image” to decide every detail of their lives (Friedan, 2010: 53-54). Holt notes that “[t]hroughout almost every source discussing the domestic ideal there is a consensus that media, primarily magazines and film, were the primary methods of which this model was transmitted to women, in effect the social construction agent” (Holt, 2006). These ideals of womanhood were found in women’s magazines, religious journals, newspaper and in fiction. Women’s magazines played a vast part in this transmission of the “ideal woman” as there was

⁶ <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/criticaltheoryfall13/2013/11/judith-butler-on-gender-as-performed-or-performative/>.

a significantly large readership. According to Holt, the “Seven Sisters” alone (*Better Homes and Gardens*, *Family Circle*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *McCall’s*, *Redbook* and *Woman’s Day*), had by the end of the 1950s over 34 million readers (ibid). These were magazines that aimed married women with children, rather than single and working women. In result, media provided a new view on women’s duties and roles.

In *The Bell Jar*, it is therefore not surprising that Esther is fascinated by the beauty and fashion industries she meets in New York. Early in the novel, she reflects and describes Doreen’s “fashion-conscious” college, where “girls had pocket-book covers made out of the same material as their dresses” (Plath, 2013: 5). Throughout the novel, Esther describes the other characters’ appearances in detail. She even describes her self, in the beginning as “tripping about in [...] patent leather shoes I’d bought in Bloomingdale’s [...] with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocket-book to match” (2013: 2). During the first part of the novel, there are a vast number of images of the consumer culture and beauty industries concerning women in America. Esther grows more aware of what she as a woman is supposed to want, but it increases her dissatisfaction, as she feels limited by the options available.

According to Friedan, media, especially women’s magazines, and different institutions in America were guilty of pressuring girls into the fabricated feminine image. She questions these new ideals of womanhood and states that women in the Victorian era both dreamed and fought for equality, their own place in the world, while women in the 50s went back to the domestic sphere (Friedan, 2010: 24). If one looks at the magazines from 1939, the heroines of women’s magazines stories were quite different. They were New Women, creating a new identity and a life of their own (2010: 24-25). The majority of heroines were career women, happy, proud and attractively women who loved and were loved by men. They had several occupations, like nurses, teachers, artists, actresses and saleswomen, and were less aggressive in pursuit of a man, as their life included a different kind of love story (2010: 25). The New Women wanted to create their own lives and identities. Gradually, however, “career woman” became a dirty word in America and the images of the New Woman in magazines and books were blurring.

The images of the “perfect housewife” started to appear in magazines and books. According to Sheila Hardy in *A 1950s Housewife Marriage And Homemaking in The 1950s*, cited in Lucy Waterlow’s article “The perfect 50s housewife myth busted: How women didn’t have time to keep an immaculate home AND achieve flawless look”,

[b]ooks, magazines, films and, later, television programmes tried hard to reinforce the idyllic picture of the perfect stay-at-home housewife who took care of the home, raised the children, cooked nutritious meals, and provided a haven of calm for her hardworking husband when he returned at the end of his working day.

(Waterlow, 2013)

The suburban housewife was described in magazines as “healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home” (Friedan, 2010: 7). Experts told women how to “catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training [...], act more feminine and make marriage more exciting” (2010: 5). The images of women in the magazines represented them as young and frivolous, almost childlike. They “were fluffy and feminine; passive, gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home” (2010: 23). Women all over America were affected by the image created by women`s magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment, and by the popularization of sociology and psychoanalysis (2010: 21). According to Luke Ferretter in *Sylvia Plath`s fiction*, the “ideological messages” sent out by these different institutions, were quite clear. In order to be a woman, you have to be “an attractive object of the male gaze” (Ferretter, 2010: 137). As a result of these messages of beauty presented by media and embraced by the society, women felt an enormous pressure to conform to the social standards of femininity. It seems like Esther has integrated these ideological messages, that women are only valued in terms of their appearance, and she does not know how to reject it. In similar terms as Mrs. Ramsay, Esther has internalized these messages, and is acting accordingly to what the social framework expects her to. She is performing her gender, in order to fit into the categories made available to her. Esther directly criticizes the institutions of marriage and psychiatry, as well as the power relationships between men and women. But does not “rise to a similar level of protest against the values promoted by the beauty and fashion industries” (2010: 139).

Women`s magazines contained almost no mention of the world beyond home. Friedan notes that the year of 1960 was the year Castro led a revolution in Cuba and men were trained to travel into outer space; and a plane whose speed is greater than the speed of sound broke up a Summit Conference (Friedan, 2010: 23). Magazines and newspapers published articles and columns “in which women were congratulated on their lack of involvement with large issues

and were enjoined to continue this state of affairs” (Matthews, 1989: 198). In the editorial of the 1938 issue by Bruce and Beatrice Gould, they stated:

Be glad you're dumb about all these earth-shaking questions. They don't affect you nearly so much as a lot of other things much nearer home. [...] Be glad you're dumb while your husband is saving the world— be brave and you can save the home

(Matthews, 1989: 198)

A male writer in a women's magazine elaborated: “Our readers are housewives, full time; they're not interested in the broad public issues of the day; they are only interested in the family and the home” (Friedan, 2010:24). This was also reflected in the pages of the women's magazines, and through titles like: “Have Babies While You're Young”, “How to Snare a Male”, “Our Baby was Born at Home”, “Should I stop Work When We Marry?”, “The Business of Running a Home”.

In 1958 and 1959, Friedan went through several issues of the three major women's magazines without finding a single heroine who had a career or a commitment to any work, other than “occupation: housewife” (Friedan, 2010: 29). Women were encouraged to work hard, but at the same time look elegant. When their husbands came back from work, they had to be “bathed, perfumed and dressed in smart clean clothes, complete with fresh frilly apron, ready to spend a cosy and possibly romantic evening with him” (Waterlow, 2013). Hardy claims that in reality it was impossible to meet these ideals. The glossy image presented in books and magazines in post-war America set thousands of women up for failure as it was not possible to live up to these expectations. In 1960 *Redbook* ran an article asking, “Why Young Mothers feel Trapped” and received about 24.000 replies. Women all over America were trying to live according to an image that made them deny their minds (Friedan, 2010: 48).

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther is surrounded by people and different kinds of institutions telling her how to both behave and look. The ideological messages concerning beauty were so deeply ingrained in the American society that it was difficult to dismiss. Esther is overwhelmed and does not know how to resist being a part of it herself. Whenever she is criticizing someone for his or her looks, it seems a bit “put on”, as she in some sense does not mean it. It could be argued that there is a silent protest against the beauty industries when Esther is having her breakdown, as she does not change her clothes or wash her hair. However, at the end of the novel she still details her outfit: “flamboyant as my plans” (Plath, 2013: 233), as something important to her identity. As a result of the vast pressure to conform to the society's ideals and standards of femininity, Esther finds it difficult to criticize it.

4.3.4 Naming the Problem

Friedan states that the “problem that has no name” lay unspoken and buried in the minds of women for many years. Many women found something meaningful as a result of the work situation during the WWII, as this was something many women had not previously known. However, this was quickly taken away from them and they were once again provided with a different context and framework to evolve their identity in. The feminine mystique became “cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture”:

Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands good-bye in front of the picture window, depositing their station wagonsful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor.

(Friedan, 2010: 8)

Women had to glory in their roles as mothers and housewives, as no other path to happiness and fulfillment was offered to them. Consequently, many women decided to adjust to their role, and therefore “suffered or ignored the problem that has no name” (2010: 15). Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique* about the “problem that has no name”, which “she called the malaise she thought to be afflicting the middle-class housewife” (Matthews, 1989: 197). It was a problem that nobody had labeled before. In *Excitable Speech: a politics of the performative* (1997), Butler stresses how language is a part of performativity. She investigates how the state produces an agenda “wherein any opposition lies outside full intelligibility”:

If what one is attempting to capture linguistically is both not yet born and also incapable of evident existence, then the clarities of language will, at some level, reduce the object of the process or render it tamed by the anticipated logic within speech.

(Lodge & Wood, 1988: 608)

This echoes Friedan and her attempt to name the “problem that has no name”. She claims that women in America gradually turned more and more depressed because the limiting categories and roles that were made available to them. They were surrounded by ideological messages sent out by the mainstream media, which gave a clear picture of how the ideal American woman should be. This made it difficult for women to be something else than this presented image. A normal, feminine woman would be happy to stay home: “One who was unhappy was, in fact, by definition not normal” (Matthews, 1989: 211). Staying at home became “increasingly unsatisfying” for many women, (1989: 209) but they did not put this feeling

into words.

American women suffered alone while they were making beds, shopping for groceries, eating peanut butter sandwiches with their children and laying beside their husbands at night (Friedan, 2010: 5). Even though there were a vast number of books, columns and articles written for and about women, there was not one word of this suffering. Media and experts told women that their role was to “seek fulfillment as wives and mothers”. Women were ashamed and embarrassed to admit that something was not feeling right. They felt as they did not exist and some doctors even called it “the housewife syndrome” (2010: 10). A vast number of men dismissed the problem by telling women that they did not realize how lucky they were. They claimed that there was no solution to the problem, as this was what it meant to be a woman (2010: 13).

In 1947, the *Journal* ran an article about the “phenomenon of radio soap opera” in the context of domesticity. Author and housewife Aloise Buckley Heath stated that “the housewife`s day was something to be endured rather than enjoyed because of the `many daily activities of a woman which require utter mindlessness`” (Matthews, 1989: 209). Soap operas helped her fill her days in which she had “work on her hands and nothing on her mind” (ibid). In 1960, writer Anne Sexton stated that “domesticity was [...] as [a] constricting [...] prison” (1989: 214). For Sexton, home did not represent much solace, as it did “defeat and denial of one`s full humanity”. In her poem “Housewife”, cited in Matthews (1989: 215), she was inspired by her long-term identity as a housewife:

Some women marry houses. It`s another kind of skin; it has a heart, a mouth, a liver and bowel movements. The walls are permanent and pink. See how she sits on her knees all day faithfully washing herself down. Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah into their fleshy mothers. A woman is her mother. That`s the main thing.

The poem echoes much of what Friedan is mediating. The imagery of this poem is interesting, because it is saying something about being trapped and abused in the position as a housewife. It also reveals how men are seen as dominant part in a marriage. The life as a housewife is permanent, just like the house, and she should only be cleaning, cooking, and looking after her family. Sexton suggests that the wife is a mother to both her husband and children, and being a mother is the “main thing”. This is similar to the Ramsays in *To The Lighthouse*, as Mrs. Ramsay is acting as the mother to both her children and husband. Much like the Victorian ideals and attitudes, the poem states that all women in the 1950s are valued by their ability to be mothers and housewives.

When Friedan began to see the dimension of the problem, she went to the different “sources of difficulty for women”, which included “Freudian psychology, functionalist social science that enshrined the status quo as the norm, educators who failed to respect female intellectual abilities, and the manipulations of advertisers eager to sell products to housewives” (1989: 219). In the 1960s, “the problem that has no name burst like a boil through the image of the happy American housewife” (Friedan, 2010: 11). The unhappiness of women in America was suddenly being reported and acknowledged. Gradually, whole issues of magazines, newspaper columns and books were devoted to the problem, and suddenly it was impossible to ignore or dismiss these voices. When *The Feminine Mystique* was published, Friedan became the center of attention of all media. The women’s magazines could no longer ignore her, and they all ran articles about her and her view on “the problem”. During her interviews in magazines and TV, “she consistently challenged the conventional wisdom about women” (Matthews, 1989: 219).

Friedan states that the solution to “the problem that has no name” has to come from women themselves. They have to confront the “housewife trap” and start listening to their own voice. Friedan further argues that only facing the problem is not enough. Friedan confirms this when writing that

[o]nce she begins to see through the delusions of the feminine mystique – and realizes that neither her husband nor her children, nor the things in her house, nor sex, nor being like all the other women, can give her a self – she often finds the solution much easier than she anticipated.

(Friedan, 2010: 274)

Women were putting the social norms and ideals before their own needs and voice. Friedan stresses that women need to provide answers on their own, not being dependent on others. They must ask themselves “what do I want to do?” and then seek answers in order to discover their own self-identity (ibid).

4.3.5 Sex and Marriage

Plath, through Esther, is ruthless towards characters that hold a double standard for women and men when it comes to premarital sex. According to Ferretter, whenever Plath heard

someone claim that the man's world was different from a woman's as an argument against premarital sex, she used it in her novel in order to provide an example of "discourse used by women who have bought into patriarchy against the interests of women like Esther who want to criticize and change it" (Ferretter, 2010: 122-123). Esther has naive expectations of what marriage and sex should be like, much because of her mother and others in her social surrounding. She believes that in order to "be acceptable as a wife she must remain a virgin, and after marriage she must assume a submissive domestic role" (Bernard, 1978: 25-26). Esther rebels against these beliefs, because of their limitations and the fact that men are not bound by similar premarital rules (1978: 26).

During the fifties, experts advised women not to have premarital sex, as it was damaging, in relation to both the individual and society (Ferretter, 2010: 117). Judson and Mary Landis's textbook from 1954, *Building a Successful Marriage*, cited in Ferretter (2010: 117), argue against premarital sex because it would lead to "mental and emotional conflict" in girls. It would not prepare couples for marriage, in fact, it would "lead to a misguided choice of partner with whom you have nothing but sex in common". In another social science textbook, cited in Ferretter (2010: 117), called *Making the Most of Marriage*, Paul Landis argues for similar views as he claims that "[e]vidence available to date suggests that marriages of the chaste are most successful under the culture pattern of the United States". An article in the *Ladies' Home Journal* with the title "How to be Marriageable" published in 1954, had an interview with Dr. Paul Popenoe, the director of the American Institute of Family Relations. He told the readers that: "By their 30th birthday 82 per cent of all American women are married. The woman of 30 who is unmarried has only about one chance in five of finding a mate" (2010: 140). In 1958, *McCall* published an article called "129 Ways to Get a Husband", which stated: "In the United States today, there are sixteen million women over the age of seventeen who are not married. Presumably the vast majority of them would like to be" (2010: 141). The messages were much the same in many of the advice manuals published in the 1950s.

According to Esther, the world is divided "into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't" (Plath, 2013: 77). She is obsessed with love and sex, but it terrifies her as well. When Buddy takes off his clothes, the sight of him depresses her. Esther describes Buddy's penis as disgusting: "The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzard" (2013: 64). He removes his clothes in a clinical way, not as something with pleasure, as one might argue that Buddy too is performing his role as "male". *The Bell Jar* is critical of a society where women were expected to be pure and chaste before marriage and

men were not. Buddy serves as an example of the hypocrisy and double standards. He reveals that he lost his virginity to a waitress, but he still expects Esther to stay pure, which enrages Esther. In the novel, Esther's mother sends her an article called "In Defence of Chastity" (2013: 76). Plath did experience this herself as her mother gave her the book *The Case for Chastity* by Margaret Culkin Banning (Ferretter, 2010: 121). This book concerns the author's notion of social dangers of premarital sex. She claims that it is "risks of venereal disease, unwanted pregnancy, the infection and death that can follow an abortion" (ibid). Esther states that the main point of the article was that a "man's world is different from a woman's world and a man's emotions are different from a woman's emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds [...] together" (Plath, 2013: 76). Therefore, the only option for a secure, happy life seems to be through the institution of marriage.

During Plath's years at Smith, she expressed in her journals that she did not agree with this "dominant ideology of marriage" and that it was unlivable. She did not want to give up herself in order to support her husband. According to Rosalie Wells in her article "Revisiting The Bell Jar", Plath "depicts marriage [...] in an impressively grim way" (Wells, 2015). Esther does not want to be "the place an arrow shoots off from", but she wants to "shoot off in all directions" herself (Plath, 2013: 79). Women were supposed to support their men by creating orderly and attractive homes. The husbands' jobs were considered of much importance, and the woman's job was to nurture him and his ambitions. It is this vision and ideal that troubles Esther, as she has always nurtured ambitions of her own. Her goal in life has never been to simply help a husband. She does not accept the idea that women should be satisfied with marriage and the domestic sphere, while men could go off doing whatever they wanted. Plath told her mother in 1955 that she had no intention of becoming "someone else's secretary". She did not want to be subordinated to others, "precisely the view she attributes to Esther" (Ferretter, 2010: 144). Esther states that she does not want to "transcribe letter after thrilling letter" but to write her "own thrilling letters" (Plath, 2013: 72).

Much like Lily Briscoe, Esther occasionally fantasize about marriage, but she knows it would mean a life in the domestic sphere, submissive to her husband: "because cook and clean and wash was just like Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night" (Plath, 2013: 80). Mrs. Willard serves as an example of traditional roles for women as a mother and housewife in post-war America. Esther says that this view of the ideology of femininity makes her tired. Marriage becomes impossible for Esther, as she knows it will destroy her own identity. Being only a housewife and mom is according to Esther equal to being "brainwashed" and "numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (2013: 81). Not

surprisingly, Esther associate marriage with a complete loss of identity and self. She is tired of the “constant struggle to define and defend her desires against the weight of ideology which tells her that they are misplaced or deviant” (Ferretter, 2010: 147). Esther experiences such a massive pressure of the “dominant gender ideologies” that it drives her to attempt suicide. Esther wants to become “the arrow”, namely having the opportunity to do whatever she wants. But if Esther steps outside the norm concerning the female role, it means that she ceases to exist “as a woman in the way that the concept of woman is publicly defined” (2010: 148). She feels no other option but to leave the world.

4.3.6 Medicine and Psychiatry: Trapped Inside The Bell Jar

One of the major topics in Plath`s novel is the criticism towards medical institutions in post-war America. Plath focuses her criticism on “obstetrics and gynecology as a patriarchal institution” (Ferretter, 2010: 125). These were institutions where “men alienate women from themselves by assuming control, under the beneficent guise of care, of women`s bodies” (ibid). Plath criticism concerns how patriarchy was revealed through psychiatry and the medical professions.

The novel`s opening sets the tone for Esther`s struggles, both inner and outer. It is an introduction to Esther`s voice as she talks about the coverage of the Rosenbergs: “The summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs” (Plath, 2013: 1). Esther recognizes much of the same feelings of what she thinks the Rosenbergs must be feeling at the moment: powerless, judged and threatened. Esther feels like her inside does not match the outside reality: “I was supposed to be having the time of my life” (2013: 2). But on the inside feeling “very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo” (2013: 2-3). This echoes much of what Giddens claims (1991) concerning anxiety and self-identity. Esther does not feel any validation in relation to her identity and who she is, as she does not live up to the standards of the gender role ideology. In result, she becomes vulnerable and insecure, not understood or validated, something she desperately longs for. Esther feels that she cannot be the ideal 1950s woman, who is chaste, cheerful and subordinated to her husband. However, the society expects women of Esther`s age to be flexible, confident and happy, at the same time as elegant. Esther feels that she has to repress her dark humor, in order to fit in, as there is no space for her “me”. The world of fashion and beauty in New York should make her happy, but it does not. Her relationship with men

should be meaningful and romantic, but they are filled with doubt and brutality. She senses a gap between what the society expects her to be feeling, and what she actually feels, and it is this gap that forces her into madness. Esther believes that she is the only one who perceives the world like this, and eventually she begins alienating herself from the reality. This echoes what Friedan argues about “the problem that has no name”. Women thought they were alone in the dark depression, and throughout the novel, Esther does not open up entirely to anyone. However, the reader is able to capture her thoughts, and therefore also her inner feelings. She, just like many American women, tried to process this depression alone.

Perhaps Plath’s most explicit critique is when Esther is at the teaching hospital, watching a woman give birth (Plath, 2013: 61). She describes the table as a “torture table”, with sight of its “stirrups”, “instruments”, “wires” and “tubes”. The woman giving birth is nothing but “an enormous spider-fat stomach [...] with “two little ugly spindly legs” (ibid). Buddy tells Esther that they have given the woman a drug that will put her in a sort of “twilight sleep”, something that would make her forget the pain. But Esther hears the woman moaning in terrible pain. All the time during the birth, the woman is making an “unhuman whooping noise” (ibid). The choice of the word “unhuman” describes Plath’s notion of how the society did not understand women’s experience in giving birth (Ferretter, 2010: 126). It is obvious that the woman can feel all the pain or she else would not be moaning. Esther views the situation as another way men are able to control women and notes that it sounded “just like the sort of drug a man would invent” (Plath, 2013: 61-62).

After Esther’s first sexual encounter, she experiences the power relationship between men and women during her gynecological examination. Ferretter notes that “Plath portrays this examination as a similarly structured power relationship to those involved in the birth scene” (Ferretter, 2010: 127). Esther’s doctor does not try to establish a caring relationship with her, neither does he try to hide his amusement: “It’s one in million it happens to like this” (Plath, 2013: 223). When Esther asks if he is able to stop the bleeding, it seems like the doctor is amused: “Oh I can fix it, all right” (ibid). Ferretter states that this is “all depersonalizing experiences” (Ferretter, 2010: 128), as the doctor does not try to establish any kind of relationship with her. According to Diana Scully and Pauline Bart in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Orifice: Women in Gynecology Textbooks*, gynecologists were the society’s official specialist on women, “commenting on their psyches as well as on the illness of their reproductive tracts (1973: 1045). They further assert that this institution appear to be another force, trying to maintain the traditional sex-role stereotypes, from a male

perspective. Esther's gynecologist does not look at Esther as an equal in the society, as he is clearly showing his attitude towards her as a female.

Plath's strongest critique of the gender politics in health care was towards the institution of psychiatry. Ferretter cites a study from 1968, which showed that many psychiatrists diagnosed mental illness "where it did not in fact exist" (Ferretter, 2010: 129). For Dr. Gordon, it takes just one incident to conclude that Esther is mentally ill. Phyllis Chesler, cited in Ferretter (2010: 129), states in *Woman and Madness* that "most clinician-theorists are trained to find "pathology" everywhere: in women, in children, in men, in nations, in entire historical epochs", which is the case in *The Bell Jar*. When Esther meets Dr. Gordon for the first time, he acts, according to Ferretter, in "a culturally typical manner", when he sends her for ECT treatment and wants to hospitalize her (2010: 132). Esther is intelligent and has ambitions, which can be seen in her writing and frustration when she does not get into the prestigious writing class. However, these "would have been characteristic signs to a young, self-confident male psychiatrist of a young woman pathogenically rejecting her feminine role" (ibid). She had not changed clothes or washed her hair during their first meeting, which would confirm this. Plath is criticizing and perhaps ironizing Dr. Gordon's acceptance of "the dominant images of femininity" (ibid), as he praises the students at Esther's college as a "pretty bunch of girls" (Plath, 2013: 126). However, Esther does not look pretty and elegant at this point, thus "failing to conform to cultural norms of femininity" (Ferretter, 2010:133). Esther is therefore judged as mentally ill. When her physical health fails, she is no longer able to engage with the world, and her body mirrors her inside. This is very much the view that Plath expresses throughout the novel.

The power relationship between men and women can be seen in a vast number of the relationships and situations Esther finds herself in. Dr. Gordon is a well-paid doctor, who is highly respected by the society. The society believes in his ability to treat Esther, but instead he increases the depression he is supposed to be decreasing (Ferretter, 2010:133). She imagines that her psychiatrist would be "a kind, ugly, intuitive man [...]", someone who understands and gets her (Plath, 2013: 123). She envisions that he will see something she can not, and guide her back to herself: "[...] he would help me, step by step, to be myself again" (2013: 124). Esther is in need of "kindness and intuition" in order to get well, but she gets "arrogance, expertise and the physical intervention that follows from the contemporary psychiatric belief in the biological determination of mental illness" (Ferretter, 2010: 133-134). She needs guidance back to her real self, but the truth is that the society does not allow such "myself". Dr. Gordon's treatment is only guiding her towards what the society wants and

expects her to be.

Esther's anger towards Dr. Gordon is depicted through a picture on his desk, a family photograph. It shows a dark haired woman, who is smiling next to two blond children. The picture is clearly visible to his patients as well: "For some reason the photograph made me furious" (Plath, 2013: 124). The photograph represents something that is perfect, something that seems impossible to achieve. Esther wonders how a man like Dr. Gordon could possibly understand how she is feeling, when his life is perfect. Her anger is not only towards Dr. Gordon as an individual, but at the entire treatment institution. Instead of helping her "step by step" into well-being, the treatment functions "as a way of marginalizing and disempowering a woman already in distress" (Ferretter, 2010: 135). Plath's criticism is portrayed through the metaphor of a halo, which is described by the photography itself. The patient on the other side of the table is excluded from one side of the picture, which Ferretter asserts to be "a circle of social acceptability, of membership and power in society" (ibid). The circle shows the power relationship between both doctor and patient, and female and male. Esther is obviously placed outside of the "discourses of health, knowledge and power" by her doctor and the institution of psychiatry. Dr. Gordon's first question confirms Esther's fears as he asks her: "Suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong" (Plath, 2013: 124). He implies that there is no problem, just that Esther does not conform to the society's rules of femininity. According to the doctors and experts, there was no problem with the society and its expectations, only with women who was not satisfied in their roles as mothers and wives. Esther is quickly placed as an outsider, an abnormal female. This is especially emphasized in her second meeting with Dr. Gordon where he does not "acknowledge her existence as a subject" (Ferretter, 2010: 135), but says that he would like to speak with her mother (Plath, 2013: 135). Esther is no longer even worth talking to. When Esther gets her treatment, she painfully asks: "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done" (2013: 138). According to Ferretter, Plath is using the ECT treatment to show how "women are controlled by and forced to conform to the norms of patriarchal society" (Ferretter, 2010: 137).

The bell jar serves as a key symbol in the text. It is first mentioned in chapter fifteen, when Esther says that she "would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in [her] own sour air" (Plath, 2013: 178). For Esther, the bell jar symbolizes the madness she is descending into. She feels the glass that separates her from being the agent of her life and connecting with the people around her. In the jar, she breathes "her own sour air", and she claims that she has no control over her sickness, as the illness is trapping her inside. As many of the doctors indicate that it is no disease, that this is in fact Esther's fault for not

conforming to the feminine role, makes her become even more depressed. At the end of the novel, Esther recognizes that the bell jar has lifted, but she can still sense it over her and she is waiting for it to drop at any time. Bassnett argues that *The Bell Jar* is not merely a criticism of psychiatry and medical institutions, but also about what happens to a girl when she is forced into the categories of womanhood offered by the patriarchal society. Esther has to “come to terms with the world, [...] world of destruction and horror” (Bassnett, 1987: 122). The breakdown, suicide attempt and recovery are all crucial in order to understand the novel and Esther’s evolution of her self-identity. Plath is trying to mediate that mental illness is a collective problem, not a personal one. She wants to link the problems women had in post-war America to the society, and does so by demonstrating how women were considered sick or abnormal if they did not conform to the established gender roles. By the end of the novel, Esther understands that her own mental illness is a reflection of the society and world around her. She realizes that the women in college were also trapped under their own bell jars, as the bell jars were not only limited to the mental hospital. It was the cost of living as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Esther’s project is similar to Lily Briscoe’s in *To The Lighthouse*. They both want to be accepted as human beings. As Friedan stated, “woman today must think of herself as a human being first”, not only as a mother and wife, and “make a life plan in terms of her own abilities, a commitment of her own to society” (Friedan, 2010: 279). However, in post-war America it was “easier to live through someone else than to become complete yourself” (2010: 274). As previously mentioned, it was either double life or no life, as a result of the patriarchy. When Esther realizes that there is no answer to the question “Who am I?” except the voice inside her, she is frightened. She feels unable to establish a self-identity, as she is “reduced to deriving her identity from the expectations of others” (Bernard, 1978: 26). She has to kill off her feminine mystique, in order to live the life she wants. She needs to start listening to her own voice, not the one of society, in order to find out who she really is. Again, this correlates to what Lily felt in early twentieth century. They are putting the social norms and ideals before their own needs and voice. But in order to become who they really want to be, they have to stop conforming to the conventional ideal of femininity. However, Lily does in fact manage to break free from the implicit rules of the Victorian era. She does not internalize the angel and moves forward towards a future as a human being. Esther, on the other hand, does not. As she leaves the hospital she is in limbo, a place of uncertainty. There is still a split between Esther’s idea of “me” and the outside reality.

5 Helen Fielding: *Bridget Jones's Diary*

“The Victorian woman became her ovaries, as today's woman has become her “beauty.”

Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (2015: 222)

5.1 Self- Identity and The Myth of Self-Perfection

The chapter will present a study of Bridget Jones in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, in order to see how Fielding deals with the aspect of self-identity. As the two previous chapters, this will also investigate identity in light of Giddens' fundamental question: “How Shall I live?” In the previous chapters, we have seen how the dominant ideology has affected women from early up until mid- twentieth century. Even though the two texts dealt with so far are different in both form and context, they show women who tried to create their own identity in a society that had strong beliefs and attitudes concerning women. Similarly, *Bridget Jones's Diary* deals with a woman and her struggle to adapt to the implicit rules of the patriarchal society she lives in. Bridget too tries to challenge the norms and ideals in order to find her own way. The book was written in 1996, after the third wave of feminism, when patriarchy was weakened or, at least, took on more subtle forms. However, it is nevertheless an inherent basis for the social structures that still surround us today. Or as Caitlin Moran (2012) puts it: “It's a good time to be a woman: we have the vote and the Pill, and we haven't been burnt as witches since 1727. However, a few nagging questions do remain ...”. Thus, the aim of the chapter is to investigate how Bridget, just like Mrs. Ramsay, Lily and Esther, is trying to come to terms with who she is, even though her feelings, ideas and instincts might be in conflict with the dominant ideology.

During the two previous periods studied, there have been myths related to women's appearance and beauty. Both Woolf and Plath had to deal with images of how they were suppose to look and act. Today, the myth of self-perfection is the new myth of woman and the curse of our time. According to Kelly Marsh, the myth of self-perfection, “the idea that the self can be completely remade, saturates Bridget's consciousness” (Marsh, 2004). In order to unpack what the myth consists of, the chapter will investigate Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*

(1991). Her main argument is that as women have gained more power and prominence, a pressure to conform to the unrealistic standards of beauty has also increased, much because of the mass media. Therefore, there will also be a section concerning the media and its part in upholding the myth.

Bridget Jones's Diary portrays a year in the life of a thirty-something, career-minded Bridget Jones. She is a self-involved woman, concerned with her weight, appearance and finding a suitable boyfriend. The book is written as a diary, which results in a very honest language. The reader is able to access her own reflections, hopes and dreams, in addition to her fears and disappointments. Much like *To The Lighthouse* and Mrs. Ramsay, one is able to see how Bridget is interpreting all the happenings in her life. The novel tracks Bridget's life during twelve-months, beginning with her New Year's resolutions. These resolutions include quitting smoking, drinking less, finding a boyfriend, losing weight and getting a better career. Bridget uses a set of abbreviations, which the reader easily can follow such as "v" for "very" or "v.g." for "very good". Bridget's year revolves much around her looking for romantic love. During the twelve months, she dates both her boss Daniel Cleaver and Mark Darcy, a newly divorced man who just moved back from America. Bridget's friends and family are always asking her about her love life and when she plans on getting children. At the end of the novel Mark sweeps Bridget away from the Christmas party and declares his love to her. The book ends with a summary of her progress on her resolutions, which shows that she has only kept one: "Number of New Year's Resolutions kept 1 (v.g.) (Fielding, 2010: 271). Bridget is constantly underplaying herself, even though she owns her own apartment in central London, works in publishing and television, attracts desirable men and has a wide circle of friends. Bridget never feels good enough, for herself or her surroundings. As a result of the constant pressure to conform to the beauty myth, Bridget is always trying to improve herself.

In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, there are two levels. On the one hand it shows us Bridget, who is trying to find her way in a social setting, on the other hand the novel shows us a social setting that views, presents and expects certain things of women. The novel serves as to mirror society's view on women in the contemporary society. Ian Adams states in *Ideology and Politics in Britain Today*, that "people do not exist in a vacuum; in fact, they only exist in relation to others. The completely autonomous self of liberal theory is a myth" (Adams, 1998: 148). Similar views are found in Susan M. Andersen and Serena Chen in "The relational self: an interpersonal social-cognitive theory" (2002). They state that "the self is relational –or even entangled- with significant others, and that this has implications for self-definition, self-evaluation, self-regulation, and, most broadly, for personality functioning, expressed in

relation to others” (Andersen & Chen, 2002: 619). In other words, one is shaped by experiences with others. The dominant ideology plays a crucial role in the perception of one’s self, and consequently, the identity and personality are defined through social relationships. The self, which consists of feelings and beliefs that one has regarding oneself, develops based on interactions with others. Everybody is trying to “help” Bridget in all aspects of her life: love, work and appearance. Bridget is very much affected by her surroundings, always trying to live beyond her own means. She is constantly reminded that she does not conform to the societal rules, that she is not complete. In the eyes of the society, Bridget is, in fact, failing. The truth is that Bridget is not given any room to be anything else then what the society is offering her. The social structure is forcing ideological messages of beauty on Bridget and she is expected to live by it, both by the society and herself.

5.1.1 The Modern Woman

Bridget Jones serves an example of the modern woman in a contemporary environment. According to Jenni Murray in her article “20th Century Britain: The Woman’s Hour”, “the twentieth century will, without doubt, be viewed by historians as the Woman’s Hour” (Murray, 2011). To be a woman in the late twentieth century is in many ways easier than in the previous periods that the thesis has investigated. As a result of the different waves of feminism, women have gained equal rights, e.g. the right to vote, access to education and workplace. These were some of the issues that both Woolf and Plath discussed in their time. Women have also attained mental liberation, which is how they see themselves as individuals. Women are now able to see more for themselves than what they could in the past, and not only in relation to something or someone else. However, there are still some unresolved questions that need to be addressed. Even though men have shouldered some of the burdens concerning the domestic sphere and gender roles, “women still have not been released from their traditional roles cooking, cleaning, and caring for children even as they’ve assumed new roles in society”. In result, women have the opportunity to work outside the home, but they are still “struggling to ‘have it all’ by bearing the double-burden of traditional roles and work”.⁷

In 1995, Fielding was invited to contribute to a column at *The Independent* in London.

⁷ <https://www.docsoffreedom.org/readings/women-s-rights-in-the-late-20th-century>

It was a group of single women who wrote personal columns about themselves. In 1997, Fielding expressed to a friend that she created a fictional persona, “an imaginary amalgam of insecurities,” because: “If you write as yourself, you can’t help but want people to like you. If you write as somebody else, you can be honest about the secret, stupid, shameful things”.⁸ When writing these personal columns, she consulted some of her old journals and was surprised that they included information concerning both drinking and counting calories. These discoveries became a part of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (ibid). Fielding contributes as a counter voice to what it actually means to be a woman today. Magazines, television, newspapers and other kinds of mediums offer images of women that often do not match reality. Fielding’s book presents a woman and the different aspects of womanhood, in which she struggles to accept. Fielding, through Bridget, is challenging the new myth of woman in order to show us how it actually is to be a woman today.

Similar views are found in Caitlin Moran’s *How To Be a Woman* (2011). She questions the different aspects of a woman’s life, and how women often feel forced to conform to the different ideals. Her goal is to find out how to be a socially accepted woman in the contemporary society, and she discusses in her post-script whether or not she has achieved this. She acknowledges that there are still parts of being a woman that she has yet to figure out, such as teenage children, menopause and family bereavement. She admits that she cannot iron, do maths or drive a car (Moran, 2012: 297). However, she stops herself by stating that: “I distrust this female habit of reflexively flagging up your own shortcomings” (ibid). Women are not unfeminine or boorish when allowing themselves to be content. Moran advocates a need for women who will take responsibility for their own well being in society. She asks herself: “Do you know how to be a woman now?” and her important revelation is

to just...not really give a shit about all that stuff. To not care about all those supposed ‘problems’ of being a woman [...] Yes – when I had my massive feminist awakening, the action it provoked in me was a ...big shrug.

(Moran, 2012: 298)

There are always some goals for women that need to be achieved, and the ability to have it all has in some sense turned into a monster. Moran acknowledges that she worried a vast amount

⁸ http://bridgetarchive.altervista.org/fielding_biography.htm

about “what [she] should *be*” (2012: 299), something that all the female characters have felt as well. However, she realized that

All through those stumbling, mortifying, amazing years, I *thought* that what I wanted to be was a woman. [...] But as the years went on, I realized that what I really want to be, all told, is a human. Just a productive, honest, courteously treated human. One of ‘The Guys’.
(Moran, 2012: 309)

Moran, just like Fielding, has contributed to voicing a message concerning mainstream identity. Their personal columns and books contributed with a new voice in the contemporary environment, as they used writing to deal with and stand up to the dominant ideology.

5.1.2 Media: Image of Women

Media serves as a part of the machinery that upholds the myth of self-perfection. As shown in the two previous texts studied, the media has for a vast amount of time been very influential in shaping the image of women. Both in Woolf’s post-Victorian and Plath’s post-war society, women were affected by media and perhaps especially by magazines. It is interesting to investigate how there is a thread from the early twentieth century up until the contemporary, concerning the myth of woman. In the contemporary environment, the Internet has become common property and opened up a whole new world. The mass media affects everyone in some way and it is in fact impossible to dismiss or escape. Each year *People* magazine publishes a list of “the 50 most beautiful people in the world” (Travis & Meginnis-Payne, 2001: 192). Germaine Greer notes in *The Whole Woman* (1999) that “every woman knows that, regardless of her other achievements, she is a failure if she is not beautiful” (Greer, 1999: 19). UNESCO described the common stereotypical image of women in the media. According to them, the media often “portray[s] women as objects of male attention – the glamorous sex kitten, the sainted mother, the devious witch, the hard-faced corporate and political climber” (White, 2009: iv). This is similar to the Victorian concept of “woman”, which was described as either a whore or an angel. It was these images that Woolf wanted to destroy. It also bears a strong resemblance to what Plath struggled with in post-war America. Friedan found much of

the same images in magazines in the 1950s concerning women who did not conform to the feminine role.

According to Sandra Pacheco and Aida Hurtado in “Media Stereotypes”, the stereotypical image of women is still upheld in media today. They state that “media stereotypes that suggest there are expected roles for women including women as sexual objects, women as submissive and less knowledgeable, and women as housewives preoccupied with house cleaning and laundry are still prevalent” (Pacheco & Hurtado, 2001: 703). In our contemporary, much like the two previous periods studied, the media convey an image of what beauty is supposed to be. The messages about beauty are received via “print (newspaper and magazines), television, radio, film, and now via the Internet” (2001: 704). The general portrayal of women in media is often emphasizing the female body, “one that is substantially lower in weight than the average woman” (ibid). When the female body is not emphasized, the focus is often on the woman as the domestic manager of the home and family. Women are exposed to images of womanhood in the different mediums every day. This idealized image of thinness has caused an increased weight concern among young women, and are visible in titles such as “Get the Figure You Want”, portrayed next to titles such as “Get Your Man to Really Listen”. This leads to the conclusion that a “woman’s personal relationships are a function of her physical appearance” (2001: 706). In result, women are told to achieve an unrealistic ideal, much the same as women in the two previous periods:

Cultural ideals, values, norms, and expectations about physical attractiveness are ubiquitous; these messages occur in magazines, television commercial, and music videos, and are even covered as noteworthy items in the news.

(Pacheco & Hurtado, 2001: 706)

Media associates beauty with well-being, success and happiness, which makes it difficult for women to dismiss. It conveys a message that only “beautiful” women are “sophisticated, successful, popular and happy”. Thus, women feel like they are failing to conform to the ideal standards every day. Media often presents “unattainable images of physical attractiveness as normative”, which gives the impression that this is the only path to true happiness. Alternative paths and identities, concerning beauty and careers, are often presented in the media as more problematic (ibid).

Gauntlett also provides an insight in how magazines in the 1990s conveyed messages concerning beauty and the ideal woman. He focuses his critiques on *Cosmopolitan* and notes

that the messages were not consistent: “one article would encourage readers to be happy about their body size, whilst another would encourage slimming; [...] marriage might be endorsed or condemned (Gauntlett, 2008: 57). The reason for these contradictions was that the “*Cosmo* woman” was expected to be so many things; “sexy, successful, glamorous, hard-working; sharp and relaxed in social settings, powerful and likeable at work” (2008: 58). Gauntlett further explains the problems with female magazines:

[F]irstly, that being a woman involves constantly adjusting one`s own image to fit time and place in an ever-changing games of images; and secondly, that “real life” is constantly thought through “(dream) images”.

(Gauntlett, 2008: 58)

Bridget is affected by the American culture and its ideals. She considers herself “a child of Cosmopolitan culture (Fielding, 2010: 52), and she is trying to be the “*Cosmo* woman”, both physically and mentally. She wants to be sexy and glamorous, at the same time as sharp and hardworking. *Cosmopolitan* is presenting an image that many women want to be, but perhaps impossible to achieve. These ideals presented through magazines bear strong resemblance to the ideals both Woolf and Plath dealt with during their time. This was an ideal that constantly changed over time, but expected women to follow. The female characters in all three texts have in some degree been governed by these ideals, trying to conform to what the different myths of their time convey.

5.1.3 Self-help books

In the search for a perfect self, Bridget and her friends also rely much on self-help books. *Women Who Love Too Much*, *Men Are From Mars and Women Are From Venus*, *The Roads Less Traveled* are books often used. Bridget seems seduced by the promise of this process, but gradually finds that it is in conflict with her own self. According to Gauntlett, self-help books are “another source of lifestyle information” (Gauntlett, 2008: 117). The problem with self-help books is that they convey a message that there actually is something wrong with people. Bridget and her friends are reading these books and finding even more things that they do not achieve or accomplish. They will often fail in the search for a perfect self, because the self-help books will in some degree support their inferiority and lack of self-esteem. The self-help books make individuals create an ideal self, one that they can try to be true to. Instead of

changing herself, however, Bridget reads until she finds something that justifies what she already is: “I realize it has become too easy to find a diet to fit in with whatever you happen to feel like eating and that diets are not there to be picked and mixed but picked and stuck to, which is exactly what I shall begin to do once I’ve eaten this chocolate croissant” (Fielding, 2010: 65). In spite of all her resolutions and advice from self-help books, Bridget does not succeed in remaking herself. Wendy Chapkis, cited in Peach (1998: 174), states that “women can overcome the beauty system by refusing to accept its prescriptions”. Everything is interrelated to the myth of self-perfection. Even though Bridget knows she is not “perfect” in the eyes of the myth, she constantly tries to remake herself into what the myth idealizes.

5.1.4 The Singletons

The Singletons also contribute to voicing a message concerning mainstream identity. Bridget and her friends call themselves “singletons” and try to support each other as well as possible:

And because there`s more than one bloody way to live: one in four households are single, most of the royal family are single, the nation`s young men have been proved by surveys to be completely unmarriageable, and as a result there`s a whole generation of single girls like me with their own incomes and homes who have lots of fun and don`t need to wash anyone else`s socks. [...] Hurrah for the Singletons”.

(Fielding, 2010: 37)

In fact, they believe in their values, such as independence, so much that they have in some sense built up a strong collective identity as “singletons”: “We women are only vulnerable because we are a pioneer generation daring to refuse to compromise in love and relying on our own economic power. In twenty years` time men won`t even dare start with fuckwittage because we will just laugh in their faces” (2010: 18). Bridget and her single friends are united to face what is really their society`s oppression.

The creation of the Singletons union is a way of standing up against the dominant ideology concerning love and marriage. They are trying to free themselves from its rules, even though they receive a lot of criticism for not being married. Bridget and her friends struggle with similar problems as Victorian women did, the most important being finding a husband. Even though Bridget and her friends call themselves the “Singletons”, to refer to the positive aspects of being single, they all long for love. In Bridget`s resolutions she states: “I will not sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete without a boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend”

(Fielding, 2010: 2). Bridget and her friends' idea of the singleton is something that would not have been admired in the Victorian society, rather a nightmare. When a woman in the Victorian society did not find a husband, she had two options. She could live off her relatives or become a governess (Altick, 1973: 55). Either way, her status in the society would make her an inappropriate member. Things have changed, and Bridget is not literally pushed outside the society. However, there are still single women, who experience similar situations as the Victorian women. Bridget goes to family gatherings and is asked frequently when it is time to get married, or when to have children. Many of the Victorian values and ideals are in some degree upheld in the contemporary society, or as Bridget herself puts it: "Maybe they really do want to patronize us and make us feel like failed human beings" (Fielding, 2010: 35).

5.1.5 The New Myth of Woman

According to Travis and Meginnis-Payne in "Beauty Politics and Patriarchy: The Impact on Women's Lives", the different beauty myths that have characterized the 19th and 20th centuries, "serve [...] to uphold the importance of attractiveness in women's lives" (Travis & Meginnis-Payne, 2001: 190). The different myths are interesting to investigate because they say something about how women are always defined in relation to something else, in similar terms to what de Beauvoir stresses as "the Other". De Beauvoir argues that women have become "the other" as a result of always being defined in relation to someone or something else, namely what men are not: "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (Beauvoir, 2015: 7). In de Beauvoir's view of constructed womanhood, she stresses that women became "the other" through gendered myths and that these myths were used as an excuse to gain and maintain power in a patriarchal society. Similar to what the female characters experienced in the previous texts, Bridget is always being defined in relation to something she is not.

The main point of Wolf's (1991) argument is that women are often defined in their ability to be a domestic goddess or their ability to attain a certain kind of beauty. In some sense it seems like their self-identity ceases to exist in all the noise of cosmetic surgery, dieting and different beauty industries. Women are all told to look the same, in consequence to not be different. Other paths to happiness are not presented in the same amount, and even so, they are perceived as different and abnormal. Similar views are found in *Women in*

culture: A Women's Studies Anthology, where Peach claims that women are defined by their bodies and labeled as "other" as a result of the myth. Peach describes the beauty myth as a "modern phenomenon that replaced the older myth of domesticity", in other words, that women should be placed in the home as mothers and wives (Peach, 1998: 171).

The emphasis on women's physical appearance led many women to pursue beauty ideals at any cost. In result, the myth compels women to depend on outside approval for their own self-identity and self-worth (1998: 172). Peach argues that "[w]omen are so often viewed as being fundamentally ornamental and decorative that many attempt to measure their own value and self-worth in terms of their appearance" (1998: 171-172). The mass media and its industries convey a message that women are not good enough as they are, that they need to modify themselves in order to be accepted by the society (1998: 173). According to Wolf, "youth and (until recently) virginity have been "beautiful" in women since they stand for experiential and sexual ignorance", while aging is considered "unbeautiful" (Wolf, 2015: 14). The ideal is to be white, thin, young and intelligent. The different beauty industries are also becoming more and more powerful: "the \$33-billion-a-year diet industry, the \$20-billion cosmetics industry, the \$300-million cosmetic surgery industry, and the \$7-billion pornography industry" (2015: 17). According to this line of reasoning one might argue that being a woman today imply that one's own outside and inside is not sufficient, and that one should aspire to something more. These industries, much like the media, convey an ideal that is in many cases impossible to achieve.

Wolf also argues women's magazines' role in increasing the strength of the myth, even though they are "one of the most powerful agents for changing women's roles" (Wolf, 2015: 64). She states that the use of emaciated models (2015: 207), airbrushed faces (2015: 82) and unrealistic ads (2015: 96) targeted at women, serves to perpetuate the myth rather than trying to increase its power over women who try to break free from it. These magazines represent the female mass culture, which in result make the messages they convey very powerful. Kate Betts confessed in the *New York Times* style section, that she had removed actress Renée Zellweger from the cover of *Vogue* because she was "too fat". Zellweger gained weight in order to become the size of the average woman, for her role in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Wolf notes that "[w]hat is seldom acknowledged is that they have popularized feminist ideas more widely than any other medium" (2015: 71). As the result of being so powerful and widespread among all types of women, magazines are able to create and convey the standards of beauty, and consequently the ideal woman.

5.1.6 Bridget's Quest towards Perfection

In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget is constantly trying to achieve what the myth of beauty depicts as the ideal woman. It starts with her New Year's resolutions, where she wants to find a "new job with potential", "reduce circumference of thighs by 3 inches" and "using anticellulite diet" (Fielding, 2010: 3). The myth of self-perfection is an important part of Bridget's life and she wants to remake herself in order to be the ideal, and consequently find a husband. Bridget believes that when she becomes "perfect", she will become happy and complete. Wendy Chapkis (1986), cited in Peach (1998: 174), states that women believe that if they can control their bodies, they can also control their lives. Bridget knows exactly what is expected from her. However, beauty is depicted in the media as something natural, but according to Bridget, this is not the case:

Ugh. Completely exhausted. Surely it is not normal to be revising for a date as if it were a job interview? [...] Since leaving work I have nearly slipped a disc, wheezing through a step aerobics class, scratched my naked body for seven minutes with a stiff brush; cleaned the flat; filled the fridge, plucked my eyebrows, skimmed the papers [...] and waxed my own legs.
(Fielding, 2010: 51)

Moran also comments on fashion and beauty in her *How To Be a Woman* (2011). She notes that "[i]t seems that being a woman is very expensive and time-consuming" (Moran, 2012: 197). Fashion and beauty defines the modern woman today, and Bridget knows what the norm of femininity is and she is trying her best to fulfill it. She wants to be thin, hairless in the right places, cellulite free and intelligent. The ideal woman should conform to the beauty myth, but she should also be intelligent. However, Wolf claims that "culture stereotypes women to fit the myth by flattening the feminine into beauty-without-intelligence or intelligence-without beauty" (Wolf, 2015: 59). Women are not allowed both, as male culture prefers to imagine women defined as either a winner or a loser in the beauty myth. This is similar to what the Victorian women experienced as being defined as either a whore or an angel. All women are expected to be striving for the ideal presented to them, and Bridget is no different. She is doing her best in order to achieve this:

I have spent so many years on a diet that the idea that you might actually need calories to survive has been completely wiped out of my consciousness. Have reached point where believe nutritional ideal is to eat nothing at all, and that the only reason people eat is because they are so greedy.

(Fielding, 2010: 225)

Bridget has somewhat integrated the ideological message of beauty and its ideal woman. As a result of growing up within such a framework, Bridget has internalizes these ideals and ideas that involves the beauty myth. She is doing much the same as both Mrs. Ramsay and Esther, that is, acting out the gender role.

As stated above, much of Bridget`s struggles concerns her own body. According to Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the body* (1993), the body is a medium of culture. She further elaborates by asserting that “the body [...] is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (Bordo, 1993: 2362). In similar terms, Giddens argues that

the body is not just a physical entity which we `possess`, it is an action-system, a mode of praxis, and its practical immersion in the interaction of day-to-day life is an essential part of the sustaining of a coherent sense of self-identity.

(Giddens, 1991: 99)

According to both Bordo and Giddens, women`s body hold an important part in the aspect of self-identity in a social framework. This bears strong resemblance to the myth of self-perfection and how women can remake themselves, in order to become socially accepted.

Bridget`s quest for self-perfection is almost presented as a religion in the text. She often states in her diary what she is “supposed” to feel, but her narratives tell a different story. Her confessions are always backed up with explanations and reasons for her behavior: “129 lbs. (but post-Christmas), alcohol units 14 (but effectively covers 2 days as 4 hours of party was on New Year`s Day)” (Fielding, 2010: 7). On her list of food consumed during the day she notes “12 Milk Tray (best to get rid of all Christmas confectionery in one go and make fresh start tomorrow)” (ibid). When she does not reach her goals, it is never entirely her fault: “130 lbs. (terrifying slide into obesity - why? why?)” (2010: 15). Sometimes she even praises herself for behavior that falls short of her goals as she notes: “alcohol units 6 (excellent)” (ibid), but later “alcohol units 6” turns into a “(drink problem)” (2010: 212). This behavior can be seen several times throughout the novel, where she regrets something one time and

praises it another: 23 cigarettes is “(v. g.)” in one entry and “(v. v. bad, esp. in two hours)” in another (2010: 15 & 70). In this context, Marsh notes:

The contradictions these entries reveal that, although she frames it as such, Bridget’s narrative is not an account of a serious self-improvement program; her interest is less in improving herself than in justifying herself.

(Marsh, 2004)

Self-hatred is rarely involved when she details her life, but she rather presents us with a “thorough explanation of the self and all its vagaries” (ibid). Bridget is made to feel like she is a sinner, but it seems from her narratives that she is a sinner who has no intentions of remaking herself. Sometimes it even seems like she is celebrating her own self. Rita Felski notes in *On Confession*, cited in Smith and Watson (1998: 87) that “[l]iterary confession since the eighteenth century is primarily concerned not with the admission of guilt and the appeal to a higher authority, but rather with the affirmation and exploration of free subjectivity”. When the “historic and joyous day” arrives, and Bridget weighs 119 pounds, her friends comments on her appearance. However, it is not the positive comments Bridget expects, as she discovers that she looks “tired” and “drawn”. They even note that she “looked better before” (Fielding, 2010: 90-92). Interestingly, Moran, much like Bridget, notes,

I presumed that once I’d cracked being thin, beautiful, stylishly dressed, poised and gracious, everything else would fall into place. That my real life’s work was not a career – but myself. That if I worked on being pleasing, the world would adore, and then reward me.

(Moran, 2012: 299)

Moran thought, just like Bridget, that when she achieved all the goals of the myth, she would become happy, accepted and complete. They both thought that their inner and outer crisis would disappear. Moran further explains the expectations of the myth of beauty: If you look recognizably, straightforwardly human – the kind of reasonable figure a ten-year-old would draw, if asked to sketch a person in under a minute – then you are fine” (2012: 110). Moran did not experience an all-embracing difference in her life when she became thin and “beautiful”. Similarly, when Bridget attempts to use makeup in order to improve her appearance, Tom’s reaction is, “Good god [...]. You look like Barbara Cartland” (Fielding, 2010: 127). These two revelations come as a shock to her, since she is fully invested in this self-improvement. However, one can see a more objective attitude towards other kinds of self-improvement, when she demonstrates that she is more or less happy as she is. For

example, she wishes “to be like Tina Brown, though not, obviously quite so hardworking” (2010: 83).

Bridget is trying to be the ideal of the perfect self when she makes New Year’s resolutions that she cannot achieve: “I will not [...] [g]et upset over men, but instead be poised and cool ice-queen” (Fielding, 2010: 2), and when she makes unrealistic predictions that never come true: “Expect to become known as brilliant cook and hostess” (2010: 72). According to Marsh, this aspect of Bridget does not prove that she is a powerless female narrator, but rather that Fielding clearly does not believe in the myth that the self can be completely remade. While Bridget often compares herself to the perfect ideal, she ends up eventually liking herself when better trying to achieve it (Marsh, 2004). The film version of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* emphasizes this aspect, when Mark and Bridget admit to liking each other “just the way [they] are.”

In some degree, people are each other’s guardians. They become so used to the ideals and values within their social framework that they turn into guardians in order to make people stay within the roles that they believe they should be in. Bridget is a part of the society as well as everyone else, but is so used to the implicit rules that she also conveys these messages. Much like Esther’s post-America, Bridget believes that in order to be accepted by the society and particularly men, she has to look elegant, thin and pretty. Her biggest worry is that she will end up living alone, as she believes that “single women do tend to get desperate as they get older” (Fielding, 2010: 168). The image of the ideal woman portrayed in the media makes women feel like they are not good enough, both physically and mentally. They feel like they should be thinner and smarter, no matter how thin or intelligent they are. Bridget believes that when she reaches her goal, it will make her happy, self-confident and complete. She, much like Mrs. Ramsay and Esther, has internalized parts of the feminine role. Peach argues that [t]he beauty myth tells real-life women that they are overweight, chubby, chunky, obese, heavy, and too fat on relation to this standard (Peach, 1998: 175). Bridget does not, however, become happy and self-confident when she reaches her goal. She gradually realizes that the shape of her body has nothing to do with her inner reality.

5.1.7 Social Mothers, Love and Marriage

According to Peach, motherhood is considered women's highest achievement. Women who did not become mothers, have often been perceived as abnormal and not a true woman, as it seems like there is no action equal to giving birth to a child (Peach, 1998: 223) These ideals are common to the literary texts studied in the thesis, issues that all the female characters had to deal with. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the aspect of becoming a mother is not as evident as finding true love. However, in addition to pressuring Bridget into finding a suitable husband, her family and friends also believe that a woman must become a mother in order to be complete. They frequently ask her when she is going to start a family. At one point in her relationship with Daniel, Bridget believes that she is pregnant, and decides that she does not want an abortion. First she pictures "Daniel carrying the baby in a sling, Daniel rushing home from work, thrilled to find the two of us pink and glowing in the bath" (Fielding, 2010: 100). But as he ignores her, she pictures herself as a single mother. As she goes to buy a pregnancy test, she feels shameful, "wishing I'd put my ring on my wedding finger" (ibid). Bridget feels guilty again for not conforming to the societal rules, as she believes that in order to become a mother she has to be married. She is scared that her surroundings will judge her. Toril Moi argues in *What is a Woman* (1999), that the social ideology makes women who do not have children feel like a failure (Moi, 1999: 40). She states that "motherhood is a socially constructed institution regularly used to legitimize women's oppression" (1999: 41). In result, women feel forced to conform to the ideal of motherhood or be perceived as selfish.

Moran also investigates the issue of motherhood in the contemporary society. Women are always asked when they are going to have children and it is presumed that women will, eventually, end up having babies (Moran, 2012: 236). The contemporary environment has created the idea that being "a thinking, creative, productive and fulfilled woman" is not good enough (2012: 245). The question is never: do you want to have kids? Moran lists several childless men such as Da Vinci, Van Gogh and Beethoven, and states that they are not seen to have missed out on a vital aspect of existence. She argues that the society needs "more women who are allowed to prove their worth as people; rather than being assessed merely for their potential to create new people" (ibid). The aim has to be a shift in focus, so it is about "who we are; and what we're going to do" (2012: 246). According to Paula J. Caplan in "Motherhood: Its Changing Face", a change in recent decades is the option of whether or not to become mothers at all. Women are less likely to be regarded as selfish and abnormal now than 20 years ago. However, many women still do not receive support from their family and

friends for their decision, “for the long-standing stigma associated with choosing not to have a child has not been eradicated” (Caplan, 2001: 786). A vast part of the attitudes and beliefs concerning motherhood found in the early and mid twentieth century, are still upheld in the contemporary society.

Bridget is very affected by the external pressure. Marsh notes that the novel “reveals the external pressure she feels to be better than she is”. One such pressure is her mother, “whose expectations for her play a fairly complex role in Bridget’s thinking” (Marsh, 2004). Even though the book starts with New Year’s day, Bridget begins recounting a conversation between her mother and her that took place in August. Her mother is planning to use Christmas to improve Bridget’s appearance and image: “Why don’t I get you a little suitcase with wheels attached. You know, like air hostesses have. [Y]ou can’t go around with that tatty green canvas thing. You look like some sort of Mary Poppins person who’s fallen on hard times” (Fielding, 2010: 8). She also wants to improve her daughter’s love life: “Do you remember Mark, darling? He’s one of those top-notch barristers. Masses of money. Divorced” (2010: 9). However, later, when Bridget is “once again starting the year in a single bed in [her] parents’ house “wondering if she dares to “have a fag out of the window” (ibid), Marsh notes that looking like an air hostess, marrying a “strangely dressed opera freak with bushy hair burgeoning from a side-part” (ibid), not smoking, and even attending the Turkey Curry Buffet, are not Bridget’s wishes, but her mother’s (Marsh, 2004). Bridget often feels guilty when she is not able to please her mother and her expectations, and even Una Alconbury, in whom Bridget sees as “the mummy I’d never really had” (Fielding, 2010: 246), “seemed to manage to kiss me, get my coat off, hang it over the banister, wipe her lipstick off my cheek and make me feel incredibly guilty all in one movement” (2010: 210). Giddens asserts that guilt can cause anxiety “where the thoughts or activities of the individual do not match up to expectations of a normative sort” (Giddens, 1991: 64). Even though Bridget’s mother is not happy in her own marriage, she still wants to improve her daughters appearance in order for Bridget to get a husband.

Fielding has admitted to being influenced and inspired by Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* when writing the columns about Bridget. Mrs. Jones has more in common with *Pride and Prejudice* than the 1990s, as she seems transported from the Victorian era and into the contemporary. Peach states that “women have been historically defined in terms of the role as a mother” (Peach, 1998: 223), and even those who are not mothers are expected to behave as “social mothers”, nurturing and caring for others. The concept of “social mothers” is important when dealing with *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. It shows how we all function to keep

each other in check. By pushing her ideals and values on Bridget, Mrs. Jones is upholding the impossible ideals of self-perfection. Mothers are standing behind these impossible ideals of self-perfection where the goal is a husband and children, which in result makes the alteration of the system near impossible. People in this framework are backing it up and guarding it, and therefore upholding it. Mrs. Jones is not satisfied in her own marriage, but she still wants Bridget to marry. It seems like Mrs. Jones has integrated the systems ideals and attitudes, that she is blinded by it. She cannot see its flaws, and therefore still pushes it on her daughter. This echoes the struggle both Lily and Esther had in the previous texts studied. They too felt pressure from other women to conform to the rules of their time.

A vast part of *Bridget Jones's Diary* concerns Bridget and her journey towards finding a suitable husband. Even though she is longing for someone to spend her life with, she enjoys her freedom and independency. She wants to find Mr. Right, but not at any cost. Much like Lily, she does not want to lose her pride and independence in search for a husband: "I am a woman of substance and do not need men in order to be complete" (Fielding, 2010: 38). However, her surroundings want otherwise. Or as Moran puts it: "Chop chop! Find a husband! Look on Ocado! Or you'll end up *like poor barren lonely Jennifer Aniston*" (Moran, 2012: 236). Bridget believes that in order to become complete, that is, a socially accepted woman, she has to get married. Consequently, this becomes an important part of her life. It is the holy grail of her quest, and Bridget is obviously affected by the society's view on marriage. She is still considered a woman in her society, but subordinated. When she attends family gatherings or dinner with friends that are married, she is anxious because she knows she will get questions concerning her love life. It is the same people present, same conversation and same questions. To her horror, her friends and family are all trying to get her together with someone:

How's your love life, anyway? Oh *God*. Why can't married people understand that this is no longer a polite question to ask? We wouldn't rush up to *them* and roar, 'How's your marriage going? Still having sex? [...] 'So you still haven't got a feller!' 'Bridget! What *are* we going to do with you!' [...] 'You career girls! I don't know! Can't put it off forever, you know. Tick-tock-tick-tock.'

(Fielding, 2010: 10)

There have been changing attitudes towards marriage. Janice M. Steil in "Marriage: Still "His" and "Hers"?" argues that attitudes and beliefs about gendered family roles have become "increasingly egalitarian" (Steil, 2001: 679). However, there are still aspects that need to be improved. Steil refers to a study done in 1996, the same year as *Bridget Jones's Diary* was

published, which found that a vast number of the survey respondents agreed that it was "better for everyone if men are the achievers and women take care of the home" (ibid). Similar attitudes were found in a survey done in 1997, as survey respondents stated, "it is much better for everyone involved if the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home and children" (ibid). It is obvious that even though the rights are equal, the patriarchal attitudes are in some degree still present.

5.1.8 The Female Divided Self

During every step and stage of her relationship with Daniel, Bridget asks her friends for advice, weighing their opinions and considering their perspectives. When Daniel has left her "hanging in the air for two weeks after sex" (Fielding, 2010: 60), Bridget consults her friends. They all have strong opinions on what to do. Jude thinks that Bridget has to be "be friendly and flirty", Sharon wants to "tell him what I think of him" (ibid) while Tom claims she has to be "aloof, unavailable ice-queen" (2010: 64). In the beginning of the text, Daniel is clearly the one who has the control and power. However, gradually Bridget manages to establish more equal terms in her relationship with him. Bridget decides to leave Daniel, when she finds out he is cheating, even though she is still in love with him: "Do not ring Daniel or you will regret it" (2010: 157). She moves on by finding another job in order to get him out of her life: "It is great when you start thinking about your career instead of worrying about trivial things - men and relationships" (2010: 193). Bridget knows when she is mistreated and will not accept it.

Mark, on the other hand, likes her as she is and not for what she presents herself to be. Much like Butler stated in relation to the fantasy and double life, this also echoes what Esther and women in the post-war America felt. The divided self was created by women in order to survive in the framework that had already decided women's role. Eight years after Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, Germaine Greer, cited in Peach (1998: 181), depicted the stereotype: "To her belongs all that is beautiful, even the very word beauty itself ... she is a doll ... I'm sick of the masquerade". Bridget is presenting herself as a double with Daniel, someone who she thinks he will accept. However, she gradually realizes that it is compromising her own self-identity and that she is "sick of the masquerade".

According to Judith Kegan Gardiner in *On Female Identity and Writing by Women*, female identity is a process (1981: 349) and something that develops over time. This is similar to Bridget and her journey throughout the book, as she seems to "find herself"

gradually through different happenings and situations. Bridget's mission is to find out how to become a socially accepted woman, but gradually realizes that she does not want this. She is doing what she thinks is expected of her, but in result compromises with her own self. The analysis of the text suggests that Bridget is affected not only by cultural norms and ideals regarding gender, but also norms and practices surrounding beauty and fashion. Butler claimed that gender is a performance (Butler, 2002), and Bridget is moving away from the performance of being a social and cultural accepted woman. The socially created norms are not something Bridget can easily throw away. It has a great deal of power over her, whether she like it or not. Despite these norms, Bridget does manage to create and evolve her own "me", even though she is in conflict with the dominant ideology. Fielding, through Bridget, is deconstructing what it means to be a woman.

At the end, Bridget experiences much of the same feelings as Mrs. Ramsay, Lily and Esther, which is the feeling of wanting to become accepted as human beings. Or as Moran puts it: "I realized that what I really want to be, all told, is a human. Just a productive, honest, courteously treated human" (Moran, 2012: 309). Women in all three periods have been defined in terms of being a woman, when they all really wanted was to be considered a human being. Although the ideal of womanhood has changed and varied in all three texts, it is clear that these ideals had one thing in common. They created limitations for women, making them create a self that was governed by the society. This resulted in split personalities, as the female characters felt a need to divide their own self, either to be who they really wanted to be or what the society expected. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states in *We should all be feminists* that women grow up to be women who silence themselves, not being able to be honest. They grow up to be women who have turned pretense into an art form (Adichie, 2014: 33).

6 Conclusion

“We have evolved. But our ideas of gender have not evolved much.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014: 18)

This thesis has been a comparative study of the female discourse in three different literary texts, from different periods, with a distinct focus on how they represent, present and investigate identity in different ideological contexts. After investigating female identity in early, mid and late 20th century, one might wonder how far we have come.

In *How to Be a Woman*, Caitlin Moran questions the social forces that shape the ideals and images that surround us today: “Why are we supposed to get Brazilians? Should we use Botox? Do men secretly hate us? And why does everyone ask you when you’re going to have a baby?” Even though Moran stresses that “there still is a need for feminism, she also argues that the contemporary environment is a good time for women: “Whatever it is we want the future to be like, no one’s going to have to die for it” (Moran, 2012: 307). The different waves of feminism have influenced the way that society understands the concept of “woman” and, in addition, women have also been granted e.g. the right to vote, education and free abortion laws. Moran asserts that much of the problem lies in women themselves, that being honest about one’s own self is half the battle: “If what you read in magazines and papers makes you feel uneasy and shitty – don’t buy them! If you’re vexed by corporate entertaining taking place in titty-bars – shame your colleagues!” (ibid). Moran, just like Naomi Wolf, argues that women have come a long way, but emphasizes that there are still problems concerning the concept of gender.

There is a new Bridget Jones movie coming out in the fall of 2016, and it has already come under fire. Do we need the character of Bridget Jones today? While she was much needed in the 90s, the new movie has been criticized for being redundant. Barbara Ellen’s article “Bridget Jones was just like us. Not any more...” in *The Guardian*, argues that Bridget can no longer claim to represent “Everywoman”, as she is offering an imperfect portrayal of modern womanhood. Ellen notes that “[t]he issue is that Bridget Jones is a true creature of the 1990s, and the 1990s not only seem a painfully long time ago, but painfully innocent, too”

(Ellen, 2016). *The Telegraph*'s Fiona Sturges criticizes Bridget for her definition of happiness, as merely being defined in terms of marriage and babies: "that we will be happy only if we can find the right man, and that marriage and babies will complete us. Talk about arrested development" (Sturges, 2016). Perhaps it seems a bit dated, but as the analysis chapter of *Bridget Jones's Diary* suggests, Bridget is still a relevant figure in the contemporary environment. Laura Snapes claims in an article in *The Guardian* that Bridget does not have to be a perfect feminist (Snapes, 2016), while Moran argues that "an old-fashioned feminist "consciousness raising" still has enormous value" (Moran, 2012: 11). Women today still encounter patriarchy in various ways, in terms of e.g. work and marriage, or as Miranda Sawyer argues in her article in *The Guardian*:

[T]he very nature of being female in the UK means that you share the same life architecture as most other women. Your life is structured in much the same way: to be blunt, you are sold the same shite. Brazilians, Botox, babies before you're too old: even if you know that you want none of these things, it can be hard not to be affected by an overbearing general atmosphere that tells you that you do. You must.

(Sawyer, 2011)

According to this line of reasoning one might argue that character of Bridget Jones is both relevant and necessary, or as Moran puts it: "I want CHOICE. I want VAREITY. I want MORE. I want WOMEN. [...] Because we're all in this together. We're all just, you know. The Guys" (2012: 309).

While this thesis has focused merely on female identity, there are several other aspects of identity that could have been useful to explore. The female characters in the literary framework of this thesis are presenting an all white western perspective and many would argue that their problems are in fact superficial, or as Moran states: "women in the Western world can bring about pretty much whatever change [they] want by writing a series of slightly arsey letters, whilst listening to Radio 4 and drinking a cup of tea" (Moran, 2012: 307). They are all in some sense a part of the center, and as women move further away from it, their voiced are reduced and silenced. The thesis could also have incorporated and explored other texts that include female characters with different racial backgrounds. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* could have provided a more balanced and varied picture of identity as it includes characters from Nigeria during the Nigerian Civil War. In this text, Adichie presents several voices, both male and female, that could have been included in the

present study. One particular debate in this text involves Odenigbo defending the tribe as the ideal unit. He argues: “the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe [...] I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed black to be as different as possible from his white. But I was Igbo before the white man came” (Adichie, 2007: 25). The thesis would have benefited from including a non-western perspective in addition to the white, western identity.

But while the thesis has only investigated the roles and categories that are made available for women within a social structure, it would have been productive to explore both male and female identity in relation to the patriarchal society. As mentioned in the introduction, Richard A. Shweder wrote an article named “What Do Men Want? A Reading List For the Male Identity Crisis” in *The New York Times*, where he stresses the need for a focus on male identity, as well as the female. He states that the male identity crisis literature emerged in the late 1980s, “a long-delayed response to 20 years of feminist critique” (Shweder, 1994). While the feminist literature has concerned itself with the historical subordination and exploitation of women by men, the men’s crisis in literature has much focus on ontological anxiety. Shweder asserts that “in a post-modern world lacking clear-cut borders and distinctions, it has become hard to know what it means to be a man and even harder to feel good about being one” (ibid). According to this line of reasoning one might draw the conclusion that an investigation of male identity is also needful.

Adichie argues that masculinity is a hard, small cage, that and we put boys inside this cage. We teach them to be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves (Adichie, 2014: 26). A book that could have been productive to explore is Nick Hornby’s *About a Boy*, which is a coming of age novel written in 1998. It is set in 1993 London, and includes several voices that could have presented another aspect to this thesis. The book would have been interesting to include in the present study in order to explore similar restriction to male protagonists, as there are ideals targeted at men as well. As one can argue that the system is restrictive for women, there are also implicit rules concerning men. An in-depth analysis of the construction of male identity in addition to female could have been both informative and beneficial for this study, as the question really is: are any of us allowed to freely define who we are?

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