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## Abstract

This thesis is a comparative study exploring the theme of the imprisoned female in the three novels *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood, *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath and *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo, which aims to explore and unpack the different ways in which the normative narratives presented by society bring about various forms of imprisonment for the female protagonists.

Historically, there have been ideals and expectations associated with the concept of “woman” and women have been under immense pressure to conform in order to become accepted members of society. Normative narratives, such as the ideology of patriarchy, have created and contributed to states of confinement and imprisonment for women and, not least, established language representing the narrative of female selfhood. The present study has conducted close readings and analysis of the three novels in order to see how these normative narratives have affected the female narrative of self, from the Victorian Period and up to the contemporary period. The novels, which were published in different time periods, all approach the issue of how normative narratives confine women in structures which do not necessarily correspond with their narrative of the self.

The close readings of the three novels will take their point of departure in the socio-cultural periods from which they emerge. The Victorian ideal woman was known as “the angel in the house” and became an object which should only be seen in the light of her husband. This concept was replaced by the so-called “beauty myth” in the twentieth century, which focused on the physical appearance of women. While the force of patriarchy has been in decline since the 1970s, however, further confining ideals in terms of sexuality, race and beauty still remain.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one”

(Simone De Beauvoir 295)

As humans we have a compulsion to narrate everything. Narratives are important to us because they help us understand ourselves and the world which we live in. They can also, however, function to imprison us, and to limit the potential of an individual. One of the dominant narratives of our society is patriarchy. The narrative of patriarchy helps to understand ourselves, and the world, however it also functions to imprison us. The individuals who arguably are most imprisoned by patriarchy, are women. This thesis is a study of how normative narratives, like patriarchy, is both defining and confining to the personal narrative of women. This problem will be discussed by close reading three different novels which are set in three different time periods.

Throughout history, women have been subjected to expectations and ideals which are constructed by their given society, indicating how they should look, talk, and live in order to become accepted members. These ideals, which I will refer to as normative narratives, are problematic to women especially, since they often restrict and limit the potential of the individual, by defining all women as one, thus establishing grounds for feeling captured or limited to one universal definition. Furthermore, these restrictions function on a larger scale to organize society into a hierarchy which consequently places women as second-class citizens to a great extent. These narratives also function to challenge the women’s own individuality and sense of self, by putting pressure on upholding, or conforming to the ideals of what it means to be a perfect member of society, even though these ideals do not match with the individual characteristics. Women thus, face the dilemma of either feeling captured in a narrative which they do not agree with and remain second-class citizens, or having to riot against the ideals and become outsiders of society. Ultimately, resulting in a collision between the narrative of the self, which is how women perceive themselves, and the normative narratives forced upon them by social structures.

The narrative of patriarchy and the narrative of woman are two important narratives which, as we can see through the analysis of the novels in this thesis, progress and change to an extent, but less than you would imagine considered the many years it has been around. As

Judith Butler argues, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), gender is a social construction which starts to shape the individual from the moment they are born, and which continue to shape it continuously through life, according to the contemporary ideals and expectations. As a result, the understanding of what gender is, become a reflection of the given society's ideal members. The gender identity and the normative narratives, such as patriarchy, are thus closely related. For one to change, the other must also. In addition, these ideals are difficult to alter, not only because they challenge the dominant position of men, which they have held for many years comfortably. They also heavily rely on women to continue to challenge the ideals in order to change them. As the novels portray, many women struggle with these changes, as it requires them to risk their status as an accepted member of society, without the certainty that it will get better.

The characters of the novels challenge the views of patriarchy to an extent, in an attempt to expedite change in the ideals which shape individuals, women specifically, to become accepted members of society. Furthermore, the female characters also ask questions concerning who they are, and want to be in their given society. Although some women conform to the ideals and others rebel, it is significant to note that they all are influenced by these ideals to a degree. The first novel, Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), explore how the personal narrative of Grace Marks, the protagonist, is challenged by the normative narratives of her given society. She is not only a woman in the Victorian period, which entail that she is expected to conform to the ideal which was the angel in the house. This ultimately meant that the ideal female member of society should be silent and almost unnoticeable, operating in the background of the male gender. Furthermore, the Victorian women should be nurturing and loving mothers and wives, which is also an ideal posing as a common theme in the chosen novels. The narrative of Grace, who is convicted of committing two murders, is in direct contrast with the female ideal at the time, as the act of murder is neither nurturing nor loving. She is also not unnoticed by the society, as there is a lot of media coverage, such as newspaper articles writing about her trial. The novel furthermore explores what happens to a woman's narrative, who is already the lesser of two genders according to patriarchy, who fully reject her position in society by committing crimes, and thus, become placed at the bottom of the hierarchy.

The second novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath, presents the character of Esther Greenwood, who attempts to define herself in a post-war society, where the definition she is looking for in non-existent. Even though patriarchy has slightly declined, in the sense that women have found a voice through the waves of feminism and are slowly starting to

realize that they may not be alone in feeling unsatisfied by this life that they are living in their contemporary society. The normative narrative of patriarchy still limits the narrative of woman, and heavily influence the process of socialization which define the genders. The housewives, who have for a long time been confined to the domestic sphere are allowed to venture out into the public sphere, where the identity of a career-woman potentially awaits her. However, this identity, as Esther discovers, means rejecting other identities such as being a wife, and thus, potentially her identity as a female. Esther's journey to establish her personal narrative, and to define who she is, illustrate the limited choices of a woman during this period. Although new and improved rights had revealed an untraveled road, into the public sphere, women still faced dilemmas such as deciding between one or the other identity. Esther realizes that her personal narrative does not want to choose one or the other, and deems it as unfair, as it emphasizes the differences in ideals for the female and the male gender. In response, her character searches for ways to escape the patriarchal structures, and to free herself from the frameworks constructed by society.

Unlike the two other literary works, the final novel, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo presents us with more than one protagonist, each of them representing an individual narrative. Altogether twelve black women, representing different age-groups, sexualities, and personal narratives. However, common for all characters is that they belong to marginalized groups, such as black women, migrant women, gay women, and gender-free womxn. This thesis will, however, only focus on four of the protagonists and how they navigate their personal narrative in relation to the normative narratives of their given society. This novel also concerns themes such as race, which has not been discussed in the previous novels, which is also a large part of an individual's identity. Not only are the women of this novel impaired by just being born to the female gender, which is already labelled the second-class citizen, but they are also challenged by ideals concerning beauty, sexuality, race and gender identity to a greater extent, namely because they do not represent the norm. The four protagonists who will be of focus in the final chapter, display women who either riot against the old ways of patriarchy, white beauty standards or standards which apply to one's sexuality. Ultimately, the novel proves the hopelessness of attempting to define all women with one set of ideals.

There are several reasons for choosing just these three novels. The first being, they each present an individual perspective on the normative narrative. They comment on the conflict that arises between the normative narrative and the individual narrative, when the individual is someone who is oppressed. Importantly, the protagonists of the novels are all

female. This is significant because the authors uses these characters to describe what it is like to be an individual, attempting to tell your own narrative, in a world where normative narratives does not allow for individuality. The society ultimately want women to follow the same set of ideals, which constructs the perfect member. Furthermore, it can be significant to note that authors of the novels are also female, which imply that they too have suffered at the account of the normative narratives and has decided to voice this issue as a rebellious act against a prominently male dominated, not only, writing culture, but also world.

The first part of this thesis consists of the Literature Review chapter, which explains and discuss important terms and concept which will guide the reader throughout this thesis. Theory which will be used throughout the thesis is mainly feminist theory. Firstly, looking at the definition of narrative, and the devised concept of normative narrative. Then looking at the counter-narratives, such as feminism. The second part of the thesis consist of three analysis chapters which explore how the normative narratives of novel create little room for the characters to develop individual narratives, thus affecting their female sense of self. In the final chapter, as a conclusion, I will attempt to describe how these normative narratives have affected women throughout history, and to analyze the rate of progression which is seen through these novels.

As a preliminary conclusion, one might argue that the novels emphasize how the normative narratives of a given society limit women to one set of ideals, thus imprisoning her as she is unable to define her own individual narrative.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

“Storytelling moves us into the place where we trust what we know, even if it can’t be measured, packaged or validated empirically”

(Simmons xiii)

### 2.1 Narrative

As human beings, telling stories comes natural to us. Whether it is telling our own life story, reading about someone else’s story in media, presenting an event or squeezing aspects of the world into narrative form. In many ways, storytelling becomes a compulsion, and we tend to storify everything. In fact, according to Paul Cobley in *Narrative* (2014), “wherever there are humans there appear to be narratives” (2). Narratives are important to us because they help us understand our own concept of “me” and the world surrounding us. However, they can also function to imprison us, to make both our lives and ourselves smaller than they really are. Typical examples of such narratives which are defining and potentially confining to humans are those concerning gender, sexuality, race, and religion. Narratives, such as gender, helps to understand ourselves however they also function to imprison us, as the narrative of gender is socially constructed, defining us within the minute of birth. The genders, then, come with different sets of ideals which will construct the perfect member of society. As this thesis will explore, the male gender typically and traditionally is viewed as the dominant gender, thus placing women as second-class citizens.

Though regularly discussed, reviewed and, in many ways, improved throughout history, the narrative of woman still poses issues, ideals and expectations which can be confining today. In this thesis I will unpack how the concept of normative narratives, which is a concept I have devised, serves to shape the narrative of the female self, by defining and potentially confining it, by close reading three specific novels: *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood, *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath and *Girl Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo.

## 2.2 Normative Narratives

The concept of normative narrative is a concept which I have devised and seem to serve the purpose of this thesis very well, as it helps to navigate and understand how the narrative of the female self is defined in society. In order to do understand this concept, it might be useful to define narrative. Narrative is ultimately the showing or telling of the events and the mode selected for them to take place, according to Cobley (5). Narrative can be defined in the Aristotelian sense as a work with a plot, for example in a drama, where the narrative evolves by methods of direct presentation on stage, such as through the actions and speeches of the characters (Abrams and Harpham 233). However, narrative can also be defined in the narrow sense as a work with a narrator, such as in short stories and novels (Abrams and Harpham 233). At the lowest level of simplification, one might say that narrative is a sequence of events that are narrated. If you consider a documentary as an example, narrative is the images depicted with a voice-over that narrates the sequence of images. Voiced narration and the sequence of images as narrative can be separated into two different entities, however, together they possess a narrative orientation. This organized narrative may often be taken for granted as it seems natural and feels essential to our everyday existence. Another fundamental part of narrative is that it consists of signs. The sequence of images does not embody meaningful relations without human input. In other words, it needs to consist of signs that humans must relate to in order to understand it. Specific to narrative is not only this sequence of events, but that it has a starting point and a finishing point. This sequence often consists of detours, or delays, making it more captivating, as a progression from point A to B is less interesting than one consisting of twists and turns before reaching point B. These twists and turns in narrative often function as what involves and grips a reader's interest. Cobley further states that "storytelling impulse is illusory" (7), meaning that in a sense, nothing is a story unless we impose a narrative form on it. Narrative is a concept which both says something about stories which are written down as novels, but it also says something about the structures we use to understand the world. For this reason, narrative is important for this project. A novel, for instance, present us with a narrative in terms of it has a starting point, at the beginning of the novel and an ending, the final page of the novel. Through these pages we are presented with plot twists and complications in form of dialogue between characters, and the voice of a narrator. This makes up the narrative of the novel. However, the narrator's voice may be influenced by other voices, such as other characters, societal structures and also personal beliefs. If the same story is told by a different narrator, with the

same plot, story and discourse, however in a different social structure or with other personal beliefs, the narrative may change and consequently, a whole other interpretation can be made. The narrator may also be influenced and challenged by external narratives, such as those existing in their society, which I will define as normative narratives.

In order to understand what is meant by normative narratives, it is important to define “normative” and “ideology”. According to *Oxford Learners Dictionary*, *normative* can be defined as “describing or setting standards or rules of behaviour”, and *ideology* is defined as “a set of beliefs, especially one held by a particular group, that influences the way people behave”. The two definitions consist of many similarities, such as their connection to behavior. One can argue that *norms*, which are defined as “a situation or a pattern of behaviour that is usual or expected” by *Oxford Learners Dictionary*, are internalized through ideology, and are used to boost a given society, or a way of controlling that specific society’s expectations of its members. In this context, normative narratives are seen to be the ideals and expectations narrated by society in order to maintain control over its members. These narratives can be said to function on different levels. On the macro level, they are normative narratives for a society, such as the dominating ideology, which functions to organize society. They can also be normative narratives for smaller communities, such as within a school, family or a congregation, or even an individual, on a micro level, organizing smaller groups within the society. The concept of normative narratives is useful, then, because it explains many of the processes that help us understand and organize a society as well as an individual.

On a social and political level, the normative narratives present a representation of how things should be through ideals and ideology. The normative narrative can sometimes cause conflict with the narrative of the self, which can be described as the personal perception of “me”. The narrative of the self can be defined as how individuals want to see their lives unfold removed from normative narratives that place ideals and expectations upon them. These narratives of the self, which can include sexuality, personality or even looks, may not always correspond with the normative narratives which is presented by society. This conflict is what will be explored in this thesis. In particular, two topics will be of focus in this project and read in terms of them being narratives, namely the narrative of patriarchy and the narrative of woman. The narrative of woman is complex, because the normative narrative and the self-perception narrative have a high risk conflicting each other.

Theorists such as such as Jean-Francois Lyotard have also discussed the way in which narratives function on a larger, as well as on a smaller basis. Bennett and Royle discuss Lyotards terms of grand and little narratives (328). The grand narratives claim to explain and

reassure human perfection. However, Lyotard argues that they are in fact an illusion which is created to even out differences and resistance. As these grander narratives become unreliable, we must rely on the little narratives, which are temporary and relative, creating the groundwork for the actions of specific groups, such as societies. The dominant ideology of a society becomes the grand narrative, which consists of smaller narratives, such as assumptions, ideals, values and norms existing in a society. These smaller narratives are affected by the dominant ideology (grand narrative) of the society, and vice versa. The smaller narratives, that include social representations, such as values, ideas and beliefs, function to organize a society. Although the narratives discussed by Lyotard are not the same as the normative narratives, the concept which is presented by Lyotard can be used as a parallel to comprehend the approach to narrative which is found in this thesis.

Another significant theory which might be useful to mention here, is Judith Butler's investigation of gender narratives. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler defines the representation of women on the one hand to be ideologically motivated in the sense that it promotes women as political subjects and signals where they belong and what their function is in a given society. On the other hand, the representation is the normative function of a language, which either reveal or distort what is assumed to be true about the existing identity of women (Butler 2). The development of a language that adequately represent women has thus seemed necessary for feminist theory, in order to promote the political visibility of women (Butler 2).

The narratives, that have been told from various perspectives throughout history, whether they are politically or personally motivated, contribute to the history of women struggling to find or define their place in society. These perspectives might have been changed over time, or due to extraordinary conditions. An example of this is during the World Wars, where men were forced to leave their normal jobs in order to fill positions as soldiers, therefore leaving what they knew to be their normative narrative, to a new narrative. As a ripple effect of this, the narrative of the woman also changed. It is not rare that the women's position in society is often just used to "fill the blanks" between the men's positions, not surprisingly causing conflict and resentment towards hierarchies such as patriarchy. Butler's ideas about gender as performance will play a major role in this thesis, which deals with literary works that see gender as a narrative.

### 2.2.1 Patriarchy

As mentioned above, Butler states that feminist theory stress the importance of having a language which adequately represent women, because this representation affect the political visibility of women (Butler 2). Dominant ideologies, especially patriarchy, have through time misrepresented or not represented women at all. By doing so, patriarchy intensify the position of being the dominant ideology, by keeping the opposition as the oppressed gender with limited rights. *Oxford Learners Dictionary* defines *ideology* as “a set of beliefs, especially one held by a particular group, that influences the way people behave”. This definition, however, can be seen to limit the term. *Ideology*, as presented by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (2016) includes everything we think and how we think about it, as a matter of language (231). In other words, Bennett and Royle define ideology largely as narratives, such as politics, society, and gender, which are integrated in our minds through dialogue and conversation. *Ideology*, according to Bennett and Royle, is “the way people think about their world” (231) which is produced and altered through language. In other words, it can be defined *as* language.

Importantly, ideology as a normative narrative, does not only make sense of a society and its organization, but also regulates it. It represents a collective model that various groups in a society apply when defining their attitudes and promoting ideals. Individuals, such as politicians, may convey the ideological statements, however, ideology in itself is not something that is individually constructed (Henry and Tator 20). Bennett and Royle’s *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2016) explain briefly the views of theorist Louis Althusser and how his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” from 1969, state that the human being “is an ideological animal by nature” (qtd. in Bennett and Royle 233). More specifically, people define themselves as *humans* through these normative narratives. Ideology is shaped by humans, but ideology also shapes humans. This indicates that ideology is at the core of both one’s personal identity and one’s collective identity. Bennett and Royle (2016) further explain how Althusser argues that while becoming a subject in a world feels natural and real, this feeling of “natural” is actually an “ideological effect”. Whether you call it language, ideology, or narrative, what is “natural” varies from society to society, and changes and develops over years (qtd. in Bennett and Royle 234).

Deborah Cameron discusses in *Feminism: a brief introduction to the ideas, debates, and politics of the movement* (2019), domination theories and the origins of male dominance, explaining how its forms have developed and what keeps it in place today. Cameron defines a male-dominated or patriarchal society as one whose structures and institutions – legal,

political, religious, economic – put men in a position of power over women (15). Furthermore, she adds that structural male dominance varies in its form but will likely consist of some or all the following characteristics: A society where men dominate positions of power and leadership. A society where men have rights under the law that women do not have. A society where men own or control more economic resources than women. A society where men have direct authority over women in their family or household. A society where men's activities, occupations, cultural products, and ideas or forms of knowledge are accorded higher status than women's (Cameron 16). Different societies may exhibit these characteristics in different ways and to different degrees, and they might also change over time. Today it is, in many countries, perhaps less likely for a society to consist of all the above characteristics. Married men do not have the direct, legally sanctioned authority over their wives as they did in the early nineteenth century, and women are equal to men in law and have gained full political representation. However, it is true that around the world, men occupy most positions of power and leadership (16). Though one can clearly see an improvement in the women's position in society, Cameron mentions that the improvement in women's overall positions has not benefited all women equally (16). Though improved in especially western parts of the world, there are parts of the world where these characteristics still apply. There continues to be differences between women in different classes, ethnic groups, educational levels, and between women who have children and those who do not. What Cameron conveys by talking about a society that is male dominated, is that the dominance is structural (17). It spreads through the system from the top to bottom. Though we may care more about who is on the bottom, it is the actual structure which must be dismantled.

Patriarchy can therefore be said to be both a social representation, as well as a normative narrative. It is a social representation, because it presents an idea of how a given society is really structured in the sense that the male gender is dominant in all spheres and women are below them in the hierarchal structure. It can also be interpreted as a normative narrative in the sense that it provides members of a given society with an ideal, telling them how a perfect member should be, and creating issues such as being rejected from society, if the individuals do not conform to these normative narratives.

### 2.2.2 Identity

In the prologue of her book *Fairy Tale: A Short Introduction* (2018), Marina Warner describes fairy tales as familiar stories, which are either verifiably old because they have been passed on down the generations or because the listener or reader can be struck by their familiar resemblance to another story (16). This familiarity is one of the factors which draws people towards this genre. This definition can also be used to explain why we as humans have the compulsion to create narratives, as it creates a space for something familiar, something that unite us. However, narratives may also function as manuals or “how-to” guides of the socially accepted ways of living, becoming integrated in our minds from an early age. This function of a “how to”-guide is what I refer to when employing the term normative narrative, which, for instance, is integral to the process of socialization which, according to Gill Eagle in “Learning to Become a "Natural Woman": The Process of Socialisation” (1988) can be defined as training or preparing an individual to fit into a given culture or social group (67). It can in other words be described as a “how to become an accepted member of society”-manual. The process, which starts from the moment you are born into a society, is powerful, yet extremely subtle. The normative narrative, moreover, takes the form of norms and values, which are repeated so frequently that they eventually seem natural, or even biologically determined, to the member of a certain society. The normative narratives presented by society, in the case of women, tell women how to be women in order to become an accepted part of society, as explained by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Hence, when a person’s self-perceptive narrative conflicts with normative narratives, this may result in a sense of crisis, for example the conflict between the actual woman and the expected woman, presented in the novels. The process of socialization can therefore be said to happen on the basis of narrative, as normative narratives, such as the dominant ideology plays an important part in creating ideals and norms for individuals, in order to organize a society.

Peter J. Burke explains in his article “Identity Processes and Social Stress” (1991) that within identity theory, the identity process functions as a control system (837). An identity is a set of “meanings” that are applied to the self in a social role, and which might be said to comprise the narrative of who one is, and ultimately have a goal of matching the environmental meanings to the internal standards (Burke 837). This model of the identity process builds on the evidence that people feel some level of distress when they receive feedback that is incompatible with their identity. An example is if a person comparing their gender identity, which by society is defined as female due to biological characteristics, yet

this individual relates to what society define as masculine traits, they might struggle to identify with the expected societal role of their given gender.

Furthermore, Burke argues that the processes ensuring harmony between environmental, or social standards and internal standards can become efficient and automatic over time as the individual learns patterns of the interaction system and how to manipulate them (839). In cases where the internal and environmental standards do not match, however, one may encounter problems in the identity process and become faced with “interruptions” (836). This interruption may cause the individual to feel social stress or a sense of crisis. Burke claims that a female who juggles the combination of employment, marriage and parenthood would be especially exposed to social stress, as her identity process is interrupted by inhabiting two or more incompatible identities which come with frequently voiced expectations by society. This causes the individual to be torn between too many expectations, causing social stress (Burke 842). Social stress can be explained, broadly, as a situation that puts relationships or a person’s sense of belonging in a group at risk. Carrie Yang Costello presents the term “identity dissonance” in her article “Changing Clothes: Gender Inequality and Professional Socialization” (2004) as the disconcerting internal experience of conflict between irreconcilable aspects of a person’s self-concepts (140). As with Burke, Costello agrees that the self-concept consist of several identities, such as gender, sexual, racial, political or religious identities. These identities frequently clash with one another and cause the dilemma of whether to choose one and leave the other, or to try to move forward with both. Costello uses the “political conservative lesbian” or the “Muslim feminist” as examples of such clashes between identity (140). People who then attempt to fulfill the conflicting identities, face the difficulty of the identity dissonance. She discusses how the professional identity might conflict with the student’s personal identity (Costello 141). As a person’s identity is constructed by several identities, this conflict between identity, and the potential of dismissing one in favor of another, could in fact threaten the individual’s sense of identity. The dominant normative narrative may inconspicuously sway the decision of which identity is to be dismissed and which to keep, by the use of norms and ideals which have been integrated in the individual since becoming a member of the given society.



### 2.2.3 Gendered identity

As established above by Burke and Costello, the narrative of the self, or the concept of self consists of several identities, such as gender, social, race, religion and more. In this thesis, I will explore how the gender identity is constructed by normative narratives, and thus influencing the narrative of the self, and potentially function to limit it. Butler notes that gender must be fluid as it is behavioral patterns learned by humans and constructed by culture, thus changing from culture to culture (9). *The World Health Organization* defines *sex* as characteristics that are biologically defined, whereas *gender* is based on socially constructed features. The term gender has advanced since the Victorian period from being binary, in the sense that there are only two genders to choose from, to incorporating a larger variety. Within much feminist theory, the two terms, gender and sex, are often used in describing the basic framework of gender identity and patriarchy, and as a way of describing the differences between men and women, biologically and socially. As the term gender is a construction of culture and society, it is in this sense also very much ideological, because its ideals and expectations are predefined by society. Butler further emphasizes that the term “woman” or the plural form “women” cannot denote one common identity, as the predetermined gender is not always constructed consistently throughout history, as it also intersects with class, ethnic, race, sexual modalities which constitute identities (Butler 4). As a result of gender being fluid, it thus become impossible to separate out from the political and cultural understandings where it is produced and maintained by society (Butler 5).

Butler states that gender must be “performative” (34). Meaning that behind the expressions of gender, there is no gender identity, rather that the identity is performatively constructed by the “expressions” that are said to be its results (Butler 34). However, this performative nature of gender identity is concealed through cultural expectations and is strengthened by the reactions of others when these expectations are not satisfied. If one challenges the binary system of gender, which is maintained by patriarchy, by rejecting the presumed correlation between sex and gender, or the binary system itself, one is faced by negative reactions such as being oppressed or rejected by society. These negative reactions functions as tools used by the patriarchal system to remain the dominant power structure.

## 2.3 Counter-narratives

Normative narratives present ideals and expectations which are introduced to an individual from the moment they are born into their given society. These ideals, as we have discussed, do not correspond with the inner standards of our identity at times, thus being a factor of social stress, as discussed by Burke in the article “Identity Processes and Social Stress” (1991). When such a conflict, between the social standards, or normative narratives, and the inner standards, or narratives of the self, appear, it makes room for counter-narratives to grow. A counter narrative is, narrative, or set of ideals, which oppose those that are imposed upon individuals by society. Feminism can therefore be explained as the counter-narrative to patriarchy.

The concept of woman is complex, mainly because the self-perception narrative and the normative narratives in most eras conflict, cause confusion in a women’s identity. Patriarchal societies where different roles are established for men and women commonly have roles and expectations which benefit men and disadvantages women. According to Gill Eagle, those who support socialization processes that stress male and female differences argue that physical differences between men and women produce differences in personality, temperament, and behavior (69). This difference in personality and behavior is then used to justify why girls and boys should be brought up differently and presented with different role expectations. This is something that was famously formulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his work *Émile*, where he states:

As soon as it is once demonstrated that man and woman neither are, nor should be, constituted the same way, neither in character nor in temperament, it follows they must not have the same education. In following the directions of nature they must act in concert, but they must not do the same things. The goal of the labors is common, but the labors are different and, as a consequence, so are the tastes that direct them. After having attempted to form the natural man, in order not to leave our work imperfect, let us see how the woman that suits this man must also be formed.

(Rousseau 72)

The reason for mentioning this quote in particular, is because it proves how the normative narrative can be disguised as nature. The gender roles in a society can be presented as

narrative which is incorporated into the process of socialization to the extent that it feels as a “natural” part of an individual’s personality. This is an important highlight throughout *Émile*. In addition, it also functions as evidence of how long-lived normative narrative can be, as we still find echo of this in our own time.

To be able to understand how such narratives, as gender has changed over time, one must look at the history of feminism, and how this has led to fundamental changes in gender roles. In a patriarchal society, feminism can be viewed as a counter-narrative to the normative narrative in the sense that it often rejects the process of socialization, defining it as a force which pushes women into a narrow and detrimental mold which determines their identity and behavior negatively. One could argue that the feminist narrative functions as a counter-narrative to the process of socialization, as the subject, “woman”, is often misrepresented or not represented at all in politics and society, as argued by Butler (2).

Feminism’s narrative is not a linear narrative of continuous progress, however. The movement keeps being reinvented, partly to meet the challenges of new times, but also because of each new generation’s desire to differentiate itself from the one before (Cameron 6). In spite of this non-linear progression, the history of feminism is often described in waves. The first wave of feminism started during the mid-nineteenth century. Women came together to demand legal and civil rights and ended up with victory of the campaign in the 1920s. The second wave began in the late 1960s. Activists wanted to stress the continuity between their own movement and the most radical elements of the nineteenth century feminism. The third wave appeared in the 1990s, where a new generation of activists explicitly contrasted the approach of the second wave. A fourth wave is sometimes mentioned regarding the renewed interest in feminism that has become more visible in the past decade. However, the wave model also faced criticism, such as it oversimplifies the history of feminism because it suggests that each wave supersedes the previous one. It is also criticized for generalizing the feminism of each historical moment, implying that all women in each of the waves shared the same beliefs and concerns (Cameron 6). A third objection is that the waves seem to have a start and an end, thus implying silence between these years, which is not the case as the women’s rights fight continued in other forms.

While feminism can be seen as a communal counter-narrative that challenges the normative narrative of patriarchy, there are also examples of individual counter-narratives that try to formulate a sense of selfhood and humanity which is in some way in conflict with the cultural and social narrative that the being is faced with. The three novels I have chosen for this thesis each portray women who demonstrate feelings of distress towards the social

and normative representation of femaleness and femininity. The protagonists in the novels all represent women who live in patriarchal societies, and who struggle to meet the standards of their respective societies.

#### 2.4.1 The Victorian Woman

The novel *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood, takes place in the nineteenth century and is based on the real-life conviction of Grace Marks. To be able to understand the female characters in the novel by Margaret Atwood and the relationships between herself as a woman and the expected version of a woman by society, it is necessary to look briefly at history surrounding this era which the novel is meant to take place in. In the Victorian period, which lasted from approximately 1837 to 1901, patriarchy was the dominant ideology. The ideology of patriarchy also enhanced the presence of other major ideologies such as domestic ideology during this period. The debate surrounding the “woman question”, as it was often referred to at this time, consisted of several issues concerning education, workforce and social influence, but became in addition concerning how to define it, and if to define it as an issue at all (Elliott 11). The husband took the place at the head of the family as their protector and provider, placing him both in the public scene, as a working man, but also in the private as the protector of the family. The concept of “the angel in the house” was introduced by Coventry Patmore’s poem from 1854, which is quoted in the epigraph of “Lady of the lake” section 10 in Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) and is often used to describe the Victorian ideal woman. This normative narrative, that as a woman you should obey your husband, and play a silent part in his world, due to the biological gender you have been born into, became so integrated to society that it felt unnatural to try to be something loud and aggressive, such as a woman chasing her own career. Middle- and professional-class homes had increasingly access to higher education and due to the consumer culture that emerged, they also had the chance to assert their own wants and desires. Women were encouraged by media to participate in social clubs, where they had the opportunity to participate in debates and discussions. Even though the encouragement for participation in such clubs, it could also be seen as a conservative force due to how it was organized around traditional lines of class, religion, and race (Elliott 11). Common for all women, irrelevant of class, religion and race, the conventional role of marriage and matrimony was defined. The social representation of women, and how they could be, was blossoming, yet the normative representation of how they should be, was still evident. The inner conflict of a woman’s identity grew.

The figure of the angel in the house seems like a direct contrast to Atwood's main character, Grace Marks, who is convicted of murdering her previous employer and his love-interest. The physical imprisonment in the mental institutions and physical abuses by medical doctors, along with her later confinement in the domesticated home of the warden contribute to the feeling of being imprisoned, not only physically but also mentally in her own body due to these normative and social expectations which she cannot fulfill. Grace Marks' approach to challenge patriarchy is interesting because she insidiously manipulates the normative narrative, "the angel in the house" to her advantage, placing doubt to whether she committed the murder or not.

#### 2.4.2 The Happy Housewife

As in Atwood's novel, the society portrayed in Sylvia Plath's novel is also strongly dominated by the patriarchal narrative. Gender roles were changed once again, as a result of the participation in WWII, as well the rights gained by women after the first wave of feminism. Women had to fill the working positions which men left behind as they were ordered to go to war. The media changed their normative narrative from women belonging in the domestic sphere, to the narrative that women can both work and be a woman at the same time. They were encouraged to fill the positions the men who were now employed as soldiers had left behind, while assured they did not lose their sense of femininity while doing so. However, as the war ended, and the soldiers returned, wanting their jobs back. The women who had previously filled their positions were in most cases fired. The sense of accept, for women to work, disappeared, and they were returned back to their domestic spheres. As a result, the gap between the actual woman and the expected woman grew larger, leaving many resentful and confused. The new woman wanted the same freedom of movement that men had, as well as the same political and economic rights. Media returned to portraying women in their houses, and advertisements towards women were often products that would help keep the house efficient and clean.

Betty Friedan and her critique of the figure of the housewife emerged after the second world war, as a response to "the problem that has no name", namely the unhappy happy housewife. In the *Feminine mystique* (1963), Friedan argued the major shift in media portrayal of women, and how the career woman had become a negative word, and the happy housewife was once again encouraged and celebrated. Friedan further argues that the women were prepared to accept the role of the happy housewife as they were left with an identity

crisis, and there seemed to be no way out or that they were alone in this unhappy state. Friedan's book, however, allowed for a slow realization between women that they were not alone in feeling unhappy about the happy housewife situation, wanting to create a new life for themselves outside the role of the housewife.

*The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath brings to light many of the issues women faced during this time. One of these issues being the question of self-identity. The main character of the novel encounters women in different roles, pulling her in different directions. On the one hand Esther Greenwood's mother encourages the traditional life of a woman. On the other hand, the role of Jay Cee draws her towards a working-life. Esther's journey to find her own concept of "me" is challenged by the norms and expectations placed by a society which traditionally confined women to stereotypical ideals of what it meant to be a woman.

#### 2.4.3 The Contemporary Women

Throughout history, women have been challenged with normative narratives, explaining how a woman should be if she wishes to be the ideal woman. The Happy Housewife myth is gradually replaced by The Beauty Myth, where the dominating ideals were tall, thin, white and blonde women living a picture-perfect life. Tracey Owens Patton discusses in her article "Hey Girl, Am I more than my Hair? African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image and Hair" (2006), how African American women have challenged white definition of beauty throughout history. Patton argues that one common societal stereotype of the U.S is the belief that Black women fail to measure up to the normative standard, of body image, skin color, and hair, therefore haunting their existence and psychology (24). Beauty becomes subject to the dominant standards of the ruling class and varies through cultures and societies. As technology has developed, media plays a larger part in distributing the ideals of these cultures and societies. It seems the narratives have become harder to escape from, as they are constantly presented to us around every corner. On the other hand, one could argue that the grand narrative declines in the transition to modernity, as the narrative of the self becomes more apparent.

Bernardine Evaristo's novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) is a patchwork of twelve British black women with interconnected biographical stories. Though representing different classes, cultures and sexual identities, the women are connected by constantly challenging the traditional patriarchy and searching for their own personal identity. Each of the chapters

present us with girls who are growing into their place in society as women. The novel by Evaristo does not only challenge the female ideal but dive deep into the different challenges met by women - young and old, of color, and with different sexualities, women who do not meet the societal stereotypical woman. Yet all these different women still feel to a degree trapped by their society's norms and expectations of how to fill their role as a woman, and in their own way seek a way out. Intersecting themes of motherhood, sexuality, marital roles, gender and age are all juxtaposed in an attempt to describe the black female "sister" experience, which Evaristo references in the dedication page in the beginning of the novel (the dedication page). The novel, as a final chapter to this thesis, allows for comparison of the development made by women and finding their place in society, throughout history, but also functions to evaluate the everchanging female ideals, and if they really are everchanging or simply changing in form but keeping the same shade. Therefore, imprisoning them to the normative narratives constructed by dominant ideologies, rather than breaking these invisible chains and pursuing their own narrative of the self.

As we move into modern times, it becomes clear that the grand normative narrative of patriarchy fades. The smaller narratives take its place. In addition, it seems as if they part into several even smaller narratives. On the one hand, the fading of the grand narrative liberates the narrative of woman and encourages to "be who you are". The smaller narratives allow for more options of frameworks to choose from, you are no longer expected to be just a housewife. The narrative of woman can be a working woman, a childless woman, a single woman, a gay woman, a black woman – the options are almost endless. On the other hand, all of these smaller narratives might actually still function to define and confine the narrative of woman, as one no longer have just one grand narrative to answer to, but hundreds of smaller narratives. The choices are so many that it might become challenging to figure out in which smaller narrative you belong, because one must after all belong or fit in somewhere in this world.

## Chapter 3: *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood

“We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced”

(Yousafzai 186)

### 3.1 About *Alias Grace*

This chapter will read of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) in the light of normative narratives, such as that of woman in patriarchy, and examine how these function to define and imprison women. As discussed in the previous chapter, the definition of woman is heavily influenced by dominant normative narratives, something that can cause conflict between the narrative of the self and that of a given society.

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) is a historical fiction novel. It follows the protagonist Grace Marks and describes her involvement in the murder of the wealthy gentleman Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery in 1843. The plot of the novel takes place 16 years after the committed murders, which Grace have spent in an asylum and penitentiary. As a result of good behavior, the Governor of the penitentiary grants Grace permission to work in his home as a housekeeper, under the supervision of his wife. The novel focuses mainly on the conversations between Grace and Doctor Jordan, who is a trained medical doctor specializing in psychology. The novel shifts between present events and Grace's account of the past to Doctor Jordan and is told from a variety of perspectives which both allows for deeper understanding of the protagonist, as well as the society of this time. While concentrating on the psychology of the protagonist, *Alias Grace* (1996) widens its perspective and presents us with an image of life as a woman in the Victorian period through the female characters such as the Governor's wife. The similarities between the lives of Grace Marks, who is a prisoner in the penitentiary, and the Governor's wife become apparent through the first chapters and illustrate how the Victorian woman is also a captive on a broader scale, in the context of patriarchy and the ideal of the Angel in the House. The ideals and expectations society of women during this time also contributes to uncertainties and discussions regarding Grace Marks. Women, who were not meant to be heard in the public spheres, and barely even in their own domestic sphere, were established as good, nurturing wives and mothers, not murderers. Therefore, the public struggled with the



acceptance that Grace Marks could commit such horrific murders, as this was not in her nature as a woman. As is signaled by excerpts from newspapers incorporated by Atwood, this uncertainty caused the media to report different stories regarding Marks, some claiming she was a monster, others claiming she was fooled to do what she did. The feeling of uncertainty and ambiguity is something that Atwood highlights throughout the novel, making us as readers question what it is that we are, in fact, reading.

This ambiguity is signaled already in the title of the novel, which generates many questions concerning the narrative. *Alias* is a noun defined by *Oxford Learners Dictionary* as a false or assumed identity that is mostly taken up by actors or criminals, generating a sense of duplicity or deceitfulness. The noun *grace*, on the other hand, has opposite connotations in that it refers to “the free and unmerited favor of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings”. It can also have the meaning to “do honour and credit to” or “a short prayer of thanks” according to the *Oxford Learners Dictionary*. The two contradicting connotations of the nouns create a strong sense of ambiguity, making us as readers uncertain of what we are going to encounter in the novel. On the one hand the title suggests that we might be dealing with a criminal, through the reference to alias. On the other hand, the second word of the title implies something that is free and pure. One way of interpreting the title is that this alias, the name Grace, is the alias that the society of the Victorian period is asking women to assume. Women were expected to be delicate, divine beings who bestowed blessings and functioned as moral compasses. The novel, as we will come to see, often represent women as flowers, which can be seen as symbolic indications of the same kind of cultural image of woman. However, the conditions for the flowers to grow in the novel are presented as gravel or unnatural places and are poor and remote from what the flowers need for optimal growth. This can be understood as the conditions which society offers for women to grow during this time. These poor conditions in society include not getting a proper education, the opportunity to get a proper job and restraining women from having the same that men have. This problem which the title present, of an impossible ideal that women are expected to reach towards, gives the title a strong sense of ambiguity. It makes the reader uncertain of what they will encounter in the novel even before they read the first epigraph and the novel itself.

### 3.2 Predefining Grace

Atwood's novel is structured into sections containing different kinds of texts and chapters, where each section is introduced by an epigraph. The epigraphs generally consist of quotes from other books, such as Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings* (1853), or of sources and transcripts dated from the time of the murder. In addition, the occasional poem or quote from other poets and novelists, such as Emily Brontë, are found in the epigraphs. The transcripts in the epigraphs are actual historical accounts by Grace Marks herself, some voluntary and others from the trial, as well as by doctors who have worked with, or heard about Grace, and by James McDermott. Common to the epigraphs is that they function to describe Grace from an exterior perspective. Only three out of fifteen sections contain quotes from her own testimony. The accounts from James McDermott are told to Kenneth McKenzie, Grace's lawyer, and retold in Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings* (1853). Apart from these epigraphs, the novel details the conversations between Doctor Jordan and Grace, and Grace's retelling of the past events. These conversations are mainly narrated in the first person, from Grace's point of view. We also, however, get access to various letters, and are presented with some passages told from the first-person perspective of Doctor Jordan.

The multiplicity of voices, is presented by Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin as "heteroglossia" (Cobley 94). For Bakhtin, the novel is made up of many different voices which may at times be competing with one another (Cobley 94). He also argues that the overlapping of voices can sometimes undermine the authoritative voice of the narrator (Cobley 94). Heteroglossia can be a useful device in novels because it includes different perspectives, which help us as readers understand and gain insight to characters and context of the novel. These individual narratives presented by characters of the novel may, as Paul Cobley discusses in his study *Narrative* (2014), dismiss certain parts of their narrative, not being able to convey other characters' thoughts, situations where the narrator is not present and is therefore dismissing large parts of context to the narrative (91). In such cases, the literary device of heteroglossia is useful because it fills in the "gaps" which certain perspectives leave out, by adding several perspectives (voices) to the same storyline. However, heteroglossia can also be said to partly undermine the authoritative voice of the narrator. It is not uncommon for these voices of narration in a novel to be competing with one another (Cobley 94).

In *Alias Grace* (1996) we encounter many voices and perspectives. The main voice is that of Grace Marks, which is in the first-person point of view, presenting not only her view

of the plot of the novel, but also her inner thoughts and dialogues perceived by her. The other voices and perspectives are introduced in the epigraphs and various letters throughout the novel. These introduce not just other fictional voices, but also voices from the of the trial of Grace Marks in 1843, as well as newspaper articles written around this time concerning the trial and conviction. These various perspectives, consequently, allow us as readers to find authority where it is appropriate to the individual reader (Cobley 95).

However, one can also argue that the heteroglossia which takes place in *Alias Grace* (1996) is a rebellious act in itself, as it displaces the authoritative voice of the patriarchy. Although the novel classifies as a historic novel, one can also view it as a murder mystery, or crime fiction, as it centers around a criminal act, which is the murders. With the limited suspects, Grace Marks clearly being one of two main suspects, the novel does not begin with stating whether or not Mark's actually committed the crimes or not. In fact, the voice of Grace as well as the authoritative voice of patriarchy, make us uncertain if there is a possibility of a woman being guilty of such a criminal act. The novel makes us, the readers, question if there is only one truth to the matter.

In order for the narrative to seem convincing, it is important that the narrator display authority (Cobley 83-105). The authoritative voice of a narrator will grab the attention of the reader and lead the plot with confidence. Grace Marks as a narrator, then, is not ideal, because it becomes apparent already in her first monologue that her voice as well as her mind, is ambiguous and obscure. In addition, we are aware that this is a murder narrative, and that the protagonist – and narrator – is a convicted offender. This immediately gives the reader cause to not trust the narrative told from Grace's perspective, and to suspect that she might, in fact, be an unreliable narrator. A character of a novel who is the narrator may be deemed an unreliable narrator because they cannot be trusted for some reason, as an example, they are prejudiced or exaggerating (Bennett and Royle 371). Therefore, as mentioned above, situations in places where the narrator is not present, as well as narration of what is going on inside another character's mind, is impossible, which potentially leaves out important details which we as readers need to be able to understand the novel fully. Furthermore, since Marks's narrative lacks authority and seems, to some extent, delirious, drifting between reality and what seems like a dream or imagination, it may cause us to question if the character suffers from some kind of mental illness. As readers we may instead start to read between the lines of Grace Marks' narrative, as it is in our nature to not trust a murder narrative blindly. The author is trying to help us in this respect, it seems, by introducing other perspectives, such as Doctor Jordan. This allows us to form a broader view of the protagonist

and to form a more informed guess of what actually took place. The letters are also part of a narrative technique that allow us to see the events and the characters from other perspectives and to gain understanding of the characters of the novel. The purpose behind introducing mixed first-person perspectives, letters and epigraphs is to allow us as readers to gain a broader view of the protagonist and the narrative we are being told, from different points of view.

The first section in the novel is entitled “Jagged Edge” and contains an epigraph in the form of a quote from Susanna Moodie’s *Life in the Clearings* (1853). The work of Moodie is not only a biography, but also functions in this context as a portrait of society in Canada in the mid-nineteenth century. During her trip along Lake Ontario, Moodie present us with observations of the social customs and practices she encounters, as well as accounts of odd characters she meets along the way, such as Grace Marks who is imprisoned in Toronto. This first quote is important because it not only provides an introduction to the society at the time, but also gives an account of how both men and women played an important part in maintaining patriarchy as a structure.

At the time of my visit, there were only forty women in the Penitentiary. This speaks much for the superior moral training of the feeble sex. My chief object in visiting their department was to look at the celebrated murderess, Grace Marks, of whom I had heard a great deal, not only from the public papers, but from the gentleman who defended her upon her trial, and whose able pleading saved her from the gallows, on which her wretched accomplice closed his guilty career.

(Atwood Epigraph, “Jagged Edge”)

The quote frames the novel, and presents us with a clearly male dominated society, through referring to women as “the feeble sex”, as well as the “gentleman...whose able pleading saved her”. By indicating that the woman on trial, Grace Marks, would not have been able to avoid the gallows had it not been for this man, Moodie implicitly confirms the superiority of the male gender. In addition, the epigraph functions to silence Grace. Moodie explains how she has heard and read about Marks, and that her main objective of her visit to Toronto Penitentiary is to look at Grace. Not speak to her, then, but to “look at the celebrated murderess” for herself. It seems as if Moodie’s main objective is to confirm if all that is written about Grace in the media and what she has heard from her lawyer, is true, by looking

at this phenomenon. First of all, it is significant to note that the epigraph introduces someone else's voice before we have even heard Grace Marks' own voice. This functions to silence her, as our own interpretation of the character is delayed by someone else's, in this case, Moodie's. We also see that Moodie's portrayal of Grace is significantly affected by what she has read in the media about the murders, and she comes to look at her as if she were an object, which is what the media has degraded her to. Grace is no longer regarded as a woman, as the characteristics of a murderer do not correspond with the characteristics of a woman. Grace's character is therefore silenced by Susanna Moodie's quote, which displays heavy influence by the normative narrative of patriarchy.

Silence is a key word when we discuss how women were expected to behave in the Victorian period. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Woman Question was not only discussions of rights and women's position in society, but also how women were not supposed to speak publicly (Elliott 11). Women and men were regarded as naturally belonging in different spheres, where men belonged to the public sector and women to the domestic sector. Due to this ideology of separate spheres, women should not be heard in the men's public sector, as that would be stepping out of the sphere to which they belonged, breaching their position in the background of the male-dominated society. Secondly, this epigraph also displays how Grace, as a convicted murderess, is at the bottom of the patriarchal hierarchy. She seems to have lost the rights which she has been born with, namely those of a woman, by committing or being affiliated with these murders. The act of committing a murder displays the opposite of that which was expected by women during this time, specifically that of being nurturing and caring. This is evident in the fact that even women, such as Susanna Moodie, came to look at her and observe her, treating her as an animal or an object at a museum rather than a human being.

Moodie is quoted in several of the epigraphs in the novel, where she continues to observe Grace in a prejudiced manner. In the second section we encounter a description of Grace. Here, Grace's expressions are described as "melancholic", "painful" and "stealthy" (Atwood epigraph, section 2), which, to the reader, seem like stereotypical expressions that one might use to describe a murderer. Moodie utilizes words which are commonly used to describe a criminal rather than a woman, which is what society has degraded Grace to, as she through the act of murder betrayed the delicate and graceful being women were expected to be at the time. It is valuable to note that Grace is in fact imprisoned for a serious crime, and while her status is degraded, so would a man's status if he had committed a crime. However, the conflict of the female genders characteristics which are defined in this period, and that of

a murderer is so great, that the crime in itself seems worse if a woman commits it, because it is not expected in terms of what society define women as. The fact that she has chosen these words to describe Grace might imply that she is not really looking, or paying attention, to Grace. She is omitting all the words which are commonly used to describe women, and instead, sees the predefinition of Grace Marks which has been made publicly in media. This also confirms that the society which they live in at the time is not only a male-dominated, but it is in fact a hierarchal structure which women also contribute to. The structure, though based on the domination of the male gender, is accepted by females who do not challenge or question it, but rather contribute to it, therefore allowing the narrative of patriarchy to continue. In addition, those who are higher placed in the hierarchy, such as Moodie, continue to display support of the narrative by treating those beneath her in the hierarchy as less than her equal.

The epigraph in section one, where we first encounter Moodie's impressions, is followed by a haiku by Bashō. This poem is important, too, for understanding the society in which the novel takes place.

come, see real  
flowers  
of this painful world

(Atwood epigraph, "Jagged Edge")

Flowers are important motifs that can be found throughout the novel, but firstly here in the first epigraph, where the author uses this poem to provide us with a suggestion of what they might symbolize. For one thing, flowers can easily be connected to femininity. They were also worn by the ancient Greeks and in images of the Greek gods, such as Apollo, in honor of the goddesses and their fertility and love. They are, in other words, frequently associated with women and feminine qualities. The final part of the haiku stating that we are talking about flowers "of this painful world" (Atwood epigraph, "Jagged Edge"), however, can be understood quite literally, as acknowledging that the world we live in there is pain. Atwood uses this poem to set shed light on the normative narratives which were at the time, by reflecting women, as flowers, who must endure the painful world of patriarchy.

The symbolic flowers are present throughout the novel. In the first chapter, which follows the epigraph of Moodie and Bashō, we are presented with the thoughts of Grace Marks in a short, seemingly inner, monologue. The monologue seems to be drifting in and

out of reality and imagination. Inner monologues often present us with not only the internal thoughts about the characters, but also a somewhat less rational and structured version than outer monologues, as they are not filtered by norms placed on outer, spoken monologues. An example is how we talk changes depending on to whom we are speaking, creating one type of dialogue with friends and another one with one's parents. An inner monologue is not heard by others than the person performing it, and therefore is not altered to meet any specific standards. As readers we are therefore, through this inner monologue, allowed to peek inside Grace Marks' mind and be a part of what she keeps to herself. Cobley points out that when a character of a narrative is the narrator, it is clear that she cannot narrate certain things, such as other characters' thoughts, or what goes on in places where they are not present (91). He also points out that sometimes, what goes on inside the narrator's head is in conflict with the "reality of the situation" (Cobley 91). This is relevant to the monologue in Chapter One which destabilizes the boundaries of time and space, past and present, dream and reality and conscious and unconscious. It is also quite revealing in the sense that it establishes three motifs that catch our attention, that is, the above-mentioned flowers, as well as memories of Nancy and the reflection on Grace's current situation.

The inner monologue starts with another representation of flowers where Grace describes peonies that "grow out of the gravel" and turn into dark-red flowers "all shiny and glossy like satin" (Atwood 5). Soon after they blossom, they wilt and "fall to the ground". There is a somewhat dark and mysterious atmosphere surrounding the descriptions of the peonies in this paragraph, making us question how they can grow at all in such conditions, and if they are even real. The flowers and gravel can again be related to Bashō's poem, and the metaphor of the flowers representing the women of the Victorian period. In this passage, it is tempting to interpret the metaphor representing Grace Marks herself, and the gravel as the penitentiary that she is confined in. However, as mentioned above, the metaphor could also be seen to include all women of the Victorian period. In this context, the gravel becomes a metaphor for patriarchy, for the conditions that women have to grow in as human beings. The gravel represents a society which does not provide women with good conditions to grow. Interestingly, there is also a Greek myth about the flower peony, which was once a nymph by the name of Peonia to whom Apollo had taken a liking. One day, the two are caught flirting by the goddess Aphrodite. Aphrodite compares Peonia's behaviour to that of a harlot, making her feel embarrassed and turn red. Aphrodite then turns Peonia into a flower to stop the shameful behavior, and this is how the peony came to be. The flower itself can therefore be said to be the symbol of embarrassment and shamefulness. It is curious that Atwood uses this

flower in particular then, to describe the women of the Victorian period, indicating that they were made to feel shameful of their behavior in ways that men were not, such as behaving in ways which were considered unfeminine, an example being moving from the domestic sphere to the public sphere where they did not belong.

Even though the stereotypical way of interpreting a flower is that it signifies something delicate and beautiful, the novel also uses it to signal violence. The myth of the peony can also be related to the story of Grace, Mr. Kinnear and Nancy, as it is implied that Grace was, in fact, jealous of Nancy, who got to spend her evenings with Mr. Kinnear, just like Aphrodite can arguably be seen as jealous of Peonia and Apollo. As a result, Grace, like Aphrodite, made sure that Nancy would not be able to act in this manner again by turning her into a flower. Here, becoming a flower is equal to a punishment, which might be what Grace imagined she did to Nancy. As we can see here, the flowers signify several meanings at once, much like everything else in this novel. The strategy of multiple meanings is deployed by Atwood to suggest that things, people, and structures are not easy and straightforward. Instead, they can signify different things according to who the receiver is. Throughout the novel, the motif of the flower recurs. Doctor Jordan's description of Lydia, one of the Governor's wife's two daughters, compares her scent to "lily of the valley" (Atwood 99). It signifies something great, though not always growing out of the optimized places, just like the peony. However, while the lily represents an ideal, something pure, effortless, and saintlike, the peony seems to represent something mystical which grows where it should not and which is, as mentioned, associated with shame and punishment.

In Grace's interior monologue, flowers are also associated in other ways with her memory of Nancy. As mentioned above, the monologue is somewhat confusing as it seems to be drifting in and out of dreams and reality. The second paragraph is a description of her memories of the first day she worked at Mr. Kinnear's house, and her first time seeing Nancy out in the garden, where she is picking flowers. Nancy is wearing a dress and a bonnet and the atmosphere in this passage is no longer dark and mysterious, but rather idyllic and picturesque. This is one of the first hints as to how the mind of Grace works, as it in just a few lines down changes abruptly in atmosphere, and switches back to the dark and mysterious, when Grace describes how Nancy turns in to look at her and all of a sudden "put her hand up to her throat as if startled" (Atwood 5). This, we learn in the murder ballad in Chapter Two, is a foreshadowing of what was to happen, as Nancy is said to have been strangled to death. According to the murder ballad, "And these two monstrous criminals, They strangled her till dead" (Atwood 15). Hence, we get the feeling that Grace is changing



rapidly and unexpectedly between recollecting and imagining the past. The rapid changes in atmosphere can arguably signal mental instability. The blurred boundaries between imagination and reality implies that Grace herself is not aware of or sure of which is imagination, and which is reality. Grace's chaotic recollection of the past make us as readers doubt her reliability, and indicates a degree of instability in her mind.

As readers we remain uncertain of the narrative, because we are aware from the beginning that this is a murder narrative, which centers around a criminal act that we have not yet been presented with who is guilty of committing it. As mentioned above, Atwood adds to this feeling of uncertainty by making the narrator seem unreliable:

Sometimes at night I whisper to myself: *Murderess, Murderess*. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor. *Murderer* is merely brutal. It's like a hammer, or a lump of metal. I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices.

(Atwood 25)

There is a devilry feeling concerning this quote, almost like she feels happy about being called a murderess, as if there is no remorse if she has committed the murders, and if she is innocent, then one would assume that there would be more frustration concerning the fact that people and the society believe her to be a murderess. It makes her, as a suspect of a murder mystery, seem guilty, and thus unreliable.

This feeling of not really being able to trust the narrator, relates to another point made by Copley, that as readers we need to have this anchor point of things, such as accurate depictions of actions and characters that we recognize in our own reality and can relate to in order for it to seem reliable (83). As receivers of Grace's narrative, we are manipulated in a sense to question everything we are told, such as when she states that Nancy "scatters into patches of colour" (Atwood 6), which is something that is far from realistic. The end of the first page of the chapter brings Grace back to what seems like reality, however, as she realistically describes the walls inside the penitentiary where she is not just confined physically, but also mentally:

If I am good enough and quiet enough, perhaps after all they will let me go; but it's not easy being quiet and good, it's like hanging on to the edge of a bridge when

you've already fallen over; you don't seem to be moving, just dangling there, and yet it is taking all your strength.

(Atwood 6)

Here, once again, we are faced with a silenced individual. The *Oxford Learners Dictionary* define *good* as someone who “follows strictly a set of rules or principles”. The dictionary also defines *quiet* in regards to personality as “not tending to talk too much” or as an attitude “definite but not expressed in an obvious way”. The two adjectives can in short be said to express the same thing. In a patriarchal society these expectations of how to be a good and quiet woman can be understood as men wanting to erase the individual nature of women and instead politically create boundaries and expectations that would confine women to a certain standard which is not likely to interrupt male dominance. In regard to the ideal of the Angel in the House to be good means to let go of the individual personality and desires, and instead be available for everyone else in the house. The main aim was for women, and especially an unnatural woman such as a murderess, to be an invisible presence. If a woman is to be seen, it is only to please and cater others. Secondly, it becomes clear that she feels her own nature conflicting with what society expects, as she states, “it is not easy being quiet and good” (Atwood 6) and compares it to hanging of a bridge and taking all her strength. “Good” and “quiet” can be understood as an exterior feeling, how people perceive you when they meet you or how you would want to present yourself. However, as we can see, the quote contrasts this external feeling of how it is on the inside, stating that “it's like hanging on to the edge of a bridge when you've already fallen over” (Atwood 6). What Grace is describing is an impossible feat and the violence in this image is striking. She is juxtaposing the feeling of not moving anywhere with how it takes all her strength to stay there. This paragraph of Grace's monologue functions to confirm the reader's suspicion of her mental state. It is clear that she is a struggling individual, whether or not she has, indeed, committed what she is accused of, and this, on a broader scale, might also indicate that this might be how women in general are feeling. To remain in their designated space, they must use all their strength.

The final paragraph of the chapter displays a sense of regret towards whatever has happened to Nancy, however, as she wishes things would be different in her dreams, saying “this time I will run to help” (Atwood 6), thus maintaining the sense of ambivalence which is further strengthened towards the end of the chapter when we read that: “This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story” (Atwood 7). This statement not only makes us question which parts of the imagination and narrative are reliable, as she comes

across as calculated and, perhaps, manipulative. If this is how she told things to Dr. Jordan, why would she hesitate to deceive us, the readers, as she narrates her story?

### 3.3 Patriarchy as a Prison

The third section of the book includes a quote from Emily Brontë's poem "The Prisoner" (1845), which describes the interactions between a speaker, who is a prison warden, and a female prisoner. The excerpt is the fourth and fifth stanza from the poem, where the reader finally meets the prisoner, in this part called "the captive". *Captive* is defined by the *Oxford Learners Dictionary* as someone "kept as a prisoner or in a space that you cannot get out of; unable to escape», while *prisoner* is defined as "a person who is kept in prison as a punishment, or while they are waiting for trial". The former suggests that there need not be a reason why you are taken captive, the only main issue is how you are unable to escape. However, "prisoner" suggests that there is a reason, as a prisoner you are being punished by something that you have done. This is crucial in understanding the poem, because it opens for questions as to why the persona is placed in prison in the first place, and whether it is by right. This stanza functions to evoke feelings of empathy for the captive. In the second stanza, which in reality is the poem's fifth, the captive tells the warden that his "bolts and irons" (Atwood 21) will not keep her imprisoned forever. "They will not hold me long" (Atwood 21), she says, indicating that one way or another she intends to get out of this prison. The poem, though not about Grace Marks, can relate to how one might think of Grace and also how Grace herself might be feeling. She might, in fact, have been taken captive without cause, and intends to get out of the penitentiary at any cost. Atwood masterfully sets the tone for us as readers and reminds us that this is a murder narrative and we do not yet know if the main character is imprisoned by right. At this point, we only know the few facts we have been told and a confusing short chapter from Grace's own inner monologue. This poem does not only strengthen the uncertainty we have surrounding the imprisonment of Grace, but by the word "captive" also points to the more general social, political, and economic situation of women at this time, irrelevant of whether they were in an actual prison or not. They are held captive in the dominating ideology of their time. Ironically, in contrast to the women of the Victorian period, Grace Marks is known by her name for her own actions, which can in a sense cause her to feel more liberated than she was before the murders, when she was a captive of the normative narratives.

Following the quote from Brontë, we are presented to the start of the story, from Grace Mark's perspective. It is significant to emphasize that the actual plot of the novel does not start until the third section of the novel, when we as readers have already been exposed to several voices which present perspectives on the novel's plot. This adds to the narrative confusion which we are exposed to as readers. The year is now 1859, and it has been sixteen years since the murder happened. Grace Marks is sitting in the Governor's wife parlor. She has been in this parlor many times, but this is the first time she is sitting down, and not clearing things out or serving the guests of the Governor's wife:

I am sitting on the purple velvet settee in the Governor's parlour, the Governor's wife's parlour; It has always been the Governor's wife's parlour although it is not always the same wife, as they change them around according to the politics.

(Atwood 23)

This is the very first sentence of the third chapter and displays how also the Governor's wife can be understood as a captive of her time. Not only is she not introduced by a name, but she is also one in a succession of women who have carried the label "Governor's wife". It allows us to understand the dynamic between a man and his wife during this time. It becomes evident that it is not a marriage of love, rather a marriage of convenience. The fact that the Governor's wife is not mentioned by name, but rather rendered property or an object belonging to the Governor, also confirms the male as the dominant gender. Further, the quote gives us a sense of how Grace feels regarding the social classes above her own, as her attitude is seemingly unsympathetic and unbothered as to how the wives of the governors must have felt being swapped out for the next best thing, perhaps indicating that she believes this is the price one must pay to live a more privileged life. This is again confirmed when Grace compares the Governor's wife and the female guests to a jellyfish:

They were bell-shaped and ruffled, gracefully waving and lovely under the sea; but if they washed up on the beach and dried out in the sun there was nothing left of them. And that is what the ladies are like; mostly water.

(Atwood 24)

The comparison Grace makes of the women who enter the Governor's wife's parlour to how a jellyfish looks beneath water, and which, if they were to be removed from this body of water, or, in this context, the parlour, would collapse. They are nothing more than the beauty of the dresses they wear. This gestures towards the lack of education which women received in the nineteenth century. Though in the late nineteenth century an increasing number of female educational options appeared, people were hesitant to send their daughters because of the social stigma that followed. In addition, studies such as "Sex in Mind and Education" (1874) by Henry Maudsley, quoted in *The Female Malady* (1987) stated that women who participated in intellectual training could become permanently injured in their reproductive systems and their brains (Showalter 124). In their pursuit for a career in a patriarchal society, they were not only judged as to why they would want to be a career woman rather than a housewife, but also challenged with harassment and often resistance instead of encouragement. In cases where women suffered mental breakdowns, doctors of the time used this opportunity to blame it on how the woman defied her "nature" by competing with men, instead of serving them (Showalter 123). As men held monopoly on occupations such as doctors, they were in a position to provide the public with the narrative which would benefit and keep the monopoly in areas such as education. In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter states that doctors announced that women were at higher risks of becoming mentally unstable, due to their monthly bleeding (60). They were more vulnerable than men and could not endure the same pressure of education as men could. Many doctors also publicized that educational stress could affect their ability to reproduce, and therefore become unattractive to potential husbands. Although Grace indicates that these women are nothing more than their attire, she also acknowledges how this attire is keeping them in place, that they have no choice in the matter: "They are like birdcages; but what is being caged in? Legs, the legs of ladies; legs penned in to they cannot get out and go rubbing up against the gentlemen's trousers" (Atwood 24). She clearly questions for whom and for what purpose the crinolines are needed. Is it to protect the ladies, or to keep them caged in, shielding the men from the women's sexual appeal? Her sharp observations in this chapter gives the impression that Grace Marks is more capable and competent than we have realized before, again placing doubt as to her status as a narrator. She displays an awareness of her surroundings to a greater extent through her awareness of societal structures and observations of the governor's wife. This passage seems less blurred, more structured, and authoritative than the previous chapters.

The Governor's wife is a typical Victorian middle-class woman who does not really have any duties or chores, and her main activity is social gatherings. On Tuesdays she hosts a social gathering discussing relevant politics, and on Thursdays it is the spiritualist circle. Grace points out that the Governor's wife does not like being a Governor's wife, asserting that "...she would prefer the Governor to be the governor of something other than a prison" (Atwood 24). Interestingly, she does not wish for a change in her life, rather a change in the Governor's life. This is important to note, as there is not really an option for her to be anything else, but an object of the Governor himself. This is also confirmed in the following sentence:

So here she is, and she must make the most of her social position and accomplishments, and although an object of fear, like a spider and of charity as well, I am also one of the accomplishments.

(Atwood 24)

Though the Governor's wife is an object of the Governor, Grace describes herself as an object belonging to the accomplishments of the Governor's wife. Hence, the hierarchy becomes clear. Men are clearly rated highest of importance, and the women are decreasing in importance according to their societal status. Grace, as a convicted murderess, might no longer possess the female characteristics of being caring and loving and is rated as low as it gets. Though we commonly speak of the male dominance in patriarchy, and men limit and confine women, this section of the novel further suggest how in the prison system of the patriarchy, both women and men are guilty of its maintenance.

### 3.4 Grace

The contrasting nature of being a female and being a murderer causes the society to question every inch of Grace Marks. On page 25 of *Alias Grace* (1996) Grace lists a long list of names and things she has been called, from "inhuman female demon" (Atwood 25) to an "innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life" (Atwood 25). Interestingly, these descriptions often contrast each another. Even the color of her eyes change according to the different narratives which people and the media form about her. Importantly, the paragraph is structured into two sentences, which makes us as readers feel

almost out of breath by the time we get to the final lines. This out of breath-feeling, puts emphasis on the final question asked by Grace: “And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?” (Atwood 25). It becomes evident that the narratives which are distributed about her, make her question who she is herself and further to question her own personal narrative. The contradicting narratives which are listed are impossible to be all at once and beg the question of which is true. As mentioned earlier, the normative narratives define women’s place during the Victorian period. However, the issue that this novel faces is what happens when you are already labelled as a direct contradiction of an Angel in the House, like Grace Marks, and which effects this has on her own personal narrative of the self. However, an interesting factor which is revealed in Grace’s narrations are how she attempts to manipulate this normative narrative to her advantage. Her personal narrative becomes an imitation of what others expect, in order for her to advance. This can be related to Judith Butlers theory that gender is performative (34). Grace, who is aware of how society perceive her in comparison of what it means to be female, allow her to perform as a female when she wants, and thus manipulating the system of patriarchy to an extent. She is already at the bottom of the hierarchy, and it seems as if she has concluded that she might as well use these narratives of how society expects a woman to be, to her own advantage. This is something that we will come back to.

The conversations that Grace has with Dr. Jordan are revealing yet also make us suspicious of her. The first chapter presenting her inner monologue, expresses thoughts and the blurred line within Grace’s mind. Her first meeting with Dr. Jordan, on the other hand, expresses her wits and brains. Dr. Jordan immediately addresses Grace’s fear of doctors, and introduces himself as one by simultaneously emphasising that he does “no cutting open” (Atwood 42). He continues by quoting the *Book of Job*, as if they were his own words. Grace recognizes where the quote is from, and she assumes that the doctor has come to test her. Instead of letting Dr. Jordan know that she understands where the quote is from, however, she does not reveal this. Rather, “I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practiced” (Atwood 43). At this point it becomes even more obvious that Grace Marks knows more than she lets on. This is developed when Dr. Jordan offers her an apple, and Grace immediately recognize this as a second test, as he asks what this reminds her of. The answer is a personal memory of Mary Whitney, which was a friend she worked with before she started working at Mr. Kinnear’s property, and of how they used to throw the apple peelings over their shoulders to see who they would marry. She withholds this memory from Dr. Jordan, however, and continues to contemplate what he might wish for as an answer: “There

is always a right answer, which is right because it is the one they want, and you can tell by their faces whether you have guessed what it is” (Atwood 45). Grace concludes that the answer Dr. Jordan is looking for is the apple of the Tree of Knowledge and says that “Any child could guess it. But I will not oblige” (Atwood 45). In both of these instances Grace shows us that she is aware that Dr. Jordan is underestimating her. She does not want to give him the satisfaction of receiving the right answer, so she instead answers with yet another stupid look.

Dr. Jordan explains that he is there to listen to her, and she responds with “you won’t believe me, Sir” (Atwood 46), pointing to all the things that have been said about her, and all the observations people have made of her, and how no one has really understood and listened to what she had to say:

You should ask the lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself. In any case, I can’t remember, I can remember other things but I have lost that part of my memory entirely. They must have told you that.

(Atwood 46)

Grace is used to people believing narratives about her, or, as in the case of Moodie, solely coming to look at her, rather than listening to her personal narrative. She also states that she cannot remember what happened in the exact moment when the crime was committed. This makes us skeptical, as she has already proven to be quite good at hiding what she does not want to say. She admits this soon after to Dr. Jordan, that “perhaps I will tell you lies” (Atwood 46). This statement confirms our cause for skepticism. However, there is still a chance that what she tells us is true, but as long as she is a woman of the patriarchal society, and a convicted felon, it does not really matter what she says, because her voice is irrelevant compared to all the other voices that narrate her life from the outside.

Dr. Jordan, who is one of the voices that will narrate her life, is in the process of establishing his own asylum and is reaching out to other institutions for information in his letters. Before his meeting with Grace, he has spent quite some time seeking her out. The first letter which we encounter in the fourth section confirms this. As Dr. Joseph Workman writes in his letter to Dr. Jordan: “However, for information regarding the chief object [Grace Marks] of your enquiry, I regret that you must seek elsewhere” (Atwood 54). As we previously mentioned with Moodie, it is important to note that Dr. Jordan, too, has gathered



information and predefined Grace before meeting her. His definition of Grace is highly influenced by the patriarchal narratives, which is especially evident in doctors of this time. As signaled above, Showalter highlights theories which doctors of this time distributed concerning females and their biological weaker nature, which informed the public of how easily mental illness could appear if it was challenged by pursuing what was considered male nature (Showalter 123). Theories as these are, to a twenty-first-century reader, clear ramifications of the existing social relations between the sexes of the time, of the male sex attempting to keep women in their place. The letters provide us with an insight of how the men of the patriarchal structure shared their experiences and narratives.

Dr. Jordan further explains in a letter to Dr. Edward Murchie about his situation in Kingston. He elaborates on the society of the town, as a place where there are just as “pretty girls here as elsewhere” (Atwood 61). He further explains that the town is full of Tories and “pretty provincial snobberies” (Atwood 61), and that he assumes that the Yankee democrat friend of Dr. Jordan will be viewed with suspicion by the people of Kingston. By this he confirms that the town of Kingston is one that is happy with what is comfortable and normal, but also struggles with what might be considered outsiders. This is significant because it allows us to further understand just how difficult it could be to be a woman during this time. If a man, with a different political view, faces difficulties from the other men, one can easily imagine that if a woman was to stray from her natural sphere to a man’s sphere, she would be facing a lot more than those difficulties that the man faces. Further, to be a woman, who has already left her natural sphere, by committing murders, it is thinkable that the society would have such issues with this, and therefore it becomes the talk of the town, trying to find a justified reason as to why this has happened. Dr. Jordan, who is only visiting Kingston, continues to elaborate on his project, which is Grace Marks. Dr. Jordan explains how the Reverend Verringer has gone out of his way to accommodate for him and arranged the meetings with Grace Marks. Though in his conversations with Grace, Dr. Jordan seems less conservative as he seems open to listening to her, in contrast to Moodie’s visit. However, it becomes apparent that the patriarchal narrative is unavoidable here, too. “[Reverend Verringer] has arranged to have Grace Marks placed at my disposal for several hours every afternoon” (Atwood 61), he says, and we realise that Dr. Jordan talks about Grace as if she was an object. In addition, it is evident that though she might think it’s her choice to attend these talks with Dr. Jordan, she has in fact been placed there to his disposal by the Reverend. Grace has no ownership over her choices. The sense of objectification is heightened when Dr. Jordan states that “I have had only one opportunity thus far of viewing the object of my

investigations, and so it is too soon to convey my impressions” (Atwood 61-62). The narrative of patriarchy takes up much space in Dr. Jordan’s mind, whether he is aware of it or not. He is unable to speak of her as an equal, which is understandable on many points. First of all, she is convicted of a crime, and he is a doctor brought in to evaluate her. On a more personal level, he cannot see her as an equal because she is a woman, and he is a man. He needs her to trust him, if he is going to be able to analyze her mind, and to truly be able to tell if she is guilty or not. His way of doing this is by manipulating the fear which she has already developed towards doctors and men, and to prove that he is not like the others. He shows up, without a scalpel to cut her, or without tying her down: “...I am not the usual kind of doctor. I do no cutting open. Are you afraid of me, Grace?” (Atwood 42). Instead, he just wants to talk to her, and to listen. To be heard, is something very unfamiliar to Grace, as she, even before the murders never really got heard, as women were not expected to speak their minds or tell their irrelevant stories. As we mostly interpret these meetings from Grace’s perspective, the letters which are provided, to and from Dr. Jordan, present us with a different version of the experiences which is conveyed by Grace, again indicating that there is more than one possible outcome, she may be guilty, or she may not. The voice of dr. Jordan, which is provided in the letters, help to explain more context and the thoughts which Grace as a narrator is unable to rely to the reader. However, the normative narrative of patriarchy seems to influence the letters, and in a sense hijack the issue of Grace, which again confirms the effect of which normative narratives have on individuals, to the extent where almost no conversation can be understood without the context of ideology.

The ninth day Grace meets with Dr. Jordan, he asks her who Mary Whitney is, and explains that beneath her portrait at the front of her confession, is the name “Grace Marks, Alias Mary Whitney” (Atwood 117). This references the title *Alias Grace*. As we know, an alias is something mainly used by criminals or celebrities, someone who is intending to hide their real identity. The fact that Grace gave another name in her testimony at that time, supports the suggestion that she is a criminal with something to hide. Grace continues to explain that she borrowed the name of an old, dead friend: “I stop for a minute, thinking of the right way to explain it. She was always kind to me, I say; and without her, it would have been a different story entirely” (Atwood 117). There are several things to notice here. Firstly, the formulation of the quote. She points to stopping, midst conversation. As readers we are aware that there are two dialogues happening, the internal dialogue, where Grace discusses her inner thoughts with herself. Then there is the outer dialogue which happens between Grace and Dr. Jordan. We are also aware of Grace’s manipulative character traits, and that

she wants to be found guilty, in order to be released. This stop, or pause, make us wonder if she takes a break, and rethinks how she will say the truth, or if she will invent a truth, creating a sense of ambiguity. The heteroglossia, presenting different voices, make us question the authoritative voice of the narrator.

Ultimately, this is an important statement made by Grace. Firstly, it announces the importance of Mary Whitney's influence on Grace. She continuously seeks to reply and think the way Mary would in certain scenarios. Grace was with Mary when she died, getting an abortion, and this has clearly traumatized Grace, and was in fact the reason why she left her previous workplace, and started working for Mr. Kinnear. The need to channel someone else because she does not feel strong enough in her own body is something that many women of this time might find relatable. She finds strength in thinking how Mary was unafraid of the patriarchy and how she responded to whomever the way that she wished. The ending of Mary Whitney's story is not a happy one, as she was never anything more than a maid and died while attempting to abort the child she had with her master. Mary's master did most likely not display an interest in having a child with her. The abuse of authority which is displayed by such relations between a man of the house and the maid, though not uncommon at the time, is noteworthy because it illustrates how easily it could happen and how likely it was to be ignored or never questioned, not even by the women of the house. The narrative of patriarchy was so overwhelming that questioning it seemed a bigger risk than accepting it and living with it as their own.

Grace continues to meet Dr. Jordan and tell him about her life. In part nine, she has told her story from when she started working at Mr. Kinnear's residence, and the next part which she is to tell is about the murders. Here, we learn that "I said that I remembered some of the things I did. But there are other things they say I did, which I said I could not remember at all" (Atwood 343). This quote too, make us wonder if she is telling the truth or not. She could, on the one hand not remember what had happened, due to blacking out, because of trauma, or because she simply was not a part of it. Yet, she implies, by saying "which I said", that this might actually be something that she just decided to say, as an easy way out, or to not seem guilty (Atwood 343).

Whilst Grace is contemplating what she will tell Dr. Jordan about the day of the murder, Dr. Jordan is in contact with another doctor, Dr. DuPont, who has been asked by a committee to attempt a session of neuro-hypnosis on Grace. In a conversation between Dr. Jordan and Grace's lawyer, Kenneth MacKenzie, Dr. Jordan admits to believing Grace's

amnesia, and states that he is curious to discover if they can bring up the forgotten or repressed memories in the hypno-therapy session with Dr. Dupont.

As Grace is put under hypnosis, Dr. DuPont and Dr. Jordan begin questioning her about her repressed memories. When they ask if she has had relations with James McDermott Grace responds in a crude way if they want to know if they slept together. Grace's voice is different from the one which Dr. Jordan has heard in her interviews with her, and he says out loud that: "This voice cannot be Grace's; yet in that case, whose voice is it?" (Atwood 456). The voice from Grace's mouth continues to explain in detail about the murder of Nancy. The Governor's wife, who is also present to see the hypnosis, exclaims "Oh Grace" (Atwood 467), to what the voice responds "I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it!" (Atwood 467). It becomes evident that it is the personality of Mary Whitney which is talking to them. The hypnosis ends, and Grace returns, unaware of what has transpired. This scene confirms that Grace suffers from split personalities, which hypno-therapy may enhance. In regard to Grace's discussion with Dr. Jordan concerning her alias, this clarifies the hint "Grace Marks, Alias Mary Whitney", which, we learn, represents two names of the same person. In this light, the blurred monologue from the first chapter becomes less ambiguous. Atwood uses different techniques to hint at how the voice of Grace Marks may not be entirely hers:

*Gone mad* is what they say, and sometimes *Run mad*, as if mad is a direction, like west; as if mad is a different house you could step into, or a separate country entirely. But when you go mad you don't go any other place, you stay where you are. And somebody else comes in.

(Atwood 37)

This passage is from the beginning of the novel, where we are not yet aware of Grace's split personality. Grace describes here that people often associate becoming mad with a choice such as deciding to run, or with a direction, or a place. However, she emphasizes that it is not the individual who decide whether to become mad or not, but the madness who takes over the individual. In fact, Grace states that it is not a change in scenery, or moving somewhere at all, you are in fact still, not able to escape – trapped – and this is the point of which madness enters your mind. However, the sentence: "And somebody else comes in" can be understood a prediction, or hint, from the author, to what will be experienced later on in the novel. As the hypnosis confirms, Grace's voice seems to be inhabited by a second voice, which is displayed by Atwood through bursts of madness, or by making the character of Grace do

things, such as promising to sleep with James McDermott and killing Nancy, and not have much recollection of it afterwards (Atwood 369). To an extent the passage presents Grace as aware of what happens when you “go mad”, as if she experiences it (Atwood 37). She is aware in a sense that madness has ascended upon her, however, she points at this not being a choice that she has made herself. In a later passage, another seemingly inner monologue displays a much more obvious dialogue between two voices:

Here I come, I am coming now. You never obey me, you never do what I say, you dirty girl. Now you will have to be punished.

It is not my fault. What can I do now, where can I turn?

You must unlock the door, you must open the window, you must let me in.

Oh look, oh look at all the split petals, what have you done?

(Atwood 345)

This is a dialogue which takes place within Grace’s mind, and as we later understand between the two voices which belong to Grace, one being the voice which conforms to normative narratives and tries her best to become an accepted member. The second voice is the suppressed voice of anger within Grace, which has no way of expressing itself, as the first voice is dominant. However, with these bursts of madness, the second voice, or part of Grace, is momentarily released, and reveal how it has become murderous and ultimately resort to violence. The second, suppressed voice takes on the alias, Mary Whitney, and is unconscious anger that Grace attempt to suppress in her mind. This paragraph shows how the two voices of Grace fight within her. It seems as if the suppressed voice, alias Mary Whitney, usually is the voice which is rejected, as she states: “you never obey me, you never do what I say” (Atwood 345). Furthermore, it become apparent that this suppressed personality of Mary, is angry because it is so rarely able to control Grace’s actions, thus the voice attempts to threaten her with punishments if she does not obey. The suppressed part of Grace does however reveal itself sometimes, such as her promise to James McDermott, which Grace cannot remember, or, in the horrific moments of the murders. Technically she is not accountable for these actions. However, the only physical body which can be punished for the crimes committed is hers, and therefore she is being held accountable. This passage is important because it not only display more clearly the dynamic between the two voices which inhabits Grace Marks’ body, but it also portrays the perspective which is Mary Whitney. Her narrative is bolder and vindictive. The voice of Mary intends to use Grace in order to revenge

her own life. Again, the voices which we are presented with by the author, creates a feeling of ambiguity. “What should I tell Dr. Jordan about this day?” (Atwood 342). Even in her dialogues with Dr. Jordan, Grace holds up two sides of her narrative, debating which or what to tell him. In addition, this passage presents us with another captivity in which Grace is held, which is that of her mind. As mentioned above, there is a suppressed voice within her, which has taken on the alias of Mary, and wish to fully control the person of Grace. The suppressed voice is captured inside Grace, as it is suppressed by her need to conform to the ideals and expectations of society. There is a possibility that this voice had not been as resentful, and perhaps not even present at all, towards the world, had it been able to live more freely, and not in the mind of a woman who attempt to live her life as close to norm as possible. On the one hand, the voice of Mary seems like the dominant voice, as it demands to be obeyed. However, on the other hand, this voice is the one which is rarely making the decisions concerning Grace’s person.

The discovery of Grace’s two selves, where the personality of Mary, or her suppressed personality, is hidden, explains the unreliableness we have felt in regard to Grace’s narrative and her ability to narrate a story. The way Grace carefully expresses herself, so that she will not be punished further does confirm this feeling of being manipulated from the reader’s perspective. The normative narratives of the society which surround Grace have an effect on her, however, she chooses to exploit them, in order to manipulate the people who can potentially aid her release, and somehow making it work to her advantage. It is also evident that the normative narratives take up much space in each of the characters’ personalities, as they are heavily influenced in how they speak and act in their communication with Grace. In a way Grace’s position of being physically imprisoned in the penitentiary allows her to be more of a true version of herself, than many of the other women who are not imprisoned, but who are still captives of patriarchy. Because she is able to live out her inner thoughts without the restrictions and influence which other characters, such as the Governor’s wife, but also like Dr. Jordan is living by each day, confining them to the roles which they have been assigned by society. Atwood uses contradictions and uncertainties to create an ambiguous feeling throughout the novel, which contributes to the end still seemingly shocking though it has been hinted towards throughout the novel. The ending of the novel, where Grace reveals her inner voice of Mary, can be a metaphor of no matter how many restrictions and ideals a society puts into the world for humans to live in, if the living conditions are not ideal, it will result in the opposite of that ideal, such as madness and murders in the case of an angel in the house.

### 3.5 The madwoman conclusion

The novel presents a physically imprisoned female, Grace, who is accused to committing two murders. As a murderer, her characteristics directly oppose those that society place upon her as a woman. This contrast play an important role in how people understand Grace, as some may doubt if she is at all capable of committing murders, as a woman, according to society, should not be anything but loving and nurturing. Furthermore, this makes people predefine her before letting her speak her own narrative, as they already believe to know what it entails being a woman. She is not only predefined by the characters of the novel, but also by the epigraphs which Atwood use to silence her character and take away her opportunity to introduce herself without the interruptions of others opinions. Arguably, the reason for the author to silence her protagonist, is to mimic the reality of women at the time, who had no choice but accept what was told about them.

Grace is treated by many doctors, one of which is focused upon in great extent. These doctors are in a sense a way to re-enforce the normative narratives of society, because even though she is indeed possibly guilty of committing these crimes, they are using her as an example of how vulnerable women are, as the lesser sex. Indicating that if she is guilty, how easy it is for women to become mad, or to be manipulated by men to take part in such horrific crimes. However, Grace also manipulates the normative narratives to an extent, as she is aware of what society expect from the female gender. In a sense, she puts on a performance, showing the doctors that she is vulnerable, and that she is able to do domestic chores, such as being a good maid to the Governor, or to able to quilt, which is traditionally seen as an appropriate female activity. She utilizes the ideals and expectations, which the Victorian period has placed upon the female gender, in hopes of being able to convince the doctors, and law enforcers, that she would in fact not be able to commit murders, as she is a woman.

However, it becomes clear that there is in fact something odd about the character of Grace, as she seems to have inner monologues, which seemingly present two voices in opposition to each other. In the finale of the novel, it is revealed that Grace potentially suffers from a split personality of some sort. As Showalter express, according to the doctors of the Victorian period, mental illnesses were more common for women, as “[mental breakdowns] would come when women defied ‘nature’” (123). On the one hand this can arguably be said to be true in Grace Mark’s case, as her personality seem to split into one person who is obedient to the normative narratives of her society. However, the other personality rejects it, and builds up an anger for being suppressed for so long, that when she is finally given the

opportunity to control Grace Mark's person, she resorts to violence and ultimately murder. Had Grace not felt the need to oppose what society labelled as her nature, she would potentially not have suffered from split personalities. However, the quote indicates how patriarchy used the definition of gender, to suppress women and thus sustain the structure where males were seen as the dominant gender.

Ultimately, Atwood's novel does not only challenge patriarchy in the traditional way, which can be seen in the portrayal of women, such as the suppression of the Governor's wife. She does in addition prove how gender is an act of performance, which the protagonist, Grace Mark's uses to oppose the structures of patriarchy. It is however important to remember that Grace did in fact commit these murders, however in a state where she was not necessarily in control of her own body. This can also be a pointer to how women in general did not have control of their own bodies at this time, and as a result of attempting to oppose normative narratives, they would ultimately be labelled mad, and put into an institution where the only choice was to conform, in order to be released, and thus not really having any opportunity to escape the structures of society at all.



## Chapter 4: *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath

“Mental breakdown, then, would come when women defied their ‘nature’, attempted to compete with men instead of serving them, or sought alternatives or even additions to their maternal functions”

(Showalter 123)

### 4.1 About *The Bell Jar*

*The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath takes place in post-war America. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, is working as an intern in a New York fashion magazine during the summer of 1953. It is the opportunity of a lifetime for this college student, and she should be having the time of her life. However, Esther is surrounded by a gloomy cloud which makes her world gradually unreal. Depression hovers over her like a bell jar, as she worries for her present as well as her future. Esther is dragged between the domestic sphere of the happy housewife and the unconventional sphere of being a career woman, causing her to question her own identity and her place in society. After her summer in New York, she returns to Boston, and is informed of her rejection to a writing course she had applied to. Her depression peaks during this time, and she is prescribed electroshock therapy by a psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon. As a consequence of the therapy, Esther becomes more and more unhinged, eventually resulting in the decision to take her own life. She survives the suicide attempt and spends time in a private hospital before she leaves to go back to college, slightly more confident, but still scared that the depression will return.

*The Bell Jar* is an autobiographical novel that is partly based on the life of Sylvia Plath and her own personal battle with depression, which sadly ended in her taking her own life shortly after the publication of the novel. It is written in the first-person perspective of the protagonist and through dialogues with other characters, her personal thoughts, and her description of surroundings, we gain understanding of Esther, how she perceives the world, and how the world in which she lives in plays an important role in her life, pushing her to become an ideal member of society and thus being an important factor in her descent into madness. Though the character of Esther resembles the historical author in many aspects, the novel is, perhaps, even more important for the way in which it ultimately deals with female exploitation under the banner of patriarchy. This thematization is the reason why it is labelled

a feminist landmark, according to scholars such as David Peck (Imtiaz 51). The novel depicts a razor-sharp image of the 1950's society and the normative narratives women faced in this time period which, moreover, affected their personal narratives. In short, we might say that Esther's dilemma boils down to either becoming an accepted part of society by choosing the expected path of the normative narrative, which also involves sacrificing her needs and ambitions, or becoming an outcast of society by following her inner desires and defining her own personal narrative.

#### 4.2 Esther: The All-American Girl

Plath and her works are often accused of being obsessed with death, and this is especially the *The Bell Jar* which in a sense can be read as mainly concerning death. This obsession has, for instance, been connected with her reference to the Rosenbergs in the opening paragraph of the novel. This reference of the Rosenbergs is not just an indication of Plath's obsession with death, however, but in a much larger sense a political comment on society as a whole. As is well known, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, were convicted and executed for espionage for the Soviet Union during the peacetime which followed the Second World War. This was a controversial case, as they were the first U.S citizens who were convicted and executed for being spies, and, to make matters worse, one of the spies was a female. The media covered their trial and execution thoroughly, which lead to a split of opinion in America as to whether they were guilty or not.

In the opening paragraph Plath writes that "I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind" (Plath 1). While the political content of such a reference has frequently been overlooked, it makes sense to argue that Plath uses the Rosenbergs in this instance to say something about the American dream and invoke those who do not identify with or follow this narrative, and also how their disastrous fate is somewhat inescapable because of the strength and influence of the American society. This normative narrative, which is to chase the American dream of the capitalist state and to be proud and loud about the country in which they live, is in direct conflict with what the Rosenbergs are accused of representing. They are convicted of living lives which stand in complete opposition to the American dream, turning their backs on America and searching for a place in another nations' narratives. One might even say that the

narrative of the Rosenbergs, is so much in conflict with the normative narrative which America expects, that they are executed for it.

This introductory paragraph, then, as well as the rest of the first chapter of the novel reveals that the character of Esther struggles with her personal identity. Esther indicates that the thought of being electrocuted triggers a curiosity in her about what it must be like to die. Though the thought of being burned alive is sickening to her, she cannot contain her train of thoughts, and to avoid thinking about it seems unavoidable as she is surrounded by the headlines wherever she goes. She then states, that “New York was bad enough” (Plath 1), without the executions of the Rosenbergs. The combination of the Rosenbergs and New York as bad enough on it’s own, indicate that life in New York is not as great as one would think. In fact, to Esther, it is almost as bad as being electrocuted. It can also be a reference to how she is caught between two narratives. New York represents the ideal life. However, this way of living is not making her feel happy and content, instead making her feel lost and confused. The description which Esther present of New York, is that it is “bad enough” (Plath 1). Indicating that there is a sense of fakeness to the city:

By nine in the morning the fake, country-wet freshness that somehow seeped in overnight evaporated like the tail end of a sweet dream. Mirage-grey at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, cindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat.

(Plath 1)

This paragraph indicates two things. Firstly, that this sense of fakeness which Esther experiences could refer to how she attacks the normative narrative for presenting her with a misleading reality which ultimately adds to the feeling of not fitting in. It presents the city in the morning as *fresh*, which is defined by the Oxford Learners Dictionary as “pleasantly clean, pure or cool”, and the city later on as dust blowing into her eyes and mouth, portraying an uncomfortable and uncontrollable experience. Secondly, the quote also functions to foreshadow the mental states of the Esther, by questioning the accuracy and reflecting the shifting state of both the city which she describes and her own mind. On the second page it is indicated that something was indeed wrong with the situation which the protagonist found herself in: “I knew something was wrong with me that summer” (Plath 2). Though she somewhat rebel against the society, arguing that the representation of the city is fake, she

essentially feels that it is her own fault for not dealing with it before whatever is wrong with her gets out of hand. It further suggests how her personal narrative is not compatible with the normative narratives of New York:

I was supposed to be having the time of my life.

I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size seven patent leather shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and a black patent leather pocket-book to match.

(Plath 2)

The repetition in the beginning of this quote is important because it reinforces the conflict between how she is supposed to feel and the way that she is actually feeling. The second line indicates that she should be happy of the life she is living, because she is living the American dream, for girls, by going to college and living in New York. Indicating that the American girl, should be what all girls want to be. Esther describes this group of American girls, all wanting the same thing, the same outfit and looks, down to the same shoesize. Importantly, as this novel is written in Esther's first-person perspective, there is no way of knowing if these girls felt any different from her, as we are not able to look inside their minds. They may in fact view Esther the same way, not knowing her inner desires as she looks like just another American girl. As we know, Friedan addresses "the problem without a name" as something that was lingering in the minds of women for years, however the assumption that they were the only ones feeling unfulfilled, lead to most women silencing their dissatisfaction:

Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night -- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question -- "Is this all?"

(Friedan 57)

It was not until they started expressing it, that it became apparent that they were not alone. This references the situation which Esther find herself in nicely, as there is no way of

knowing if the women she looks at and critiques are feeling the same as she is, and if they are wondering the same about her.

The focus upon the appearance of the girls in society, functions to uphold the normative narrative. Esther continues to explain how the photographs that are posted by the magazine of herself and the girls she is with, would cause envy with everyone and make it look like anything is possible for girls, too: “Look at what can happen in this country, they’d say” (Plath 2). Her summer in New York would signal that girls from anywhere could come to New York and steer it like it would be a private car. However, she quickly adds that she is not “steering anything, not even myself” (Plath 2). Everything is facilitated for Esther to feel as if she is having the time of her life, to be happy, however Esther struggle to find excitement in this: “I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo” (Plath 3). This emphasizes the feeling of disconnect between how she experiences her own life, and how it must look from the outside. Esther comes from a background of little money, yet now, she is living a glamorous life. However, this glamorous life in New York does not spark any feelings in her and she feels numb.

This first section of the chapter also signals the emphasis that is placed in making these girls identical, as seen in the quote above, where they are all influenced to wear the same clothes and accessories almost like a uniform for single ladies in New York. During her stay Esther is pampered with gifts, such as make-up kits and lipsticks. The girls are also awarded with tickets to shows, fashion shows and personal stylings, where they are advised on how to style their complexions. The outside pressures the girls to look a certain way and behave a certain way is obvious and most of the other girls in the group of interns are represented as pretty much the same, traditional girls that society expects them to be, going to posh secretary schools or having just graduated from secretary schools and “simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other” (Plath 4). While waiting to be married they live a life which Esther envies – laying on the sunroof painting their nails between travelling to Switzerland and Brazil. However, in spite of the exciting life that they are living, Esther still thinks they look bored. Society can be said to encourage women to wait and to take up little space, by placing physical limitations such as expecting a certain weight and size norm. In addition, women are expected to wait for a husband to choose them to be their wife. In the meantime, while waiting, they should not take up too much space in any part of the society, especially not publicly, as this will make them unappealing to men. This relates to Butler’s theory of gender identity as a performative act

(34). The women continue with activities, and to look like the expectations of what society has placed on genders, and thus contributing to sustain what these gender identities should be in this society. A woman who decides to focus on building a career for herself, in a sense loses her femininity, as she oppose the gender ideal of their time by performing the way a male would instead of a female. The femininity is represented by the potential of becoming a mother, is lost, and therefore she become unattractive to men in society. Esther's goal is to live the life which they live before reaching their goal of marriage. She wishes to be free to work, travel and do whatever she wants, without being confined by marriage.

In many ways one may argue that Esther is a feminist. Firstly, she rejects the dominance of the male gender and the structure of patriarchy, by rebelling against the expectation that as a woman you need to know shorthand, if you want to have work. Knowing shorthand means to be able to work as a secretary, and ultimately working for a man, rather than on your own. This is a thought which Esther cannot stand: "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way" (Plath 72). She indicates that she would rather not know shorthand, and not work, if it means working for a man. Secondly, another factor which argues for her being a feminist is her refusal to get married because she believes that once you become a wife, not long after you become a mother, and that means having to give up a part of yourself:

I also remember Buddy Willard saying in a sinister knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private totalitarian state.

(Plath 81)

The quote not only display how men had different options to women. Women would be forced to give up their careers as they became mothers, which is one of the reasons why Esther does not want to get married, because she does not want to let go of her other options. In addition, she describes the constitution of marriage as brainwashing to women, indicating that they lose control of how to think for themselves, and their only option is to serve their husbands.

### 4.3 The role models

The first chapter clearly signals some of the main – but silent – conflicts that were to be found in post-war American society. During the Second World War, women were encouraged to help the American economy so men could attend to the war. They were encouraged to take on work and to leave the domestic sphere to which they had belonged for so long (Wynn 474). They were ensured that working would not mean that they would lose their sense of femininity or make them any less of a woman. The narrative of what society expected from women during this period changed drastically from what it had been before. Because of the war, the country now needed the men to fill in as soldiers, and women therefore needed to step into the public sphere. However, as the war ended, men returned to their jobs and consequently, women were fired or dismissed from the public sphere and forced to return to their domestic roles (Wynn 475).

There is an important shift in the female narrative at this time. In merely a few years, the narrative had gone from one where women were told that they could not do what men did to one where they were told that they could, in fact, do so and still keep their femininity, and then, after the war, being once again told to return to the domestic sphere after the war had ended. These shifts, which at one point functioned to confirm that women could fill the positions which were tied to the public sphere, led to a slow realization that women could do more than what men – or society – wanted them to. This mental change, however, was not something that happened overnight. As a result, society was split into some women accepting, and perhaps finding comfort in, the domestic sphere as theirs, and others wanting to push the boundaries of the expectations and ideals which society announced as female.

*The Bell Jar* (1963) clearly displays the rift between women at this time. On the one hand we have the traditional women, such as Esther Greenwood's mother who pushes Esther to learn shorthand. By insisting that she takes up shorthand, Esther's mother confirms that she believes that this is still a man's world, and that her daughter needs to stay on the traditional course of womanhood in order to have a successful life, such as the women mentioned in the first chapter, who attended the secretarial schools and end up "hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man..." (Plath 4). Continuously throughout the novel, her mother pushes towards the more traditional roles for Esther to fill. Though she never really rejects Esther's wish to become a writer, she often finds a way to emphasize the importance of the traditional roles, such as in the following quote:

My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand was something else again. Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter.

(Plath 72)

This quote is important because it reveals how the patriarchal structure is engraved in not only men, but also women. Though Esther's mother never tells her not to pursue a career in New York, she is adamant that she still needs to learn shorthand, because that is the career option for women at this time, and this will also make her attractive to other men, ultimately leading to marriage. In a sense, her mother wants to support her daughter, but simultaneously reveals that she is scared of what might happen if she completely dismisses the expectations that society place upon her as a young woman. Ultimately, her mother's wish is for her to choose the safe path of conforming to society's expectations, and for her to become a waiting woman.

Esther's view on marriage is created by the way she sees and interprets the marriage of her role models, such as her mother. Her parent's marriage was very stereotypical in terms of what society expected. Esther's father worked, while her mother stayed home to take care of the house and kids. When her father passed away, her mother was left resentful because it forced her into a role which she did not want, as seen in the following quote:

My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen.

(Plath 36)

The quote can also function to explain why Esther does not want to become dependent on a man, but rather seek out her own career, as she saw the hatred her mother developed for her father. Her impression of marriage is negatively loaded, and she views it as a way for men to keep control of women. In addition, the quote also indicate how society keeps women away from the good paying jobs, reserving those to men. Consequently, making it almost impossible for women to get by on their own, as there is not enough money in the jobs that they are offered.



Another stereotypical character in the novel is that of Mrs. Willard, who is the mother of Esther's college boyfriend, Buddy. She has a typical patriarchal view upon marriage: "What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots from" (Plath 67). She held this conventional view of men being the forward forces into the future, whereas a woman's job was to support their man from home. One of the few memories Esther has of Mrs Willard is of her braiding a rug out of her husband's old suits. This had taken her weeks, but once she was done with it, she laid it down in place of her kitchen mat:

And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs Willard's kitchen mat.

(Plath 80)

This quote also indicates that the type of marriage which Mrs Willard has, is one that is very structured according to patriarchy. She put all this effort and work into making a beautiful work of art, and instead of hanging it on the wall, she put it on the ground to be stomped on. This is a metaphor for the wife's role in a marriage, as something a little more pretty than a doormat. In addition, Mrs Willard holds firm views concerning men and women's purity before marriage. As Esther experiences in her first meeting with Mrs. Willard:

[...] Mrs. Willard was a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both. When I first went to her house for supper she gave me a queer, shrewd, searching look, and I knew she was trying to tell whether I was a virgin or not.

(Plath 67)

Ironically, her own son is guilty of having an affair with a waitress before marriage. The fact is that Buddy, over the course of his relationship with Esther, frequently quotes his mother on her views on relationships and importance of purity of men and women. This makes him a hypocrite and a liar in Esther's eyes when she finds out about the affair. This, too, affects her view of marriage and confirms that it is an institution which benefits one person only, making her doubt whether this is what she wants for herself. Though Mrs. Willard has firm views

about the purity of both men and women, the more classic stereotypical view in the patriarchal society singularly concerned the purity of women. Men were usually excluded from this expectation, and free to do whatever they would like. If a girl acted in such a manner as Buddy did, having an affair before marriage, she would not be considered good enough for any man to marry. When Esther starts to ask around at the college about how other people would feel if a man had an affair, their response is that it is normal. Esther once again challenges the normative narratives of patriarchy, that women should be pure, but men are able to do what they like, by seeking out someone to sleep with, in order to restore balance between her and Buddy.

Ever since Buddy Willard had told me about that waitress I had been thinking I ought to go out and sleep with somebody myself. Sleeping with Buddy wouldn't count, though, because he would still be one person ahead of me, it would have to be with somebody else.

(Plath 74)

This quote is important because it displays Esther's way of reasoning. It is clear that she sees it as unfair that men have one standard while women are held to another, and challenges this view by wanting to compete with Buddy's number of girlfriends. She realizes if she sleeps with Buddy, this would also make his list longer by one, thus it would not count as it does not provide her with an advantage. Again, we see how Esther wants to challenge the patriarchal views of society, but is somewhat stopped in her riots, as she realizes there is not really a chance for her to win no matter what she does.

As mentioned, during the Second World War, there was a change in the proportion of women in the labor force (Wynn 475). However, the years before the war, around 1930s, there were in fact laws which prohibited married women to work (Wynn 475). Esther's mother, who is a part of this generation where women did not work, obviously met this new world with skepticism. Esther, who is a part of a more liberal world, becomes very aware of how her mother is confined and unable to escape the restriction which marriage put on her. Esther is critical towards this difference between men and women, and the fact that her mother is a captive of this way of looking at life, fuels her desire to even out the standards between the sexes, and to be able to live without the limitations which are placed on women. In addition, it becomes apparent that she also sees it as a sort of competition. She must sleep with someone else than Buddy, because if they end up together, he will always have slept

with one more person than her, which again makes him superior, which is a feeling that Esther truly cannot stand: “I couldn’t stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not” (Plath 77). This instinct of everything, even how many they have slept with, becoming a competition can be translated to her never feeling good enough. In a sense, this competition is Esther searching for opportunities, where she can prove her worth, that she can, as much as any man. However, what limits her, are the expectations and ideals of society.

We also, however, get other female role models, such as Jay Cee, who is Esther Greenwood’s boss, and who is described in the following manner in the beginning of novel: “She wasn’t one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn’t seem to matter” (Plath 5). Jay Cee is the opposite of the feminine mystique, not conforming to the beauty standards, is married, working and is clever. She is the opposite of Esther’s mother, and encourages Esther to pursue a career, to work hard and towards a goal within the professional life. When asked what she wants to do after college in a meeting with Jay Cee, she replies that she does not know. This indecisiveness is also something which affects Esther. As mentioned earlier the goal of her life would be to have the same options and possibilities to do more than just choose one thing. She does not want to be just a career woman, or just a housewife, but to be able to do it all. This becomes apparent the symbolism of the fig tree, which she imagines to be her life spreading out into different branches, one being the life where she has a husband and children, one being a famous poet, or a brilliant professor. The problem she is having is that of deciding. She does not know which she wants more, and realizes that what she really wants is to be able to do all at once:

I say myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I wouldn’t make my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go back, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.

(Plath 73)

The tree represents how the structure of patriarchy has somewhat evolved to women now having more options than before. However, if they decided on one, they would lose the

others. Even though the options have multiplied, they were still restrained by these expectations and limited to what they were able to do, and who they were able to be.

It becomes evident through the novel that Esther struggles with making decisions, as well as she firmly believes that one cannot pursue all dreams, you must choose the path, or fig, which is most important and focus only on this. This leads Esther to live a passive life, to the extent where she is not even able, as mentioned above, to make decisions for her fictional character Elaine. This indecisiveness is also evident in other settings such as in the proposal for marriage which Buddy present her with.

#### 4.4 Double life

As we have seen with *Alias Grace* (1996) by Atwood, the social pressure to be someone who corresponds with the normative narrative of women is constant. In Atwood's novel, this pressure is formulated as someone asking you to assume an alias. In Plath, we find a similar use of metaphor as Esther on multiple occasions takes on an alias to protect herself, or in some cases, to be able to be her true self. As mentioned earlier, Esther finds it unfair that men are able to live by some standards, while women are restricted to another set of standards. The ideals that society presents are not compatible with the "me" of women, and this often leads to the need to create an alias in order to survive. Already in the first chapter of the novel we see Esther taking on another identity in the form of Elly Higginbottom. After announcing the alias, she states: "I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston" (Plath 11). One thing that is clearly relevant here is the cultural reference to Boston. *The Public Historian* features a journal article by Martin Blatt, which is called "Boston's Public History" (2003) and which introduces the city of Boston to be "where America invented itself" (11). Boston is one of the first places to be colonized and can in many ways be said to have fabricated the American dream because of its history and conventionality. Though structures have been lost in Boston, it is clear that the city is one that traditionally resist change, holding on to the past as long as possible, making it difficult for women during this time who search for a less traditional personal narrative. The reasoning for this being so difficult is because of all the traditional values and event which are related to the city of Boston, whereas other cities, such as Chicago. The significance of the alias of Elly, then, is that it allows Esther to be freer and to worry less about her reputation, and we as readers see that she is what Esther wishes she could be. Elly

is also from Chicago, rather than Boston, and Esther states that “In Chicago, people would take me for what I was” (Plath 127). Though Esther has never been to Chicago, she imagines it being a more accepting and “unconventional” (Plath 127) place, where she does not have to hide her true self, but instead people accept her for what she is.

Another alias created by Esther is Elaine. When Esther decides to spend her time writing a novel, she decides that the heroine of her novel will be herself, only in disguise: “My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine” (Plath 116). As Esther begins her writing, she is proud of her work, but it does not take long before she realizes that she has no plans, no goal for her character and the writing stops:

I sat like that for about an hour, trying to think what would come next, and in my mind, the barefoot doll in her mother’s old yellow nightgown sat and stared into space as well.

(Plath 116)

Firstly, it is important to note that again, Esther finds herself waiting, waiting for an idea of what would come next. Her character, Elaine, is also “waiting for something to happen” (Plath 116). As she is attempting to live in an uncontrolled, imaginary world, where only she defines her limitations, she is unable to do so. There are no norms and expectations guiding her character in this fictional world, and this could be an effect of her always being told what to do. It can also be a reference to the fact that she cannot decide what she wants, because reality is, that she wants it all. However, she knows it is not possible, which makes it impossible for her character as well. In addition, she compares the character of Elaine, and ultimately herself, to a doll. A doll is an object which is without self-control and is incapable of moving on its own. The *Oxford Learners Dictionary* defines “doll”, as a way of describing a pretty and attractive woman, in the old-fashioned way. Though we have moved away from this definition today, a doll is still understood as a model figure of a human, and the term “doll” can also be used to call someone nice and generous. Furthermore, the doll is associated with childhood, and not adult life. It is used to play with and for entertainment, rather than serious business.

It is also worth mentioning that *The Bell Jar* (1963) was first published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, due to Plath’s uncertainty regarding the acceptance of the novel both from the public as well as family. As discussed in the previous chapter, aliases functions to hide the real person. Indicating that Plath struggled with insecurities herself. It was not

until Plath had taken her own life, that the novel was published in her own name. This indicates that she might not have been sure how the novel would be accepted and was prepared to take her secret with her as she took her own life.

While designed to create some spaces of freedom, the aliases that Esther applies to herself is what ultimately drives her mad. This is because she is never really able to define what she wants and do what she wants, undisturbed by the different personas who she uses to shield herself from society. The character of Elaine, which never really has any restrictions such as Elly, because she is just a part of Esther's mind, rather than the social life, should in reality be able to do whatever Esther decides, however, due to Esther's inability to decide what she wants, without the influence of others and society, she is not able to decide what Elaine will do with her fictional life, thus becoming stuck in writing her novel. Society has so much control over Esther, that she is not even able to live out an imaginary life, where in theory, she should be able to control all aspects of on her own, which is what she wants from her real life.

#### 4.5 The Doctors

Both *The Bell Jar* (1963) and *Alias Grace* (1996) portray female protagonists who oppose the normative narrative of their society. A common theme in both novels, then, is the consequence of opposing the normative narrative, which often lead to the female characters becoming patients of male doctors. To be clear, the protagonist of *Alias Grace* (1963), is one that is declared mad, as she is guilty of committing the crimes, however, the expectations of society limit her in her trials, and the doctor visits, as people believe to know what kind of person she is, before even given her the chance to present her own narrative. Opposition, it seems, is associated with a disease that requires a cure and the female characters are prescribed therapies, such as hypnosis or, in Esther's case, electro-shock, to cure their minds and put them on the right track. In reality, shock treatment can also be a way of wounding, and giving the characters trauma which will affect the rest of their lives accordingly. Therefore, it can also be argued, that these treatments are a way of making sure that women either are mad, or stay mad, but most importantly it keeps the structure of patriarchy intact, as there is no way for women to come out victorious in such a situation. To some extent it seems that the novels signal that it is the normative narrative that leads them to doctors, and that the

narrative which society pushes upon them is in direct conflict with the narrative which they wish to form for themselves.

In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter (1987) explores how the cultural ideas about a “proper” feminine behavior shaped the definition and treatment of female insanity in the period between 1830-1980. Showalter argues that it was the ideals about feminine behavior that resulted in mental disorders in women. Showalter explores how these cultural ideas shape the definition of female insanity by describing therapeutic practices which were used to bring women “to their senses”, which, again, are evident in both *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Bell Jar* (1963). Showalter further explains how the rise of the feminist movement and the rise of the Victorian madwoman happen almost simultaneously. As the New Woman appears, with her demands for education, work, and personal freedom, she presents a direct challenge to the social gospel of psychiatry (Showalter 121). While women were offered more opportunities to participate in the society by receiving education, working, and voting, doctors warned and directly related nervous disorders to women’s ambition (Showalter 121).

Both the character of Grace, as well as the character of Esther, are pushed towards ideals which do not correspond with their inner narrative. The result of this collision between what is expected and not, is that they are sent to institutions to be corrected. Psychiatry during the period of the two novels was dominated by male doctors and one could consider it an obvious defense of the patriarchal culture to label women campaigning for access to the male sphere as mentally disturbed, by directly linking it to the female hormone cycle and reproductive system as this was one of the obvious biological differences one could not find in a man.

This is also something that we see in *The Bell Jar* (1963). In Esther’s first meeting with Dr. Gordon, her appearance plays a role in how she is perceived by the doctor. The expectations of women is to dress appropriately, to look good and happy, however, Esther is wearing old clothes and has not showered in a long time: “The sweaty cotton gave off a sour but friendly smell. I hadn’t washed my hair for three weeks, either” (Plath 122). Esther’s expectation of the meeting with Dr. Gordon is that he will help her return to her normal self: “... he would help me, step by step, to be myself again” (Plath 124). However, in the doctor’s eyes, Esther is failing to conform to the normative narrative, based on her first impression and looks. Esther comments on his good looks, and that he looks very proud of himself, almost vain: “He was young and good-looking, and I could see right away he was conceited” (Plath 124). Furthermore, he has a photograph, of what Esther believe to be his family, in his office which grabs her attention:

I didn't see why it should be turned half towards me unless Doctor Gordon was trying to show me right away that he was married to some glamorous woman and I I'd better not get any funny ideas.

(Plath 124)

Arguably, the photograph combined with his attention to looking good, present that he has certain superficial expectations to both men and women. He continues the conversation by condescendingly saying: "Suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong" (Plath 124). This indicates that he already has the answer to the question. Esther's response, internally, is the feeling of not being taken seriously: "That made it sound as if nothing was *really* wrong, I only *thought* it was wrong" (Plath 124). It is clear that Esther is in need of guidance to, as mentioned before, step by step return to herself again, however, Dr. Gordon greets her with ignorance and superiority. As readers, we are already aware of this as a problem Esther is struggling with, and a factor which brought her to the doctor's office in the first place, and we suspect that this "treatment" might not make her better. In addition, the doctors, in both Grace Marks and Esther Greenwoods cases, aim not to return the women to their desired version of themselves, but to turn them into acceptable members of society. These expectations are what drives them to the doctors in the first place, but instead of getting out of them, they are pushed further in. As a result, patriarchy wins either way. On the one hand they could leave the doctors confined to the ideals and expectations of the society, or they will be deemed mad and lose their place in society and be placed in asylums. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe in *'The Madwoman in the Attic' The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (2020) how a common theme in nineteenth and twentieth century literature by women, is that protagonists often have few alternatives to escape from their imprisoned lives. Their alternatives being escape through flight, starvation or suicide (Gilbert & Gubar 341). In regards to Jane Eyre, Gilbert and Gubar also mention another alternative, which arguably is not the woman's choice, but what chooses them, to escape through madness (341). As seen in this novel by Plath, Esther contemplates her future by imagining a fig-tree with all her options. She realizes that having to choose one means leaving the rest behind, thus she end up not being able to make a choice: "I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose" (Plath 73). In regard to Gilbert and Gubar, one can understand this quote as a metaphor for how the patriarchal structure forces the alternative of starvation upon her.



Because she is not able to make the choice which she ultimately wants, which is to take part in all of them, she is unable to keep living, thus starving in a sense. Furthermore, one can also find evidence of how Esther attempt to escape the patriarchal structure by flight, though this too is a failed attempt:

The grey, padded car roof closed over my head like the roof of a prison van, and the white, shining, identical clapboard houses with their interstices of well-groomed green proceeded past, one bar after another in a large but escape-proof cage.

I had never spent a summer in the suburbs before

(Plath 110)

Esther decides to spend her summer away from New York, as a consequence of not getting into the writing course which she had applied to. However, as the quote indicate, as she arrives at the train station where her mother is ready to pick her up, she immediately realizes that this place will not allow her to escape the patriarchal structure. In fact, it might make it worse, as her mother is a strong enforcer of it. Finally, Esther decides to attempt to escape through suicide. Ironically, the decision to commit suicide is one of the first and most committed decisions she makes in this novel. In the end, after multiple attempts, however, she survives and in a sense fails to follow through, and is forced into the fourth alternative of escape, which is madness.

In the end of the novel she is moved under the care of Dr. Nolan, a female psychiatrist. She gains Esther's trust, by letting her know that she disagrees with how Dr. Gordon proceeded with the shock treatments. She also reassures Esther that she is not going to get that treatment here, however, if she is, it will feel like she is sleeping rather than a nightmare. However, a while into her stay here, she receives the news that she needs more shock treatments, and instantly feels betrayed by Dr. Nolan:

It wasn't the shock treatment that struck me, so much as the bare-faced treachery of Doctor Nolan. I liked Doctor Nolan, I loved her, I had given her my trust on a platter and told her everything, and she had promised, faithfully, to warn me ahead of time if I ever had to have another shock treatment.

(Plath 203)

Though Dr. Nolan is gentler and more comforting than Dr. Gordon, she ultimately deals with Esther's inability to find her place in society the same way. In a sense it can be said that Esther's case, she is only driven madder by the help of doctors.

#### 4.6 The Forever Hovering Bell Jar

The title of this novel, *The Bell Jar*, can in itself be understood as a metaphor for the imprisonment which the character of Esther experiences throughout her life. The bell jar, a glass structure which is meant to keep things sealed from the outside, surround Esther: "The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn't stir" (Plath 178), indicating that the air of patriarchy keeps her from moving anywhere. In attempting to escape from this bell jar, she is forced, as mentioned by Gilbert and Gubar (2020) to evaluate the options of flight, starvation or suicide. As all of these options fail, she is forced into madness, which is only supported and intensified by the doctors attempting to help her out of it. In many ways, the novel is about the inescapable structures which women of Esther's time found themselves in. In addition to the fact that they were forced into silence, the women suffered thinking they were alone in feeling imprisoned by the framework of society. As Esther's mental health improves, the bell jar slightly hovers above her, but she implies that there is no certainty that the bell jar will not descend on her again: "...the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (Plath 230). Indicating that though it has lifted, she is not free from it yet.

In comparison with *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood, *The Bell Jar* does imply that there has been a sense of progression within the structures of society, such as women being able to make a choice of where she wanted to belong – either in the domestic sphere or in the public sphere, to a degree, as a career woman. However, choosing one means losing the other, thus the progression is still not complete. Men still have the upper hand, in terms of all spheres, and if a woman, such as Esther, attempt to rebel against this structure, she is ultimately deemed to a life of misery, because of her limited alternatives to escape.

Furthermore, Esther does not have any proper role models, instead she has one role model in each sphere, pressuring her to make the choice of which to join. In addition, her mother and Mrs Willard strongly argue that the woman's place is behind and supporting the man. Whereas Jay Cee encourages to leave family life behind and to chase a career. Neither of the role model's encourage Esther to create her own personal narrative, thus making her choices so much harder.

## Chapter 5: *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo

“I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew that my hair is me, before I lost the right to me, before I knew that the burden of beauty – or lack of it – for an entire race of people could be tied up with my hair and me.”

(Caldwell 365)

### 5.1 About *Girl, Woman, Other*

Bernardine Evaristo’s novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) present the stories of twelve black, British women of different ages, who each present their personal narrative, and how this has been affected by and at times collide with the normative narrative, causing them to feel as an outsider to their society. The characters represent marginalized groups, not only as women, but as black, gay and gender-free womxn, demonstrating that the term woman cannot be understood as a singular, but instead need to be understood in the plural sense, as women. Themes such as race, motherhood, sexuality, marital roles, gender, and age are presented throughout the chapters, in an attempt to give new language, and louder voices, to those marginalized groups who are neglected in the overarching definition of what it means to be female in a society. The dedication page emphasizes Evaristo’s focus, which is to give voice to the minority groups who are often overlooked in the grand schemes of society:

For the sisters & the sistas & the sistahs & the sistren  
& the women & the womxn & the womyn  
& the brethren & the bredrin & our brothers & our bruvv  
& our men & our mandem & the LGBTQI+ members  
of the human family

(dedication page, Evaristo)

The dedication shows that these groups are a varied collection of individuals and not one voice. Evaristo challenges the traditional format of the novel, with one protagonist, by experimenting with not only twelve protagonists, but also by using a style of writing which is non-traditional to the novel format. These marginalized women presented by Evaristo, are not

given justice, or represented wholly, by using normative language. The two earlier novels, Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), both present fairly straightforward novels in the forms of historical and autobiographical novels, including a protagonist and a storyline. However, Evaristo's novel present complicated narratives obstructed by normative narratives, which ultimately calls for a more experimental and less straightforward style of writing, in order to present these narratives without softening them to fit into the traditional conventions of storytelling.

In addition to representing stigmatized individuals, the traditional family of husband, wife and children, is not the main family structure that is found in these stories. The women are often single mothers, whether by choice or not. Furthermore, the women in the novel also vary in age and span from nineteen to ninety-three. This was an important factor upon developing protagonists for the novel. Evaristo expresses, in an interview with LIT HUB from 2022, the need to avoid normative or clichéd representations of her characters, for instance by presenting older females, without plaguing them with dementia ("Bernardine Evaristo on the Richness of Older Womens Stories"). This is highlighted early on in a conversation between mother and daughter, Amma and Yazz:

[...] ageing is nothing to be ashamed of  
especially when the entire human race is in it together

(Evaristo 4)

Structurally, the novel is divided into five chapters and each chapter, with the exception of the final one, contains the stories of three characters. All twelve stories intertwine in one way or another, whether it is the characters being related to one another, friends or merely crossing paths during their lifetime. In the fifth and final chapter, the stories of many of the characters merge, at an afterparty for a theatre play. As we can see in the quote above, moreover, Evaristo has written the novel without any capital letters, except for the names, and with limited punctuation marks, and no quotation marks. Instead, the author uses empathic line breaks and commas. This allows her to control the speed and rhythm of the novel to a greater extent and to provide the novel with a more personal and intimate tone. In addition, this intensifies the fact that the stories presented are nothing but ordinary, thus an unordinary style of writing is necessary. In the article for LIT HUB, Evaristo describes the writing style as "fusion fiction", not only due to the lack of punctuation marks and making the sentences and paragraphs merge together, but also because the stories of the characters

are fused together (“Bernardine Evaristo on the Richness of Older Womens Stories”). She further explains that the novel is written in such a way to allow her to flow freely between past and present, and between one character’s narrative to the next.

In the book *Fairy Tale: A Short Introduction* (2018), Marina Warner discusses the role that women played as storytellers throughout the history of fairytales. Traditionally, oral stories are a feminine way of telling stories. An example would be of the old wives’ tales, which were originally was just that – stories told by older women. However, Warner stresses that the old wives’ tales in time came to carry connotations of error and of false counsel (11). The form of Evaristo’s novel, presenting female stories without the use of quotation marks and punctuations, resembles the oral form of storytelling. The fact that the female protagonists present their stories in such a way, could arguably be a way for Evaristo to take back control of how oral tales, such as the wives’ tales mentioned by Warner, have become negative in the sense that they are often compared to lies and superstitions, rather than the truth. The oral traditions of storytelling can in this sense be understood as freeing – for the author herself when writing it, as well as for the characters whose stories we are reading.

In the following chapter I will investigate how the personal narrative of the protagonists in Evaristo’s novel not only challenges normative narratives such as patriarchy, but also how these characters fight for an equal position in society as black, trans and gay women, and their attempt not to conform to society’s ideals. Furthermore, I will analyze how the language used by the author for the chosen characters accentuate and shape their narrative. I have decided to focus on four female characters in total. These four protagonists make it particularly clear how difficult it is to form your own narrative, and to escape the norms of society. The first two characters are mother and daughter, Amma and Yazz. Amma, though repressed by her patriarchal father, is at the frontline of battling expectations which she deems as restricting. In raising her daughter, Yazz, she sets out to brace her daughter for the tough and unjust world which women of color are forced to live in. Interestingly, though brought up by a unruly and strong-willed mother, and as a human rather than a woman, Yazz still display moments where the normative narrative affect her way of being, thus raising the question if it is possible to avoid these narratives at all.

The third character I will focus on, is Carole, who is raised by her traditional Nigerian mother Bummi and who becomes the victim of a rape. As a rape victim she experiences the loss of control of her own body. The traumatic experience causes a disconnected between her body and mind. In response, she perfects her English accent and makes sure that the impression which she gives to others is in direct contrast to the visual, first impression. She

attempts to completely separate her body, which not only holds labels regarding the color of her skin, her hair, her personality and how she should speak, from her mind, which is her own personal narrative, and the way she wants to be perceived. This part of the novel also displays a slight shift in the structure of language which functions to intensify the trauma, specifically typical to women, which is evident in Carole's chapters. Her character faces not only the challenge of being a woman, but also a black, raped woman.

The final character, Morgan, identifies as gender-free. Their chapters in the novel cover the journey from transcending from Megan, the name they were originally born with, to becoming Morgan, and the challenges which they face from society, home and in school. The reason for choosing this character as a focus point is that the novel's main aim is to shed light on the minority groups, and Morgan's chapter allows us to not only see how the world has developed in many ways, but also to see how, though developed, the norms and expectations might arguably be just as present now as before, as we lack, down to language and being able to adapt pronouns, the ability to include marginalized narratives, such as that of Morgan.

## 5.2 Amma: Creating new standards

In deep contrast with the other two novels, *Alias Grace* and *The Bell Jar*, the characters of *Girl, Woman, Other* riot against patriarchy at every chance they get, rather than silently protesting it or merely accepting it. They are not only fighting for their rights as women in a world which has been male dominated for so long, they also fight for their rights as black women, gay women and womxn. Amma, who is the first of three characters introduced in the first chapter, is an unapologetic, exuberant, and wild individual. As she is walking along the promenade on her way to her play which opens that night at the National, and which the other characters will attend the afterparty of in the end of the novel, she reminisces about how her life was when she started out in theatre: "she remembers pouring a pint of beer over the head of a director whose play featured semi-naked black women running around on stage behaving like idiots" (Evaristo 2). It becomes clear that Amma is a woman who fights for what she believes and is not afraid to correct anyone who disagrees with her. Amma's daughter, Yazz, describes the style of her mother as "a mad old woman look" (Evaristo 3), and continues to beg her mother to shop her attires where all the other mothers get their clothes, Marks & Spencer (Evaristo 3). Yazz finally concludes that she "knows full well that Amma will always be anything but normal" (Evaristo 3). Oxford learners dictionary defines "normal" as

something that is “typical, usual or ordinary; something you would expect”. Yazz’s comment not only references the clothes, but that her mother’s sense of being is not like the other mothers, she is not what you would expect from a woman, let alone a black woman, thus will she never shop at Marks & Spencer and do what is expected. Unlike women in the Victorian and post-war period, who did not have the means or the opportunity to stand out without the risk of being deemed mentally ill, Amma wants to stand out and will not conform to society’s expectations, no matter what. One example is her fight as a black woman actor in auditions for roles in plays and theatre:

perfect slave girl material one director told her when she walked into an audition for a  
play about Emancipation  
whereupon she walked right back out again

(Evaristo 6)

First of all, the quote displays, again, the lack of capital letters and punctuation marks, with the exception of the reference to the Emancipation Proclamation. The novel disregards the use of capital letters, with the exception of the names of the characters as well as certain words, such as “Emancipation” in the quote seen above. The effect of this is to intensify what the focus should be when reading a certain section of the novel. The characters are the core element of this novel and are thus placed in capital letters. Furthermore, none of the characters start with the same letter. This is arguably to separate them completely, by not even sharing the same first letter. Secondly, the quote also displays that Amma is not willing to accept being disrespected and, in response to the comment, she proceeded to walk straight back out.

By dividing the novel into chapters belonging to different characters, the various individuals are given the opportunity to present their own narratives. The focus is therefore only on the thoughts and experiences of the persons self. The chapters are written in the limited point of view of each of the characters. This is defined in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2009) by M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, as a way of narrating “while staying inside the confines of what is perceived, thought, remembered and felt by the character” (302). The point of view which we are presented with in each of the chapters are limited to the consciousness of that character, giving the readers the illusion of experiencing the events which are narrated. The missing quotation marks adds to the feeling that the reader is a part of the narrative that is presented, because it removes signals of fiction.

Amma explains in her chapters that she believes her father is a traditional patriarch in many ways. She has three older brothers who have become lawyers and a doctor. Her father's only concern for Amma, however, is "marriage and children" (Evaristo 10). He believes that her acting career is a hobby which she will leave behind when she finally marries and has kids. The idea that whatever Amma decides to do before she marries is merely a hobby and not a lifestyle can be related to how the college girls in *The Bell Jar* are expected to wait around until they get a man to start their lives with: "... they had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other" (Plath 4). Women's interests, as well as education as seen in *The Bell Jar*, are quickly labelled *hobbies*, which is defined in the *Oxford Learners Dictionary* as "an activity you do for pleasure while you are not working". The men, which the girls in Plath's novel are waiting around for, are not expected to leave their education and jobs behind once they are married. In addition, if a man wants to act, like Amma, he is labelled an actor. Female interests seem to traditionally be labelled hobbies, whereas male interests have the significance of a future career.

Amma confronts her mother, telling her that she is married to a patriarch. As a response, her mother defends her father's ways by explaining that he was born in 1920s Ghana, and she can never expect him to understand her 1960s London-ways. To Amma, her mother is defending patriarchy:

I let her know she's an apologist for the patriarchy and complicit in a system that  
oppresses all women  
she says human beings are complex  
I tell her not to patronize me

(Evaristo 11)

Amma, not only states that apologizing for patriarchy is the equivalent of accepting it and allowing it to exist, she also resists and rebel against the views of her own parents. Unlike Esther in *The Bell Jar* (1963), who is influenced by her mother in many ways, Amma strongly disagrees and is not afraid to tell her mother that silence is complicity. Interestingly, when she is told by her mother not to tell her father that she is lesbian, however, she agrees to go along with it. She explains that it was hard enough to tell her mother, who thought it was just a phase. Although she is loud and proud, and not afraid to speak her mind and voice her



rights, she does not do so to her own father, the patriarch. One can argue that even though the world has become more openminded, there are still restrictions to which Amma conforms. She does not speak against her father.

Amma has her daughter with a gay partner, Roland. She decides that Yazz will be “her countercultural experiment” (Evaristo 36). She allows her daughter to wear whatever she like and wants her to be self-expressed before they try to crush her spirit in what Amma describes as “the oppressive regimentation of the educations system” (Evaristo 37). She never tells Yazz off for speaking her mind and wants to raise her daughter to be “free, feminist and powerful” (Evaristo 38). What we see here is that Amma attempts to break the cycle with her parents, by not placing any ideals and expectations upon her daughter. Amma wishes for her daughter to become the person she herself wants to be or, one could say, to be able to live in her own personal narrative without the influence of the normative. Amma, who comes from a rather conservative family, attempts to reform the world by using her daughter and encouraging her to be whoever she wishes to be. What is interesting is that while reading this novel it becomes apparent that the world has indeed developed quite a bit when it comes to female rights and what is expected and accepted in a society. However, there are so many minority groups who still lack rights and a safe space in society, that the fight for rights seems to be without an end. While Amma is raising her daughter to be a free feminist who is not afraid to speak her mind, she is in a sense placing narratives upon her daughter. Yazz grows up to become an independent young woman, but will in turn challenge her mother’s beliefs of what openminded and revolutionized views on society are, by calling them old fashioned and not openminded enough: “feminism is so herd-like...I’m humanitarian, which is on a much higher plane than feminism” (Evaristo 39).

### 5.3 Yazz: The experiment

The second character which this chapter will focus on is Amma’s daughter Yazz. She is raised by her mother, to the best of her ability, to withstand the need to conform to society’s ideals and expectations. Even though her whole upbringing has been preparing her to riot against uniformity, and to be able to trust in herself as an individual, Yazz still unveil areas where she is in fact influenced by the normative narratives of society. In regard to Yazz’s upbringing, to be as independent and free as possible in terms of rules and expectations, and her young age, she is the character of the novel, which in theory should have the best chances

to escape the normative narratives of society. She has the backbone to stand up for what is right and fair, because of her mother's persistence in giving her a different upbringing from her own traditional childhood. Her mother praises Yazz strong opinions and encourages her to defend them accordingly. In terms of her age, she has also been least in contact with the ideals and expectations of society, thus arguably should be the least affected by them over time. Ironically, however, her chapter starts with:

sits on the seat chosen by Mum in the middle of the stalls, one of the best in the house, although she'd rather be hidden away at the back in case the play is another embarrassment

(Evaristo 41)

This is interesting, because despite her mother's goals to bring her up freer than herself, she has not chosen her own seat, and she would rather sit elsewhere, because she is scared to be embarrassed in front of the crowd of people who have come to see her mother's play. Though it is not uncommon to be embarrassed by your mother as a teenager, one would assume that these would be one of the things Yazz had been hardened to.

The chapter continues by describing her hair, saying that "she's tied her amazingly wild, energetic, strong and voluminous afro back because people sitting behind her in venues complain they can't see the stage" (Evaristo 41). However, she does not take offense to this, and unlike her fellow citizens, does not consider it a micro-aggression. Instead, she has sympathy and often responds to the issue by saying: "how they'd feel if an unruly topiary hedge blocked their view of the stage at a concert?" (Evaristo 41). The two descriptions of her hair are in contrast to one another, one uplifting and proud, uses words such as "amazingly wild" and "strong" which are positively loaded words, while the other uses "unruly", which synonymous with "disruptive". In a sense, these two descriptions can be understood as her voice being split in two. One which is influenced by her mother, telling her to be proud and unapologetic, while the other might be influenced by how she has heard herself being discussed in society, as a black woman. The negative words which she uses to describe herself are the voices of society which her mother has tried to shut out and shield her from, thus indicating that even though her mother has raised her to be strong, she is still affected by the outside normative narratives.

In this context, hair is an important symbol. The example of Yazz pulling back her hair, to tame it in a sense, is one of many examples where the white beauty standards are

emphasised throughout this novel. In addition, this section with Yazz' hair functions as a reference to the dehumanization and stripping of identity during the time of slavery which was to a very large extent associated with hair. As Tracey Owens Patton discusses in her article "Hey Girl, Am I more than my Hair? African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image and Hair" (2006), hair has played a massive role in shaping the identity of black men and women (Patton 28). Once enslavers realized how much hair meant for their identity, they shaved their heads, thus removing a significant part of their identity and making them less human. Yazz pulling her hair back can therefore be said to be an act of cohesion with the imperialist mindset, voluntarily diminishing parts of her identity in change for acceptance by society. Through this act, she is betraying the very thing her mother fought so hard to maintain in her and colluding with the normative narratives of society.

Owens also discusses how African American women have had challenge white definition of beauty throughout history (24), as they do not conform to the standards of the happy housewife or the beauty myth, which featured tall, white, thin and blonde, almost doll-like, women, similar to the way that Plath's character Esther describes herself in the novel she attempts to write. The quality of being beautiful is something that is carved into the minds of humans. Women should want to be beautiful, because that is what men desire. In the fairytales which we are told as children, the strongest man fight for the beautiful woman. In turn, the beautiful women who are the protagonist of such tales, are often more successful than the ugly women. Take the story of Cinderella, for example, she is portrayed as a filthy maid in the beginning of the tale, but because of her beauty, her small feet and her beautiful dresses, she becomes what the prince desires. Another thing to notice in this fairytale, is how the stepsisters of Cinderella are often pictured as physically "uglier" than Cinderella, with features such as large noses, or their body shapes being bigger than the typical barbie size which is seen in the main character. Naomi Wolf's work *The Beauty Myth* (1991), moreover, describes how the ideals and expectations of beauty have affected the everyday lives of females for decades, and that the realization of this myth has helped many women understand that the ideals are unfair and to work to take back their power of self (Wolf 1). Society has improved in many ways, from the nineteenth century when the events of *Alias Grace* (1996) are set to take place to the post-war USA in *The Bell Jar* (1963) and continuing on to contemporary British society in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), by implementing consumer laws, expanding the looks of barbie dolls and talking more openly about how women in magazines are airbrushed to look perfect and that reality is that our skin, hair and body have imperfections.

Wolf further discusses how these ideals compose women, from the Victorian period to contemporary times: “The Victorian woman became her ovaries, as today’s woman has become her ‘beauty’” (Wolf 222). What is interesting is that the reproductive value in a woman, as Yazz states, is still evident in contemporary times in addition to the beauty standards. Again, we see a development in society’s expectations; no longer is a woman just measured based on her reproductive values or the ability to be a wife, this can be understood as progress. Although we move away from such expectations, new expectations appear, such as beauty, and perhaps the progress is not that significant after all. The normative narratives are just divided into smaller normative narratives which are not as noticeable as the one large narrative which dominated during the Victorian period. Some of these normative narratives, such as fertility and beauty, are still expected by women, which even Yazz eventually has to deal with.

As Yazz attend university, she makes new friends who are hard workers like herself, and they are all determined to get a good education, because “without it they’re stuffed” (Evaristo 41). In contrast to Plath’s Esther, who is torn between the domestic sphere and that of the career woman, Yazz is determined to be as highly educated as possible and is not afraid to aim as high as she wants. There is a visible difference between being raised by someone who want you to feel powerful in everything that you do, such as Yazz’s mother, and how Esther’s mother attempts to hold her back for the sake of fitting in. However, she is still influenced by society, as seen when pulling her hair back. Upon starting university, Yazz had hoped to find romance, however she quickly realizes that the men her age are less mature than she expected, and that she is way ahead of them emotionally. She considers her options for dating, including older men. There is still an indication that society is stuck in their old patriotic ways, as she mentions the following:

Yazz reckons that by the time guys her age want to settle down, her ovaries will be busted and they’ll be on to women half their age who can still drop babies at the drop of a hat

(Evaristo 53)

Though Yazz makes a conscious decision that she is in fact out of the male students’ league at the moment, once they are emotionally ready, the most desirable characteristic they look for in a woman is their chances of fertility.

Yazz's chapters capture how difficult it is to avoid the normative narratives. She is raised to be tough enough to withstand the expectations and ideals of society, yet she still finds herself conforming to normality in certain aspects of her life. These ideals are indeed so integrated into our lives that they are close to unavoidable – at least being able to avoid all of them.

#### 5.4 Carole: her body no longer hers

Carole, the third character to be analyzed, is dominated by the childhood trauma of being raped. Her character can be described as triple-challenged, as she faces prejudice of being a woman, a black woman, and a rape victim.

Carole is born in London to Nigerian immigrants, and as her father passes early in her life, her mother raises her mostly on her own. Her parents decided to not give her a Nigerian name, because of all the discrimination they had to face when they arrived in London. However, she still faces a lot of prejudice based on her appearance and nationality, and the overarching trauma of being gang-raped, and feeling completely separated from her own body, fuels her need to re-brand and conform to normal. She attends Oxford University and becomes a successful banker:

look at her

In her perfectly-tailored city clothes, the balletic slope of her shoulders, straightened hair scraped back into a martial topknot, eyebrows plucked with calligraphic flair, her discreet no-nonsense jewellery of platinum and pearls

(Evaristo 114-115)

On the outside, she makes sure to look the way she would want to be perceived. Even then, she faces discrimination from clients based on the color of her skin. Her clothes are sown to fit her perfectly, leaving nothing to chance, and her hair is straightened and tied back. Compared to Yazz, Carole conforms completely. The act of straightening the hair is also something that is discussed in Tracy Owens' article. She mentions on the one hand that in the days of slavery, those who had straight hair were often given work inside the house as

houseslaves, whereas those who did not, were forced to work outside (Owens 26). Furthermore, she also explains that for some African Americans, straightening their hair was a way to challenge the idea that black beauty was ugly. However, straightening the hair continued to be controversial, as people such as Malcom X spoke out against it, saying it was a way of shaming the black uniqueness (Owens 29). In Carole's case, it seems everything she does is in order to seem normal, and to hide everything which relate her to the ab normal. It becomes clear quite quickly that her outside does not match the way she is feeling on the inside. As she is walking through Liverpool Street station, she think about those who jump in front of trains to take their lives, and how close she is at times to do the same:

Carole knows what drives people to such despair, knows what it's like to appear  
normal but to feel herself swaying  
just one leap away

(Evaristo 114)

Again, we encounter the word normal. This indicates that as with the other characters Evaristo present, Carole's story is not what is expected, and confirms the theory of her wanting her outside appearances to seem as normal to distract from the fact that she is not. This chapter is arguably one of the more poetic chapters of Evaristo's novel. The line jumps and poetic pauses between words and sentences convey to us as readers how vulnerable Carole is, in telling her own personal story, which bases its roots mainly in the trauma of being raped and losing the connection to her own body.

The prejudice which she faces in regard to her looks is not something she is unfamiliar with, and again, her aim is to confront the predefined opinions which people form of her, by contrasting it to the best of her ability. When meeting clients, her objective is clear:

she will stride up to the client, shake his hand firmly (yet femininely), while looking  
him warmly (yet confidently) in the eye and smiling innocently, and delivering her  
name unto him with perfectly clipped Received Pronunciation, showing off her pretty  
(thank-god-they're-not-too-thick) lips [...]

(Evaristo 117)

Again, Evaristo employs a very oral way of formulating Carole's voice. The characteristics that Carole wishes to present herself with, cannot be too feminine, but they also cannot be

feminine enough. In addition, the color of her skin makes people define how she speaks and acts before she gets the chance to show them the reality. Their prejudice versus how she presents herself is “the collision between reality and expectations” (Evaristo 117). One of her first encounters with discrimination in her career life make her body feel invaded, and again like it does not belong to her:

even her body was  
invaded  
as if she were an impoverished mule with half a kilo of white powder stuffed up her  
fanny...

(Evaristo 119)

The clients who she is there to meet does not even bother looking at her identification, because they believe they already know who she is. Because according to them, it is the color of your skin which define what and who you are, and to them, black means to be criminal, or related to drugs. This feeling of her body being invaded, brings forth the somewhat suppressed memory of being raped as a teen.

The incident, which it seems most of her challenges lead back to, happened as she attended a party, and was lead by her crush outside, thinking they would have a romantic moment. Instead, the boy brings his friends along and rapes her. This significant moment, cause Carole to disappear from her body and lose the sense of owning and being in control of her own body, which might explain why taking control of the conversations with her clients who prejudice her becomes so important, as it in many ways become her story of herself:

then  
her  
body  
wasn't  
her  
own  
no  
more  
  
it

belonged  
to  
them

(Evaristo 125-126)

The quote is one word per line, almost making the pauses between each word feel like an eternity. Carole explains how the loss of control of her body cause her to make her brain take her elsewhere. She begins to think about numbers, which is what she is good at. When they finally stop, she is unsure if it has been minutes or hours. As the boys disappear, she metaphorically disappears with them. The rape becomes her biggest and darkest secret. She tells no one, and especially not her mother, who would merely accuse her of lying:

Carole never told a soul  
definitely not Mama who'd tell her off for lying

(Evaristo 127)

The fact that she does not tell anyone about the incident, she never really learns how to deal with it, or give it language. Another similar incident happened when they were in year eight, to a girl named Sheryl. Carole's friends and classmates respond to this by saying it was the girls fault, because she dressed inappropriately. Thus, Carole begins to believe that the rape was in fact her own fault. She becomes depressed, until one day, she sees her life from the outside, as she is watching a documentary, and she decide that the incident will not break her. The lack of dealing with the trauma causes her to divide herself into two entities, one being who she wants to be perceived as, with the perfectly tailored clothes and straight hair, and the other one, being the black rape victim without a voice. As first argued by Freud, trauma has to do with something that has happened in the past but has not yet ended (Bennett and Royle 133). The force of the traumatic experience does not disappear and can come back to haunt the traumatized. This is seen as Carole's experience of being discriminated against at work, cause her to feel like she loses control of her body, and thus taking her back to the trauma of being raped. Her trauma is underlying to her story, and the way she works, talks, dresses and acts reflect the need to control herself, so the torment within her is not further fueled.



## 5.5 Megan/Morgan: Rejecting the cute status

Morgan, who is gender-free, introduces the problem of someone who has no appropriate language, and no way of expressing themselves, as society is rooted in male and female. The lack of experience and ability to adapt fast enough to accommodate for new genders, result in the rejection from society of gender-free individuals, and becoming outsiders. The chapter of Morgan starts to present her using the name received at birth, Megan, and also addresses them with the pronoun “she”. In this analysis I will too refer to Megan as “she” and once the transition to become Morgan occur, the pronouns will be gender free as well.

The issue concerning gender is something that Judith Butler discuss in *Gender Trouble* (1990), stating that gender is socially constructed. From the moment one is born, the social construction starts. Little girls receive dolls as toys and pink dresses, whereas boys get play cars and blue shirts, which is something that Evaristo makes a point of in this chapter: “her mother was unthinkingly repeating patterns of oppression based on gender” (Evaristo 307). Megan gives the example of her being a child, and wanting to wear trousers instead of dresses, as she found them more practical and comfortable. In contrast to her mother wishes, who wanted her to look cute, as a girl should. Megan names the people who praise her cute status as a girl child, “cute investors” (Evaristo 308). In rebelling and rioting against the dresses her mother wants her to wear, she finds herself constantly letting down her mother, who is her “primary cute investor” (Evaristo 308). Once Megan becomes older, she understands that her mother has made choices on her behalf, according to the gender she was assigned at birth, such as making her wear skirts and dresses instead of trousers:

she was determined to dress Megan up for the approval of society at large, usually other females who commented on her looks from as early as she can remember

(Evaristo 308)

This quote points to two things; the trouble of predefining genders according to societys standards. The way Megan is dressed is a reflection of her mother, and her mother wants to be approved by society by dressing the way that is expected. The second point is, again we are presented with the theme of normality, as Megans mother do not want her to appear unlike what is expected of a girl. Evaristo continue to present characters that are all ab normal

in some way or another. Some wishing to conform, such as Carole, and others to riot, such as Amma.

Her father was her mother's enforcer, and if Megan rebelled against her mother, the consequence would be her father ordering her up to play with her Barbies, because that is what was expected of her:

the Barbies with their stick legs and rocket breasts were another problem Megan had to endure

she was supposed to spend hours dressing up or playing house with them, including the darker ones she was supposed to find more relatable

(Evaristo 309)

This quote is significant because again we see how the normative narratives have progressed in the sense that the beauty ideal now presents different kinds of beauty in terms of skin color, hair color and body shapes, as Wolf states in the introduction of *The Beauty Myth* (2002). This progression, however, is not enough for Megan. The dolls, which not only represent the ideal of how women are expected to look, but they also represent how women are supposed to act – dressing them up and playing house, which is exactly what Megan rejects. In addition, being normal, and doing what is expected of her, becomes a punishment, thus forcing her, or confining her to ideals which she ultimately rejects as she grows up.

As Megan becomes older, she develops womanly curves, and her skin color is described as a “natural suntan” by her classmates. The girls want to be like her, and the guys wanted to be with her. However, something feels off as these curves and female characteristics appear. This feeling of being someone who she does not understand or recognize as herself, leads to a decision to not conform to what people expect of her, and eventually she starts expressing herself the way she wishes – starting with shaving her hair off. As mentioned with Yazz, hair is a somewhat sensitive area, because it indicates removing a large part of the identity as a black person. While Megan's removal of her hair has a positive effect on her self-esteem and self-image, it has an opposite effect on her classmates:

she felt free, weightless, herself

except it had the drastic effect of turning everyone against her, her classmates implored her to grow it back

(Evaristo 312)

In this case, the removal of the hair makes her classmates struggle with their perception of who she is. Megan understands that she is on her path to become her true self, to find her own personal narrative which she can contently live with. However, the response of society is rejection in the sense that her classmates do not want to be seen with her anymore. Instead of complying with norms, however, Megan continues to abandon all ideals, and begins to dress and express herself in ways which makes her feel powerful. This results in the complete rejection of society and having to find comfort in other men and women, other outsiders, who also do not fit the normative narratives of society. Ultimately, though finding strength to express herself the way she wants, she is beaten by society, and ends up dropping out of school and taking drugs. She is forced to either leave her sense of self and to conform to normality or to leave society completely and become an outcast.

In a moment which Megan describes as a mistake, she returns to social media to spy on her former classmates who rejected her. This is interesting, because even though she has abandoned all pretenses at conforming, she still feels the need to see what her former “pack” of classmates are doing. This indicates that she still has the need to fit in somewhere, and though she has found her family in the “others”, she is aware that she does not fit in where she used to. What she finds in social media is images presenting their lives as being perfect, though she knows that many of her classmates had felt the same as her, imperfect in their bodies:

(...) being happyhappyhappyhappyhappyhappyhappyhappy, with complexions filtered to perfection, waist-lines digitally slimmed, their smiley friendships and relationships and even though she knew a few of these girls were annies, bulimics, had been bullied, were depressed, had social anxiety you wouldn't know from their posts

(Evaristo 315)

This quote is significant for many reasons. First of all, it is extremely clear from the style of writing, whereby “happy” is repeated nine times without the use of space, that this is a way one would normally express oneself orally, not in written form. The exaggeration also signals sarcasm, that they cannot be as happy as it seems. Furthermore, it can also be understood as an echo of her self-representation, which is also exaggerated. Secondly, the quote displays how the digital world has become an almost unavoidable influence and distributor of the normative narratives. As discussed, the Beauty Myth has been exposed by feminists, and

Megan understands that the images which she is looking at are not representative of real life. Even though Megan understands that the pictures which she views on media are fake in terms of their extent of happiness, yet she is still affected by it in the sense that the images display a world which she is no longer allowed to be a part of. She describe the “mistake” of spying on her former classmates on social media as a “wake-up call” (Evaristo 315), and decide that she will not return to the group of outsiders, and she finally decide to quit her drugs and become sober, and one day she wakes up feeling different:

she woke up  
born  
again.

(Evaristo 315)

This is one of a very few punctuation marks which appear in this novel. In reference to Butler, the emphasis on being born again can indicate that this was her chance to redefine her gender, to challenge the gender which society would decide for her with the gender which she herself decide to take on.

In her quest to redefine her gender, she befriends a person called Bibi, who helps her understand that there are more than just girls and boys, and explains that gender is a social construction. Bibi tells her that most people are born either a man or a woman, but the concepts of masculinity and femineity are inventions of society (Evaristo 319). Megan’s interactions with the trans world leads to her finally identifying as gender-free and changes the pronouns that signify her from she and her, to the neutral their and them:

Morgan (no longer Megan)  
has identified as gender-free for six years now, they’ve learnt to be cool with it when  
people don’t use or understand their preferred pronouns  
initially they wanted to punch their lights out

(Evaristo 328)

The change in pronouns is difficult because as Butler describe in *Gender Trouble* (1990), as humans we are socially constructed to believe that there are only two genders. Today it has become more normal to identify with what you prefer yourself rather than what society expect, yet when wanting to address an individual, one is most likely to refer to them as he or

she, as this is what has been the norm through history. The character of Morgan is significant because they represent not only the minority group of the “biological genders”, which are male or female. They also represent the whole human being who is part Ethiopian, part African American, part Malawian, and part English, and thus not really belonging to either of those groups fully. Finally, they also represent the gender-free human. One is presented with so many labels placed on one individual, such as all the ethnicities and the genders, one almost expects them to find a place in society, because in theory all those labels mean many options. In reality, having all these options mean not fitting in anywhere except in their own narrative, which in many ways resembles Esther’s fig tree, where she feels forced to select one, and let the rest go.

## 5.6 The Mitosis of the Female Ideals

The characters that Evaristo introduce us to in this novel are given the opportunity to express their own narrative freely, without grammar or other voices constraining them. Some of the characters, such as Carole and Morgan are unable to express themselves, either because of the trauma they have experienced or the mere fact that there is no language available to them. Thus, Evaristo uses poetic devices such as repetition, line breaks, capital letters and punctuation marks. The latter two are generally avoided in the whole novel, although used once to create extra emphasis on the subject. The free float of words created by avoiding punctuation marks allows the reader to form a more intimate relationship and understanding of the characters and to, implicitly, even question the normative narrative. The style can in a sense be reminiscent of slam poetry, as the style of writing gives the impression of high speed, rhythm and intimacy conveying the characters stories. Each character fights a separate battle, but ultimately, they oppose the same thing; a world which has not enough space for minority groups.

We might also note that this novel represents a slightly different view of how the normative narratives confine women, because there has been a progression in the imprisoning ideals, as discussed by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (1991). They are no longer confined to the domestic sphere; they have more choices than they did before, when it comes to who they are, who they love and how they want to express themselves; they are able to take on work; choose who they love and dress how they would like. However, some choices, such as who they love and how they look, may still result in them becoming outsiders to the society,

as society's normative narrative is so integrated in the minds of its members. While society has progressed to an extent, the ideals and expectations still bear resemblance of how they have always been, with two genders as the base of everything, and where the man is superior and the woman suppressed. Thus, any genders that challenge this view of two socially constructed genders, as Butler defines them, face skepticism and are placed on a lower rank in the hierarchy of genders in society. As discussed in the beginning of this thesis, the concept of woman cannot be understood as one universal definition, as women are so much more than *just* a woman. Their identity consists of other identities, such as gender, race and social identity. However, as we see a decline in the narrative of patriarchy, there is also a rise in identities which women have assigned. On the one hand, society has become more open, and gender is no longer binary as it was understood in the beginning, of the Victorian Period. Which then allow for identities, which oppose this binary system of gender, such as gender-free individuals, identities who have non-traditional, according to patriarchy, sexual preferences, such as gay women and so on. In a sense, a progression can be seen as women have more choices in the contemporary world, than when they did through history. However, what is important to note, is that all these new identities, also come with a set of predefined norms and expectations, or stereotypes, which the normative narratives of society construct and scatter around, however, more concealed perhaps, this time around. An example of such ideals might be that a gay woman is stereotypically assumed to be more masculine, which is not necessary the case, as we have learned that masculinity and femininity are also fluid terms which are not connected to the socially constructed genders. These narratives, however, still confine individuals to stereotypical ideals, and can thus still be confining and limiting. It furthermore begs the question, if all these new narratives, call them identities, or labels, are helpful, as they allow for more options for individuals, or not helpful in the sense that they still confine individuals to an extent?

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis has been a comparative study of the narrative of the female self in three different novels, that is, *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood, *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath and *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo. The three novels are set in different periods, with a distinct focus on how the protagonists are challenged, influenced and imprisoned by the normative narratives in their respective socio-cultural conditions. The female protagonists all search for a way to define themselves as women of their given society, and, in addition, they each throw light on the normative narratives which exist in their contemporary times.

The first novel, *Alias Grace* (1996) is a historical fiction novel. This portrays the stereotypical image of the Victorian woman through the Governor's Wife, but, more importantly, provides us with a portrayal of a female character who is ranked at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as she is not only a woman but also a murderess. The novel in many ways reads as a murder mystery, as we, as readers, are uncertain if she really did commit the murders. The novel includes epigraphs and various letters introducing other perspectives, which largely functions to further silence the protagonist. This makes it even more complicated for us as readers to make up our minds of who she is, because we, as readers, are constantly met with views and opinions that may influence and cause us to predefine the character of Grace. Such devices can also be read as a commentary on the Victorian culture, which worked to silence women by, for instance, placing ideals and expectations upon them which included the virtue of not speaking their minds.

Being silenced is a theme which is presented, in some way or another, in all the novels that have been analyzed and which has proved to be a common way for normative narratives to prevent or control counter-narratives. *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath arguably also voices this theme of silence. The ideal wife and woman at this time was not expected to be seen or heard, but to function as an accessory of her husband. As we have seen, Plath's novel introduced us to Esther Greenwood who attempts to establish her identity as a woman in this patriarchal society. This proves to be difficult for many reasons. Firstly, she does not have any proper role-models. The women that Esther looks to for guidance proceed to encourage one choice of life and to disregard the other. Secondly, the men in this novel are stereotypical to the men of this period. This means that they view marriage as the only real option for women, that they are superior to women, and can do any job better than a woman. Buddy Willard, as an example, continues to not take Esther's opinions regarding

marriage seriously, thus effectively silencing her by completely dismissing her opinion and consequently undermining her. By not accepting that Esther does not want to get married, he suggests that there is only one right answer, and he will not stop asking before the answer is what he considers correct. Furthermore, male characters such as Doctor Gordon, indicate that he already knows Esther's problems in their first session, and barely bothers to ask her to tell him what might be wrong.

To be dismissed because of your gender is something that has occurred throughout history. Not only in terms of conversations and opinions, but also when it comes to job positions. This is not unfamiliar to the characters of *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo, who all fight for equal rights between men and women, but also for members of the LGBTQ+ communities and for black women. One of Evaristo's characters, Amma, describe how she was immediately dismissed for acting roles that were not those of a slave or a black woman. While women can work, women can be bosses, be mothers, be in love with other women, or identify as another gender than the one assigned at birth, the normative narratives still consume our energy in any given contemporary society and still produce new ideals and expectations.

Ultimately, the three novels deal with many of the same problems, which is extremely interesting to me, because though they take place in different eras, many of the same issues are still problematic in the contemporary society. This signals how difficult it is to remove these normative narratives, and how they are a part of us as humans, because they have been passed down in generations. Although we see improvements and progressions, then, such as exposing the beauty myth, the normative narratives are arguably stronger and more passive-aggressive than ever. The ideals become hidden in social media, and our perception of beauty is arguably becoming more and more fake, as it is not uncommon for people to undergo plastic surgery, not only due to medical cases, but also just to adjust their appearances. The beauty myth can arguably be said to have a tighter hold on us as a society today than before. It has even manipulated us to the extent that we talk about how it is a myth, yet we still allow the fashion world to dominate and place the ideals of what being a woman looks like. The novels emphasize how the normative narratives of a given society limit women to one set of ideals, thus imprisoning her as she is unable to define her own individual narrative.

The novels analyzed in this thesis show that storytelling, and the use of words and language, can be used as an oppositional practice. However, as we find ourselves at the beginning of the visual turn in our contemporary society, and in Evaristo's novel, it becomes clear that new ways of experimenting with opposition to the normative narratives are needed.



Atwood and Plath present rather traditional novels in terms of having one protagonist addressing the question of women in society, but also by committing to the standards structure of the novels, keeping to grammatical rules and the way sentences and dialogues are presented. Evaristo, on the other hand, indicate that these narratives need to be addressed differently, and experiments with writing that connects more to our visual, and oral mind than our linguistic, by omitting quotation marks in dialogues between characters, and by not following a regular line structure, but jumping lines in order to emphasize words, giving the novel a much more poetic and artistic touch.

It seems as if the narrative of women still has a long way to go, and the counter-narratives still need to be voiced and perfected. Let us hope that we will never stop fighting for the right to express our own personal narrative, unrelated and unaffected by the normative narratives which essentially imprison women to the ideals and expectations of society.

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