Breaking the Bell Jar?
Femininity in Virginia Woolf’s To The Lighthouse and Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on female identity formation in patriarchal society in Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. Both authors portray female characters who struggle with the normative gender identity. As the novels represent different eras and locations, the two characters examined in this essay, Woolf’s Lily Briscoe and Plath’s Esther Greenwood, have very little in common on the surface. However, both authors deliver similar feminist social criticism concerning the negative impact of patriarchal norms on female identity formation. This study analyzes some of these external constraints, or norms, and aims to prove that the two female characters’ ideas of womanhood and identity collide in a similar manner with those norms. Schachter’s study on identity constraints in identity formation and Sanchez and Crocker’s research on gender ideals work as the theoretical background in the study. The negative influence on Lily’s and Esther’s identity formation is similar since both characters live under a symbolical bell jar, unable to form their identity according to their own preferences. Patriarchal conventions remain a constant constraint and the two women keep struggling to find a balance between their own ideas and those of their societies. Both Lily and Esther grow to understand their own traits, desires and abilities in their respective stories, but fail to reach their preferred identity. Their resistance to adapt to gender conventions helps them to form a stronger identity, but it is an identity that remains profoundly and negatively influenced by the patriarchal norms of their societies.
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1. INTRODUCTION

The underlying assumption of this paper is that both Virginia Woolf, in *To The Lighthouse* (1927), and Sylvia Plath, in *The Bell Jar* (1963), portray female characters struggling with the same issue, namely that of the quest for identity in patriarchal society. Both authors offer gender critique through representation of female protagonists who live in patriarchal, strongly conventional societies. As feminist writers with iconic status, Woolf and Plath are both significantly preoccupied with the issue of restrictive patriarchal gender ideals and their negative impact on women’s identity. Thus, the problem of developing and defining one’s identity as a woman could be seen as the main theme in *To The Lighthouse* and *The Bell Jar*. The two female characters, Lily Briscoe in *To The Lighthouse* and Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, find the traditional gender role restrictive, which becomes clear during the reading, not least because the authors describe the world from these women’s point of view instead of relying on the more privileged male point of view of their times. Although both authors present strong social and gender critique in their respective novels by portraying women who struggle with the normative gender identity, the criticism is presented differently through the two characters in their respective stories. This is precisely the motive for choosing these two novels; there are obvious difference on the surface, but nevertheless the quest for identity depicts similar concerns. These matters have a negative impact on the identity formation of Lily Briscoe and Esther Greenwood. The aim of this paper is to analyze some of the external constrains Lily and Esther face in their highly conventional societies and draw conclusions on the similarity of the negative influence they have on the two protagonist’s identity formation.
Research questions

This study argues that patriarchal norms in Lily’s and Esther’s surroundings are in conflict with their own ideas of womanhood and identity. What is important is the fact that on the surface Lily and Esther have very little in common, but they nevertheless struggle with similar concerns in building their identity as the conventional views on marriage and family life, gender role, physical appearance and behavior are in conflict with their own ideals of self. What I will try prove is that despite of all the differences presented earlier, the authors succeed in portraying female protagonists who struggle with similar concerns that are largely caused by patriarchal conventions and restrictions. These patriarchal boundaries, which in this paper are represented by the metaphor of the bell jar, have a negative impact on the two protagonists’ identity formation.

In order to prove the underlying assumption of the paper, the following questions are considered in the analysis:

- What are the protagonists’ thoughts and views on the normative gender roles and behavior?
- How do they deal with the normative feminine gender role?
- How do they perceive their own appearance in relation to ideals of femininity?

In my study, I will employ a feminist critical perspective and the main theoretical sources include Schachter’s study on identity constraints in building one’s identity and Sanchez and Crocker’s research on gender ideals.

One of the obvious differences between the novels concerns the characters. Woolf’s Lily Briscoe is more mature and independent than Plath’s Esther Greenwood. Lily is more confident and less concerned with expectations and opinions in her society, whereas Esther is
very much concerned with consequences of her conduct and others’ views and, therefore, constantly questions herself. Another difference that might be seen as important is that Plath’s novel is considered autobiographical. However, Woolf’s novel is also considered autobiographical to some extent and, for example, in some studies Mrs. Ramsay is argued to represent her own mother (see e.g. Forbes). Another feature that distinguishes the two novels is their time and place of publication. *To The Lighthouse* and *The Bell Jar* are written about forty years apart and in different countries, thus, under the influence of different eras in feminism.

Nevertheless, the fact that both authors have a feminist viewpoint and focus on the theme of identity formation in a patriarchal society makes these two novels an interesting pair to study. The two young female protagonists, Lily Briscoe and Esther Greenwood, have much in common despite the different times and locations in England and in The United States. The novels are situated in temporary locations in the two characters’ lives; Lily spends a summer on a Hebridean island (the west coast of Scotland) at the Ramsay’s summer house (to which she later returns) and Esther wins a summer job in New York, writing for a magazine. In addition, both Lily and Esther share the same ambition of leading an artist’s life, Lily as a painter and Esther as a writer. The two summer residencies then initiate the whole process of the characters’ search of self as they offer them a chance of practicing their art; Lily paints the sceneries on the island and Esther gets a chance to practice writing. What is more, both Lily and Esther are surrounded by people who do not understand their ambitions and who do not support them in their attempts to become who they want to be.

In fact, Lily and Esther are constantly pushed into the feminine roles that are considered appropriate for their times. For example, in *The Bell Jar* Esther’s mother thinks it crucial for Esther to learn short-hand, because it would guarantee her a job. In other words, she is pushing Esther into the typical female role, which meant, for example, a career as a
secretary rather than a writer. In *To The Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay confronts Lily with marriage suggestions and she has difficulties to understand that marriage and children are not the main concern in life for Lily. Mrs. Ramsay thinks Lily’s ideas of an artist’s life are nonsense, a sign of whimsicality that she should grow out of. Furthermore, an important fact is that both Esther and Lily seem to be ahead of their times, which can be understood by considering their situations in present day terms. If they were to have lived today, they would have faced few, if any, of the dilemmas they had to deal with during their times. In fact, Esther and Lily represent the independent women who are common today, yet they had to fight for their freedom of self-ownership and self-realization.

To sum up, both Woolf and Plath can be regarded as feminist writers. *To The Lighthouse* and *The Bell Jar* both portray women who are objects, and victims, of the patriarchal societies of the 20th century where gender roles and norms posited women as inferior. In her novel Woolf lets her voice on gender issues be heard through Lily who believes in herself, despite the fact that she is constantly criticized and looked down on due to her desire to lead an artist’s life. Esther, on the other hand, is a bewildered young woman who constantly questions her own beliefs. Thus, Plath’s strategy to express her critique of the patriarchal society and the normative female role through Esther is very different from that of Woolf’s. Esther is younger than Lily and her insecurity leads to her mental troubles. However, in this paper I will not consider the challenges and problems in Esther’s life to be caused by mental illness, but rather argue that she is suffering from socio-political pressure. From a feminist critical standpoint, I argue that her state of mind is the product of the pressure set by the surroundings. This could be illustrated with the help of the image of the bell jar, which envelops (and imprisons) her, but at the same time allows her to see the outside and the freedom it offers. This bell jar is firmly closing in on Esther and suffocating her genuine self.
As a metaphor for patriarchal restrictions, the bell jar can also be used in connection to Woolf’s Lily as will be discussed below.

Connecting differences

The characters in their respective novels work as tools for the authors to present strong opinions, although they do that in different ways. The differences in time and place are crucial here: the late Victorian England is different from the much more liberal 1950s in the United States. However, both characters deviate from gender norms and, as mentioned earlier, both characters have troubles relating to their expected roles as women and struggle to build their identity. The significant difference is that Lily has no desire to identify with others, and consequently acts against the expectations of the society, whereas Esther strives to conform to the expected gender role and has many traits approved by society, but feels discontent as that role is not who she wants to be. There are more differences between the novels and the two female characters, which in the scope of this study support my argument.

Lily and Esther are very different personalities and clearly have a different mindset. The way they are portrayed in their respective stories reveal their different, almost opposing way of thinking and perceiving society and their own place in that society, yet they are facing similar challenges in building their identity. This can also be demonstrated with the help of the bell jar. Esther feels suffocated under this bell jar, but is not confident enough to break free. She questions her own being, her abilities and identity. Lily lives under the bell jar as well, but does not feel as trapped as Esther and in a way prefers living in her own ‘closed world’. In contrast, while Lily questions her own being, she also questions others and, despite their criticism, she believes more in her abilities and succeeds better in forming her identity. Lily is almost ten years older and more independent than Esther (who still lives with her
mother) and her appearance is clearly different from that of the others in her surroundings, whereas Esther’s appearance is very ordinary. What is more, Lily’s ‘otherness’ is also emphasized by her lack of acquaintances, who are only a few and not very close to her, whereas Esther is surrounded by people who enjoy her company and consider themselves as her good friends. However, throughout the analysis these differences also work as uniting factors. In other words, despite the differences in their personalities, appearance and relationships, the times portrayed and the narrative style, the characters are clearly tackling similar feminist concerns.

The main structural difference between the novels is the narration. Woolf writes in third person, whereas Plath uses first-person narration. In other words, the reader learns about Esther solely through her own narration, while Lily’s thoughts are presented through a less intimate third-person narration. To a large extent, Woolf portrays Lily through the eyes of the other characters and, therefore, much emphasis is given to physical descriptions and social encounters in different scenes. In addition, Lily is only one of the protagonists in the novel, although the amount of text allocated to her is considerable (and she is the protagonist in the last part of the novel). Yet another difference in relation to the characters concerns the mental state of the two young women. Esther is portrayed as a depressed and anxious young woman with little self-confidence. In some studies Esther is argued to suffer from a clinical mental illness (e.g. Guimón) but as mentioned before I will consider her instability to be the result of the pressures and norms put upon her by society. Lily, on the other hand, is mentally stronger and more stable, which gives a picture of a more self-confident woman. However, she is not able to express her ideas and personality in the patriarchal society she lives in and her confidence becomes evident to the reader more through her thoughts than through her actions. Thus, the two authors, Woolf and Plath, deal with women’s quest for identity and the difficulties they have to face in forming that identity. Lily Briscoe and Esther Greenwood are
two female protagonists living in different times and places, but their selfhoods and ideas collide in a similar manner with the strict, patriarchal conventions that they both find restrictive. Although leading apparently different lives they face gender constraints in their societies, which in their turn have a negative impact on their identity formation.

2. IDENTITY FORMATION AND GENDER IDEALS

In *Identity Trouble Critical Discourse and Contested Identities*, Jay L. Lemke argues for a multiplex nature of identity (18). This idea is commonly acknowledged in identity theories and the topic is generally examined from a variety of different perspectives. On the whole, today’s theories cannot provide a cohesive answer to the question of identity and, in fact, the more studies that are conducted, the more complex the question of identity becomes. However, a general socio-constructivist view argues that people are not born with an identity but one’s identity is constructed through personal history, experiences, socio-cultural values and ideals of gender, ethnicity and nation. This assumption also works as the basis in this study and is seemingly confirmed in the literary representation of Lily and Esther, as they both are heavily impacted by the strictly normative societies and the experiences they go through in those surroundings. Identity formation has a crucial role in feminist criticism as it views female identity as heavily constrained by the conventions of patriarchal societies throughout history.

Contemporary feminist critical theories include a wide variety of ideas and positions that sometimes are rather controversial. From the 1970s there have been disagreements and debates within the discourse, regarding such areas as the role of theory and the nature of language (Barry 123). A more detailed example on the variety of approaches within feminist theory are the discussions on gender identity that today are conducted from, for example, sociological or philosophical points of view, where notions of both gender and
identity are seen very differently (Butler 22-23). Obviously, within most of the feminist
critical approaches gender identity is related to normative ideals and conventions, regarded as
influencing our experiences and therefore our identity formation.

Even though the variety of approaches within feminist critical theories is wide, it
is a commonly agreed fact that surroundings and norms have a significant influence on the
formation of both identity and gender identity. Perceptions of women and their expected roles,
as well as the norms regulating female behavior through history have highly impacted
women’s identity building. The western ideal of gender identity has been extremely powerful
in molding western women’s self-identification. Obviously, gender ideals affect men as well,
but to keep to the feminist theory’s point of view, it could be argued that men have had less
restricted position in building their identity, whereas for women the boundaries have been
tighter and more demanding. What is more, the history of women as the inferior sex has
negatively influenced women’s general willingness and ability to break those boundaries.
This inferior position has not allowed women to have their voice heard and, therefore, their
desire to alter the strict gender ideals has not been given attention.

Studies conducted on gender ideals reveal that investment in such ideals affects
the self-esteem of girls negatively, whereas for boys studies have shown no negative results
(Sanchez and Crocker 64). This means that girls who are taught to conform to traditional
gender roles face more difficulties in their identity formation process and more often possess
negative ideas about themselves. This fact makes characters like Lily and Esther exemplary
for this study, as they live in societies where investment in gender ideals plays an important
role. Many of these types of gender studies are of a more recent date, dating back 10-15 years.
However, when ideals on gender roles are considered, it can hardly be argued that the
circumstances during the times portrayed in the two novels were less restricted. Thus, such
findings concerning the inferior role of women and the conventions on appearance, behavior, marriage and motherhood will be relevant for this study.

The effect of external factors such as appearance and others’ approval is crucial for our self-esteem. This concern for the approval of the surroundings leads to people’s eagerness to fit into gender ideals. Sanchez and Crocker call this phenomena ‘investment in gender ideals’ and conclude that strong dependence on these external factors means that one’s identity is partly, or largely, determined by others and clearly often with negative results: “Investment in gender ideals is harmful to well-being because it places one’s worth as a person at the mercy of others’ approval and appearance” (Sanchez and Crocker 64).

Clearly, the effect that strong gender ideals have on individuals, especially on women, is often negative. It is commonly acknowledged that the traditional gender ideal demands men to be “masculine” and women to be “feminine”. However, the significant aspect is that masculinity in general is more culturally valued than femininity (Sanchez and Crocker 64). The idea that femininity is not highly esteemed, yet something women should strive for, enhances the confusing influence of strong gender ideals on women’s identity formation. Therefore, for women, the pressure for gender conformity is often experienced as negative because “when people violate gender norms, society views them unfavorably, sending a clear message about gender-role expectations” (Sanchez and Crocker 63). It is obvious that the gender norms and expectations were even more demanding in the early and mid-20th century.

Elli Schachter has studied individuals’ perceptions of “good identity” (Schachter 422) and introduces a concept of structural requirements that constrain the formation of a final, what she calls mature identity. She looks at identity formation by considering identity as not only something “adaptable” (Butler 22) or as something built on experiences. At first she draws on Erik Erikson’s identity theory where he characterizes
identity as “a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity” referring to individuals’ sense of remaining the same “across situations and across time” (Schachter 417). Then she continues by stating that this feeling allows individuals to relate their experiences and actions to their core active self and that “identity is attained by making choices and by committing oneself to these choices” (Schachter 417). She states that the formation of identity requires commitment to certain choices. In other words, identity, although claimed to be “never stable and pure” (Cranny-Francis et al 49), could be argued to be formed according to some fundamental features. These features are the choices one attempts to commit to, which are not only based on experiences but more on personal ideals and desires.

In addition to continuity and sameness, Schachter presents three further requirements, which are all relevant in examining the challenges in Lily’s and Esther’s identity formation process. First, Schachter claims that identity must include all significant identifications, meaning that an individual who is forced to reject a part of how they conceive themselves cannot form a viable identity. Secondly, an individual’s identity must be recognized and affirmed by the social group they consider significant. This is clearly problematic for Lily and Esther. The last requirement is that an individual’s identity must allow for feelings of authenticity and vitality, otherwise they are forced to look for different identities. Both Lily and Esther must constantly struggle to compare their own ideals to the normative gender role and find their own position and identity in relation to that role. The following analysis aims to identify the negative influence of some of the external factors on Lily’s and Esther’s identity formation and examine their perception of those factors.
3. ANALYSIS

Conventions and status

As discussed in the theoretical part of the paper, investment in gender ideals is an important factor contributing to the challenges Lily and Esther face in their lives and, therefore, this analysis will begin by focusing generally on the conventions within the respective societies that negatively affect the two women’s identity. In her article, “Plath’s The Bell Jar as Female Bildungsroman”, Linda Wagner defines the themes of Plath’s novel as follows: “The Bell Jar is plotted to establish two primary themes: that of Greenwood’s developing identity, or lack of it; and that of her battle against submission to the authority of both older people and, more pertinently, of men” (Wagner 56-57). Wagner then continues to explain that the latter theme is occasionally seen as part of the first theme. As the emphasis of this study lies on female gender identity formation in patriarchy, Wagner’s statement captures the essence of this paper. I would argue that a statement such as Wagner’s is also applicable to Lily’s story in *To the Lighthouse*. A strictly patriarchal society has a major influence on the development of Esther’s and Lily’s identity formation. I would argue that if confused identity is the effect, then conventions of the society, particularly the patriarchal social constraints (the symbolic bell jar), is clearly the main cause in both cases. Identity is formed through experiences and personal history, which means that the surroundings have an important part in the process of forming one’s identity. This human subjectivity is never stable and pure, but “is always being operated on and influenced by social codes and institutions” (Cranny-Francis et al 49). Lily and Esther are constantly, and often unwillingly, exposed to the society’s conventions that force them to ponder on their own way of being in relation to that of the ideal manner. This is also supported by Schachter in her identity theory. As Lily’s and Esther’s own ideas are in
conflict with the conventional ideas of femininity and female gender role, it becomes
impossible for them to remain same in different situations. It is difficult for them to commit to
the choices they would prefer, which is particularly true in Esther’s case. She is trying to fit in
and in order to do that she is forced to act against her own will. In other words, she cannot
relate her experiences and actions to her core active self, but is left with poor confidence and
identity.

As mentioned earlier, in Lily’s case the significance of gender conventions
becomes evident mostly through the other protagonists’ views as Woolf’s narration gives
voice to many of the characters in the novel. For example Charles Tansley, another guest at
the Ramsay’s summer house, comments on women’s lack of artistic abilities very openly by
stating that “‘women can’t paint, can’t write. . .’” (TL 56). Despite being openly and harshly
judged by Mr. Tansley, Lily in the end helps him out of an awkward situation during a dinner.
In this scene, Mr. Tansley is struggling to maintain his superior status as a man among the
women who discuss fishing industry, a topic considered masculine as fishing was considered
men’s work, yet no one asks for his opinion. He feels neglected and uncomfortable, which
clearly demonstrates the importance of gender codes of behavior and status. Women are not
supposed to be leading a conversation (especially on business) and ignore men, which Mr.
Tansley’s behavior clearly indicates. Lily ponders on Mr. Tansley’s earlier comment as
follows: “…remembering how he sneered at women, ‘can’t paint, can’t write’, why should I
help him to relieve himself?” (TL 99) Here, Lily questions whether she should help him as he
oppresses her. What is interesting in the previous quote is her view of herself as equal to Mr.
Tansley. She does not see Mr. Tansley’s being a man as a reason enough to behave according
to the prescribed role as female nurturer and admiring audience. It seems that Lily is clearly
committed to her own view on gender equality, as she is emphasizing that Mr. Tansley is
sneering at women and not just at her. She is clearly criticizing the conventional view of
masculine superiority. Despite the fact that she does not consider Mr. Tansley as de facto superior because of his gender, she goes along with the expected female behavior, and the passage continues with a slightly mocking tone: “There is a code of behaviour she knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behoves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man…” (TL 99). Lily is aware of the general opinion of the inferiority of women’s tasks by stating “whatever her occupation may be”. The fact that she emphasizes that a man’s discomfort in any given situation takes priority over all tasks a woman could be occupied with exemplifies her critical view on patriarchal gender norms. The scene continues with discussions on a possible trip to the lighthouse and Mrs. Ramsay’s questioning of Mr. Tansley’s sailing skills, which irritates him even more, as he now feels that he is lacking all authority and control in the discussion. He gives a short reply, in order to hide his fury, but now Lily is willing to help him out of his discomfort and awkward situation by asking, “Will you take me, Mr. Tansley?” (TL 100). Here, Lily makes herself appear as the woman in need of help, thus helping him regain his authoritative status as a member of the privileged gender. What is interesting though is that this quote can also be interpreted as a sarcastic comment by Lily. She is pretending to be friendly when the tension around the table is obvious to everyone, not least to Mr. Tansley. Finally the conversation takes an auspicious turn and Lily gets a chance to reflect on the situation: “She had done the usual trick – been nice. She would never know him. He would never know her. Human relations were all like that, she thought, and the worst . . . were between men and women. Inevitably these were extremely insincere” (TL 101). Her thoughts summarize her perception of the conventional gender roles, which she sees as fake and hypocritical.

There is a similar comment by Esther on the conventional role of women, who clearly have as one of their duties to comfort and support men to gain authority and control in
difficult situations. Esther is recalling an occasion that took place when she was in college. A Yale student, named Eric, had come to Esther’s dorm house on a weekend to meet a girl who had already left the house with another boy. Esther recollects the situation as follows: “As the girl had lived in my house and as I was the only one home that particular night, it was my job to cheer him up” (BJ 82). Esther considers it her duty to comfort Eric, even though she does not know him. The fact that Eric is a man who has been treated badly by a girl weighs more than the fact that Esther has nothing to do with that girl or him. She feels forced to behave in a traditionally womanly way, showing her care for the male stranger. In the end, they have an interesting conversation about love and sex and Esther is fascinated by Eric’s thoughts, which she agrees upon completely. For example, Eric states that girls are animals looking for sex and he believes that love and sex have nothing to do with each other. Later on, Esther receives a letter from him saying: “He thought he might really be able to love me, I was so intelligent and cynical and yet had such a kind face . . . ” (BJ 83). Esther interprets this as Eric’s refusal to go to bed with her, as he has said earlier that having sex with someone he loves would not work out. Esther feels devastated and undesirable, which adds to her already fragile confidence and her low self-esteem. For once, Esther feels truly connected to a man and is able to imagine a conventional future for herself. Therefore, Eric’s implicit refusal of her has a tremendous, negative impact on Esther’s well-being and self-esteem.

Clearly, Esther has a more negative view of herself than Lily, and her negative thoughts on her physical appearance will be exemplified in more detail later on in the analysis. When it comes to her self-image and intellect, she is very self-deprecating, although at the same time she seems to be aware of her abilities. Her dilemma seems to be that she is constantly comparing herself to others. Her desire to invest in gender ideals is strong and it is evident that her efforts influence her well-being negatively. Esther’s behavior and thoughts exemplify the following theoretical claim of Sanchez and Crocker: “Those who invest in
gender ideals come to define their worth through external sources, which promotes fragile self-esteem and vulnerability to depression” (Sanchez and Crocker 64). As mentioned earlier, Esther is presented as mentally unstable and depressed in the novel. Esther’s continuous struggle to form her identity in comparison to others is often expressed straightforwardly in her narration. A clear example of such a narrative strategy is found in a scene where she is sitting in the UN building, observing the talented interpreters who have come from around the world to work in New York: “I felt dreadfully inadequate. The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn’t thought about it” (BJ 80). Such a direct and, to her mind, rational confession of her general inferiority in relation to others is a significant realization and she starts to ponder on her life and its purpose profoundly. She compares her life to a fig tree, where there are several fat, purple figs, which each represent a possible future. One of the figs is a husband and a happy home, whereas others include a future as a famous poet, a brilliant professor and an amazing editor. In addition, some of the figs represent Europe and Africa, and one is devoted to the men she has dated in her life. The myriad possibilities overwhelm her: “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 . . . choosing one meant losing all the rest . . . ”(BJ 80). The conventional gender view does not allow her to decide as she would like to, because at this time the normative female gender role does not comprise of, for example, the combination of a happy home and a career as an artist.

Although being clearly a stronger and more confident person than Esther, similar, self-deprecating traits can be extracted in Lily’s narration (although significantly only in the early parts of the novel). Lily does not only belittle her painting but also her importance as a person. A scene in chapter nine where Lily paints in the garden in the company of Mr. Bankes (yet another guest at the Ramsay residence) reveals many of these thoughts. Firstly, she devalues her painting: “And it would never be seen, never be hung even, and there was
Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, ‘Women can’t paint, women can’t write . . .’” (TL 55-56).

The effect of Mr. Tansley’s words, as representative of the bell jar, has a tremendous negative impact on Lily’s confidence. During the same scene, the narration depicts women’s general inferior status to men with Lily’s thoughts on Mrs. Ramsay: “She was wilful; she was commanding (of course, Lily reminded herself, I am thinking of her relations with women, and I am much younger, an insignificant person, living off the Brompton Road)” (TL 56).

Here, the female relations indicate the prevalence of norms again: a woman can be wilful and commanding only in relation to other women (never men) through a higher status in the society.

Lily also defends herself against Mrs. Ramsay’s values regarding the importance of marriage and the fact that “an unmarried woman has missed the best of life” (TL 57): “Oh but, Lily would say, there was her father; her home; even, had she dared to say it, her painting. But all this seemed so little, so virginal, against the other” (TL 57). In this quote too, the patriarchal values are noticeable, as Mrs. Ramsay states that an unmarried woman’s life has no great value. The best of life being marriage can be regarded as representative of women’s limited opportunities in this highly conventional society. The idea that a woman could not achieve ultimate happiness or success in her life by any other means than a marriage emphasizes the inferiority of female gender role. What is more, the order in which Lily lists the important aspects in her life is significant. She starts with her father (masculine superiority) and continues with home (marriage, women’s role) and ends with her painting (personal interest and ambition). She is clearly influenced by the patriarchal conventions, which consider woman’s personal desires and goals the least important. Lily’s father is seldom mentioned in the novel, yet he is the first thing she mentions when considering the best in her life. In short, the normative gender role considers a woman successful only through a husband (or in connection to a man, e.g. father). This idea of men as more vital and
significant in patriarchal society, and their gender role as therefore more valuable, is supported by theorists’ such as Sanchez and Crocker, who argue that masculinity is culturally more valued than femininity. The next part of the analysis will look at Lily’s and Esther’s views on men in more detail.

Masculine dominance / views on men

Clearly, gender conventions in the societies of their time classify Lily and Esther as inferior. This conventional view expects women to lead a largely predetermined life of a mother and a wife. Therefore, Lily’s and Esther’s ambitions of leading an artist’s life, or simply being who they wish to be, are not supported by people around them. The patriarchal structure of the society influences all of their relationships, which is an important factor contributing to their sense of selfhood and gender identity. Both Lily and Esther disagree with the normative gender ideals, but remain affected by them. To an extent, they refuse to accept the conventional view of men as superior and therefore their views on men are unavoidably suspicious, or even pessimistic. There is, however, a difference in their way of thinking. Esther seems to possess ideas on men that are generally very negative whereas Lily’s thoughts are not similarly straightforward. For example, Mr. Bankes seems to be a significant person in Lily’s life, a man she feels connected to and never speaks badly about. This is mainly due to the fact that Mr. Bankes shows interest in Lily’s painting and actually gets to comment on her work, which to Lily is a huge challenge: “She braced herself to stand the awful trial of someone looking at her picture. One must, she said, one must. And if it must be seen, Mr. Bankes was less alarming than another” (TL 59). Lily seems to trust Mr. Bankes more than anyone else and as the scene continues, he comments and questions Lily’s painting in a constructive way, instead of simply labeling it as nonsense. He even admits that Lily’s style is
something new to him: “The question being one of the relations of masses, lights and shadows, which, to be honest, he had never considered before, he would like to have it explained – what then did she wish to make of it?” (TL 60). The fact that he shows such an interest in her picture is exhilarating for Lily, although at the same time she is aware of the fact that a man has been allowed to share something personal with her: “But it had been seen; it had been taken from her. This man had shared with her something profoundly intimate” (TL 61). Lily has never before felt such a connection with a man and, as it involves something as personal as her painting, it makes Mr. Bankes an even more exceptional man in her mind. Therefore, Lily cannot possess only pessimistic ideas of men, as she has respect for and a warm connection with at least one man. In fact, Lily seldom states her direct dislike of men as representatives of patriarchy but she does express her thoughts in a way that reveals her disagreement with the conventional high status of masculinity. What is interesting, though, is that in the last part of the novel Lily’s narration has a slightly different tone and she seems to have gained more confidence, and a stronger identity, which becomes evident during encounters with Mr. Ramsay. I will analyze her changed attitude more after looking at Esther’s ideas on men.

In contrast to Lily, there are several scenes where Esther clearly states her pessimistic view of men and criticizes the generally accepted masculine domination in the society. For example, her boyfriend Buddy’s mother is working on a rug, braiding strips of wool from her husband’s old suits and, after weeks of hard work, instead of hanging it somewhere to show she uses it as a kitchen mat. After seeing this, Esther suddenly realizes 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 ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard’s kitchen mat” (BJ 88-89). This is an interesting comment on two levels. Firstly, Esther is paying attention to the fact that Mrs.
Willard is working so hard on the rug made of her husband’s old suit. The narration gives an idea of the suit being precious and worth using to its end, indicating the respect the wife is showing her husband. Secondly, Esther reveals that Mrs. Willard’s hard work is not appreciated afterwards, as the rug is simply used as a kitchen mat (likely to wear out quickly). What is important here is Esther’s thought of the wife not appreciating her own hard work, which suggests her insignificant role in the relationship. Again, the normative gender ideals portray masculinity as favorable and central, whereas femininity seems less significant, yet it remains the only option to strive for.

In another scene, Buddy takes Esther to see a woman having her baby. Afterwards he explains to her that the woman was given medicine that made her forget about all the pain. Later, Esther thinks to herself that: “it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain . . . and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been . . . ” (BJ 68). The quote clearly states her opinion of men as manipulative and almost evil in their actions, always thinking of themselves and refusing to see women as equals. Esther seems to imply that men see women as objects, as tools for executing their own selfish plans and for achieving their own goals. In both of these examples, the narration gives the impression that Esther is looking for reasons to dislike and disapprove of men, and it becomes evident that she considers men as a major cause for her unhappiness or inability to be who she wants to be. Here again, the normative gender role restricts her identity formation and influences her self-esteem and confidence negatively. Esther finds it difficult to trust men, or even give them a fair chance, as she seems to believe that there is no way of changing their dominance. Esther’s idea of men remains somewhat similar throughout the novel, whereas in Lily’s narration there is a noticeable shift in the tone toward the end of the novel, and she becomes clearly more angry and critical than she is in the early part of the novel.
In the last part of Woolf’s novel ten years have passed and Lily returns to the summer house with the remaining family members (Mrs. Ramsay e.g. is now dead). From now on, her narration covers a significant part of the story and there are several instances where her views are clearly presented by the author. For example, the final section of the novel begins with a scene where Lily is thinking about the place and the Ramsay family. She feels nothing, despite the fact that Mrs. Ramsay and some of the children are dead. Everything seems strange to her, chaotic and unreal. Suddenly she remembers her painting that she never finished, and the location of a tree in that painting, which became such a dilemma for her: "She had borne it in her mind all these years. It seemed as if the solution had come to her: she knew now what she wanted to do" (TL 161). She suddenly feels confident and determined to finish the picture, but as soon as she lets Mr. Ramsay enter her thoughts she grows pessimistic, blaming him for her inability to achieve her goal. Lily is strongly affected by his presence and describes his strolling back and forth on the terrace as “ruin approached, chaos approached” (TL 162), which prevents her from painting. Mr. Ramsay’s negative influence on her is overwhelming, which she describes as follows: “Let him be fifty feet away, let him not even speak to you . . . she could only think, But he’ll be down on me in a moment, demanding – something she felt she could not give him . . . That man, she thought, her anger raising in her, never gave; that man took. She, on the other hand, would be forced to give. Mrs. Ramsay had given” (TL 163). However, the last sentence with the remark on Mrs. Ramsay’s constant giving, which only ended when she died, changes Lily’s reasoning and she realizes that she is in fact angry with Mrs. Ramsay for leaving everything and for leaving her “. . . at forty-four, wasting her time, unable to do a thing, standing there, playing at painting, playing at the one thing one did not play at . . . ” (TL 163). At this point she is very confused and agitated with all the thoughts and starts to question herself. The whole scene with all the emotions and
distress is caused by the mere presence of Mr. Ramsay, by his supposed male superiority that Lily despises and thinks artificial.

Lily’s dilemma exemplifies her inability to reach Schachter’s four requirements of a good identity, as she now has come to realize that she will always be considered inferior and therefore it will always be difficult for her to commit to the choices she desires. This commitment to choices is the major requirement in Schachter’s theory of identity development. The second requirement considers the importance of self-perception and claims that individuals cannot form a viable identity if forced to reject a part of how they perceive themselves. It is obvious that Lily must struggle to keep her self-perception while considered in a different light by others, especially regarding her ambitions as a serious artist. The third requirement considers the social group around the individual and the importance of individual identity to be recognized and affirmed by that group. Lily’s identity is not affirmed by her society and her identity will most likely never be mutually recognized, unless she is willing to adapt to the normative female gender role assigned to her. In other words, the patriarchal views on gender identity and Lily’s own ideals concerning her identity are unlikely to be equally accepted. Finally, the fourth requirement considers vitality and authenticity as crucial elements of a good identity. This last requirement is clearly not something Lily’s situation allows for. Despite her struggle to remain true to herself, preserving her authenticity as a person and her ambition to be an artist, the pressures set by the surroundings challenge her efforts tremendously. In fact, both Lily and Esther have to face these challenges, and not least because of their deviating views and ideas on marriage and motherhood, which at their times were considered as self-evident tasks and primary achievements in a woman’s life.
Marriage, motherhood & women’s role

Both Lily and Esther have ideas on marriage that challenge the mainstream ideology of their times. Marriage was considered the major accomplishment in a woman’s life, a necessity and a natural desire all women should possess. At first, Lily seems to have a rather demeaning view of marriage, which becomes clear from her observation of the Ramsay couple with their children: “So that is marriage, Lily thought, a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball. That is what Mrs. Ramsay tried to tell me the other night” (TL 80). In this, she also shows her indifference regarding Mrs. Ramsay’s suggestions for her to marry. Later on, Lily even considers marriage a humiliation, as something she is lucky to escape from, which she reveals as she observes a young couple, Minta and Paul, during the dinner. They have entered late and Minta has lost her brooch on the beach, which Paul is determined to find. Lily sincerely offers to help him, but Paul answers by a chuckle that Lily interprets as an indifferent, disrespectful reply. Paul does not behave similarly toward Mrs. Ramsay, but offers her an assuring smile, while Minta also does her best to charm Mrs. Ramsay. The pretentious behavior of the engaged couple is something Lily despises and she feels thankful that “she need not marry, thank heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle” (TL 111). In this, Lily seems to consider marriage not only a humiliation, but also as something that makes a person weaker. The use of the word ‘dilution’, i.e. making something weaker by mixing in something else, is significant here and clearly indicates Lily’s idea of a conventional relationship. She sees marriage as something that will restrict a woman and sharing a life with a man would only make her weaker as an individual.
Similarly, Esther has a very negative idea of the whole institution of marriage as she does not want to end up like her mother, living a dull, predetermined life of a wife whose main function is to take care of the husband and raise children. Esther’s father died when she was nine years old and in addition to witnessing what it is to be a housewife, she has also learned how it would be to be left on your own with the restricted abilities of a housewife and without any personal plans or desires. Esther is desperate to lead her own life as she wishes to, but she is still affected by the strong gender conventions, which is confusing to her. This becomes clear when she describes Dodo Conway, a pregnant neighbor with six children, very negatively as “a woman . . . with a grotesque, protruding stomach . . . Two or three small children of various sizes, all pale, with smudgy faces and bare smudgy knees, wobbled along in the shadow of her skirt” (BJ 122). Right after, she realizes that everybody in the community still loves Dodo, even if she deviates from the conventional family ideal, which does not include so many children. The simple idea that Dodo is married and has children seems to weigh more than the fact that she does not fall within the conventional mother role (which would include only two well-groomed children). Deviating then from that gender ideal by having a larger family than the average (as in the case of Dodo Conway) would not be regarded as wrong as striving for a career as a single woman. Esther’s rationalization shows her strong belief in the importance of gender ideals, which first and foremost expect women to be married and have children. She is incapable of trusting her own instincts (which would guide her toward more independency) and instead considers that happiness could perhaps be achieved by accepting the gender ideals as they are, by becoming a wife and a mother. These thoughts have a huge impact on her since she despises the monotonous life of mothers and wives. Toward the end of the scene, she states that “children make me sick” and falls back to her bed thinking: ”I couldn’t see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to” (BJ 123). It becomes clear that Esther faces a huge dilemma of not wanting to have a future like
her mother or Dodo Conway and, therefore, as a young woman she cannot see a future for herself as her own ideal life does not seem to exist in the real world.

Even if the ideal role for women in *The Bell Jar* is to be a mother and a housewife, it is not the only option for women of the era. As mentioned earlier, during the 1950’s the female role had changed and women were often working, although within the field of ‘feminine occupations’ such as secretaries, nurses or teachers. Esther’s dream and goal is to become an author, an independent, self-supporting writer. She cannot imagine having an occupation that her surroundings consider appropriate for her: “. . . when I tried to picture myself in some job, briskly jotting down line after line of shorthand, my mind went blank” (*BJ* 100). Esther wants to believe in her abilities and she often fantasizes about the future: “I smiled, seeing a pristine, imaginary manuscript floating in mid-air, with Esther Greenwood typed in the upper-right hand corner” (*BJ* 108). A career as a writer would seem possible for her as she has always been a good student with top grades and with good reputation within her school world. However, even though she tells the reader about her success in school and the appraisals she gets from teachers, she never seems to give herself credit for her hard work. Esther’s thoughts are clearly so consumed with the conflict between her own desires and the expectations of others on her as a woman that she cannot concentrate on simply working at her own career and future. Instead, she becomes more confused and desperate in her attempts to fit into the normative gender role, while simultaneously questioning the reasonability of that role. Tragically, her efforts to conform to the normative ideals are equally strong as her desire to deviate from them by fulfilling her own desires. Evidently, Esther’s identity formation is strongly lacking in the four requirements of a good identity, which partly is caused by her young age and immaturity, but mainly by the pressures set by the patriarchal surroundings. Esther struggles to commit to her choice of striving for independency as a writer, which has a negative and confusing influence on her self-perception. She feels forced
to reject part of what she conceives to be herself. Her ideals on who she wants to be are not recognized and affirmed by her society, which pushes her in the direction of a predetermined gender role.

Similarly to Lily, Esther’s identity formation cannot result in vital and authentic gender identity because the patriarchal society does not recognize and affirm the kind of identity she wishes to have. Instead, she is constantly pushed into a certain gender role. However, what is different in Esther’s case is the fact that she does conform more to that conventional gender role than Lily. Nevertheless, Esther strongly feels that all her good grades should not only lead to a career as a housewife, as had happened to the mother of her boyfriend Buddy (who everyone thinks she should marry): “This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s, but I knew what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard’s mother did from morning till night” (BJ 88). Buddy contributes to her confusion by claiming that after having children she would not want to write poems anymore, which Esther reasons to be true in her typical pessimistic way: “. . . 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” (BJ 89).

Buddy’s masculine superiority does influence Esther as she agrees with his views on women’s writing, but at the same time she has her own differing ideas about such a grim destiny for a woman writer, which she does not share with Buddy. Most importantly, she remains true to the conventional, submissive gender role by letting Buddy convince her, even though it is against her own beliefs.

As mentioned before, early 20th century societies had extremely stereotyped ideals on gender roles. Lily Briscoe’s character deviates from this role tremendously. She does not only think differently, but she acts and looks different as well. In addition, being unmarried with no plans for starting a family are also factors that alienate her from the
mainstream female role. Therefore, her gender identity becomes confused as she is surrounded by people who all seem to fall within the normative roles and conventions. A few decades later, in the mid-20th century society, the stereotypical female role was still preferred, even though women started to gain more independence and secure jobs outside the home (Thistle 36-37). Thus, Esther is living in a society where stereotype gender ideals still reign but the advances in society open up for women to participate increasingly in what was traditionally masculine endeavors, for example at work and in public positions. Despite this development, the idea that women could have careers and goals other than those of motherhood and housewife was seldom openly approved. The traditional role and ambitions of the mid-20th century woman were still to be pretty, desirable and willing to build a family. Her task was to offer a safe, functional base for the man of the house so that he could concentrate on his work and career. This is well presented in the following thought that Esther has on marriage: “That’s one of the reasons I never want to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket” (BJ 87). In comparison, for the early 20th century woman the sole ambition should be to get married and become a good mother and a wife. Obviously then, Lily’s choice to remain unmarried challenges the normative gender role. Thus, both Lily and Esther question the ideal of what women should be, which is one of the major factors contributing negatively to their identity formation. Another factor that strongly affects their gender identity formation is related to the conventions on physical appearance. However, there is a clear difference in their perceptions, as Lily seems less concerned with her appearance than Esther, even though Lily’s appearance is less conventional than that of Esther’s.
Appearance

There is so much emphasis put on the descriptions of the two characters’ appearances in the novels that it seems to be a conscious choice by the authors. The descriptions of Lily’s physical appearance are numerous and often deal with the same details related to her foreign looks. There are many references to her “puckered eyes” and “Chinese face” (e.g. 23, 32 and 99) and they are often presented in a negative or condescending tone. For example, when Lily is first presented in the novel, the description that Woolf offers is extremely scornful and patronizing in relation to Lily’s appearance, passion and civil status. This description is narrated by Mrs. Ramsay who is modeling for Lily’s picture in the company of her son, when he suddenly gives a loud cry. Mrs. Ramsay looks around to see if anyone heard him:

> Only Lily Briscoe, she was glad to find; and that did not matter. But the sight of the girl standing on the edge of the lawn painting reminded her; she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible for Lily’s picture. Lily’s picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her puckered-up face she would never marry: one could not take her painting very seriously; but she was an independent little creature . . . (TL 23)

The decision to first introduce Lily in such a seemingly subjective manner is clearly a statement by the author; it illustrates the conventional view on the feminine gender role. Mrs. Ramsay does not only belittle Lily’s artistic abilities, but she also refers to her as a “girl” and “an independent little creature” who will never get married because of her looks. Mrs. Ramsay sees Lily’s independence as something positive (as her being free) although adding
the words “little creature” gives her comment a patronizing tone. Perhaps she has troubles considering Lily an independent woman, as it is not something commonly acknowledged in this patriarchal society where a woman can not be independent without deviating from the gender ideal. Such influence on Lily’s identity formation is negative as her society does not accept the way she looks and behaves even though she herself may be content with (or indifferent toward) her own appearance. In other words, her social surroundings judge her. For Esther the demands in relation to appearance are similarly set by the society, but she remains her own worst judge. In fact, in relation to appearance, Esther is extremely concerned with fitting into the normative ideals of femininity. She sees herself as deviating from those ideals. However, the narration never clearly portrays her actually looking different from others. Lily on the other hand, is not as concerned with her appearance being unlike others’, although her looks are considered deviant by people around her.

Here, the dissimilarity in attitude could be explained by their difference in age. Esther’s young age, combined with her lack of confidence, contribute to her constant search for her place in the society. She is looking for role models that could help her in forming a conventional, socially approved identity. In “Plath's The Bell Jar as Female Bildungsroman”, Wagner pays attention to Esther’s maturation process and claims that all characters in the novel are “subordinate to Esther and her developing consciousness” and that “no incident is included which does not influence her maturation” (Wagner 55). In addition to stressing the importance of the external factors (i.e. characters and events), Wagner also discusses the importance of the possible role models involved in Esther’s search for identity. What is interesting is the fact that these role models are very different from each other. They include for example a rebellious, yet feminine, southern girl and a lesbian acquaintance at the hospital, as well as an older famous novelist woman who sponsors her college scholarship. Possible role models around her also include her mother and Dodo Conway, the Catholic
woman with seven children. The range of role models indicates Esther’s hopeless struggle to balance her desired gender identity and the expected gender identity, a struggle which is only deepened by her young age.

As concluded previously, Esther’s self-esteem and identity are negatively influenced by the norms related to appearance and she sees herself as different and unattractive, even though she is not negatively judged by others. For example, when Esther looks at her reflection in a mirror she often perceives herself as ugly, foreign-looking and tired. She is extremely conscious of her looks and concerned with the idea that it is her physical appearance that makes it hard for her to find boyfriends. In one instance, she considers her lack of sexual experience to be caused by her looks, or by her intelligence (which others consider to be positive traits): “if only I had a keen, shapely bone-structure to my face or could discuss politics shrewdly or was a famous writer Constantin might find me interesting enough to sleep with” (BJ 86). Constantin is a foreign man working at the UN as an interpreter. Esther enjoys Constantin’s company and feels somewhat confident, as he seems “mature and considerate in every way” (BJ 83), and is not likely to brag about sleeping with her to other men. Esther’s insecurity in relation to men and sex is strong and she is concerned that no one would be interested to find out who she really is because of her self-alleged unattractiveness. Some other examples of her negative self-perception come abruptly in the text and often without further pondering, which obviously is a sign of her constant worry about them. She seems to be obsessed with pessimistic ideas of her appearance and she often describes herself as foreign looking. For example, chapter 10 starts with Esther sitting in the train, looking at the image in the mirror of her compact powder: “The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian” (BJ 118), followed directly by her observations of the sceneries passing by. At another time she describes her appearance reflected in an elevator door: “... and I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only
me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked” (BJ 19). In these examples, alleged foreign features can be considered as something that, in her mind, pinpoints what makes her different from others. Her sense of being foreign signifies her sense of alienation in the patriarchal society.

Both Lily and Esther, although showing different concern for their appearance, are similarly affected by the ideals of femininity and the strict norms for physical appearance. Esther’s identity formation is directly affected by her struggle to adapt to gender norms while trying to express herself. In contrast, Lily’s identity formation is not affected by her own concern for the norms, but by others’ low opinion of her appearance and choices, which then affect the way they relate to her.

4. DISCUSSION

Both Lily and Esther are unable to fulfill Schachter’s requirements of a good identity. They are not able to commit to the choices they desire as their societies do not show understanding for such desires. Both characters are pushed into predetermined feminine roles and, therefore, struggle to keep a different self-perception, which consequently has a negative impact on their identity formation. Lily and Esther feel alienated from the mainstream society, but in Lily’s case it is even more obvious that her social group does not recognize and affirm her individual identity. To an extent, Esther strives to conform to the expected gender role as she wishes not to be judged by others, but it is not who she wants to be. Thus, she feels that her desired individual identity is not recognized and affirmed by her social group. The last requirement Schachter presents considers vitality and authenticity as crucial elements of an individual identity. Both Lily and Esther are in a position where they find it difficult to preserve their authenticity as a person as the society, again, labels them as inferior women with a
predetermined role. The constant feeling of alienation and struggle to find balance in life clearly has a negative impact on the two protagonists’ vitality and general well-being.

From a feminist stand point, Esther could be seen as a victim who knows her own capabilities and strengths, but is not able to trust them as patriarchal society is forcing her into a desired mold. From another point of view, Esther could be seen as a depressed young woman, who is still searching for herself and her place in the world and who has poor self-confidence caused by, for example, upbringing and the surroundings or own harsh demands on herself. In Lily’s case, it is much more obvious that the society’s expectations and norms are the cause for her dilemma. The atmosphere of the early 20th century was much more patriarchal than that of the mid-20th century. To The Lighthouse takes place in late Victorian England, where the outlook on gender roles was still extremely male-oriented. During Lily’s time, the idea of women being independent, self-supporting and unmarried was not acknowledged. However, this way of thinking was about to change, which can be seen in the society portrayed in The Bell Jar. Esther’s story takes place in the United States during the time when the second wave of feminism and female liberation were slowly rising, as a counter-reaction to the post-war efforts to re-build the patriarchal society familiar from the times before the war. The traditional roles of men and women started to lose their status under the rapid economic growth and capitalism, which created a need for women to work outside homes (Thistle 36-37). The expected roles of women changed radically, although the new emerging ideals of femininity remained traditional when it comes to such aspects as appearance and motherhood.

To me, the major issue in relation to gender roles is the value of the role (to the individual in question), and not the contents of the role itself. In other words, a woman could well have been willing to act according to the expected gender norms and be content, and if that role was appreciated and looked upon as equal to that of men, it is hard to see the woman
as oppressed. However, in an ideal situation women would have had more possibilities to choose, advance and gain significance and power within society. This was clearly not the case in the English society portrayed by Woolf in *To The Lighthouse*. On the contrary, deviating from the norms and following one’s own desires was not even considered possible for women and therefore may have seemed like a bizarre idea for many. Although during the mid-20th century women had grown aware of their possibilities and realized the value of their abilities, they still perhaps lacked the courage and encouragement to fulfill their own goals and lead their lives the way they wanted to.

Living under the “bell jar”, Lily and Esther face enormous challenges in building their identity according to their own preferences. Lily is constantly considered as different by others, whereas Esther is not seen as different, but in light of the norms and expected gender ideals, Esther feels alienated, which for her is a negative experience. Lily is not striving to fulfill the requirements of the conventional feminine gender role and alienation from the mainstream could be seen as a defense mechanism to preserve her own well-being. In other words, Lily avoids investing in the conventional gender ideals that according to Sanchez and Crocker can be “harmful to well-being, as it places one’s worth at the mercy of others’ approval . . . ” (Sanchez and Crocker 64). For Esther, who is clearly putting more effort into adapting to the conventional role, the sense of alienation is due both to her investment in gender ideals as well as to her struggle to build her identity according to her own desires. In this way, she becomes her own worst judge and the consequences on her well-being are clearly more negative as she is constantly concerned with adapting to society’s view of desirable femininity.

Both characters find it difficult to become who they want to be as they do not receive support, or even understanding, for their goals of leading an artist’s life as women. Their abilities are doubted and belittled, because the normative female gender role does not
include the choices they wish to make about their own future. It is evident that both Lily and Esther struggle under patriarchal rule, which negatively affects their gender identity formation. Patriarchal conventions concerning women’s role, women’s appearance and inferior gender status are constant concerns in Lily’s and Esther’s lives and the scenes analyzed in this study are representative for those concerns and their negative consequences on their identity formation. Lily’s and Esther’s ideas on womanhood and identity deviate from the patriarchal views and throughout their stories they are struggling to find a balance between their own ideals and those of society, which has a significant impact on their identity formation. The theme of developing and defining one’s identity as a woman is presented by Woolf and Plath as social criticism. Both authors manage to deliver similar criticism concerning the negative impact of patriarchal norms on female identity formation despite the different times, places and seemingly different characters.

In the eyes of patriarchy, Lily and Esther remain inferior as women, but their resistance to adapt to the conventions does help them to form a stronger identity. However, they are not able to reach their ideal, preferred identity, as they are not able to commit to all of their own desires under the pressures of the patriarchal society. Both authors leave their respective stories open for interpretations regarding their protagonists’ future, although Lily seems to find her personal equilibrium at the very end of the novel. Now, she is looking at her picture, thinking “it would be hung in the attics . . . it would be destroyed. But what did that matter?” (TL 224) She seems to have grown aware that she does not have to care so much about the values and goals determined by the society, but should rather concentrate on fulfilling her own, personal goals. She then takes up her brush again and “with a sudden intensity” (TL 224) finishes the picture. The very last words in the novel are her thoughts: “I have had my vision” (TL 224). These words leave the reader with a self-confident Lily. In comparison to Lily’s final confident thoughts, which envision an independent and successful
future for her, Plath reveals an important detail about Esther’s future already in the beginning of the novel. Esther is thinking about all the free gifts she received during her summer employment in New York: “I use the lipstick now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sun-glasses case for the baby to play with” (BJ 4). The relevance of this line is easy to disregard, as there are no other references to Esther’s future in the novel or any other indications of her starting a family. However, it is not stated that the baby is her own but if assumed so, then she has conformed to the ideal of motherhood either because of her own changed desires, perhaps due to biological instincts, or as a means to invest in the gender ideals in order to fit the conventional role of a woman.

Nevertheless, Plath and Woolf leave their stories open for the reader to interpret, but both authors suggest a final positive change in their protagonists’ life. In my reading, the two female characters will continue their struggle for freedom in relation to their choices and identity. Compared to the characters we became acquainted with in the beginning of the novels, they have already taken the fundamental steps forward in the process. At the end, both Lily and Esther are portrayed as women who have come to understand their own traits, desires and abilities. However, Woolf and Plath portray female protagonists who remain restricted in realizing their goals and will remain so, until the conventions of their patriarchal societies change.
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