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Introduction

I do as others have done before me: In *The Novel and the Police*,¹ D. A. Miller does as Elaine Showalter does in her introduction to *Hystories*²: recounts his own hysterical reactions. His are pains in his shoulders and back, while Showalter coughs when giving lectures. I must admit to a similar reaction, having at times during my writing this thesis suffered from acute nausea and palpitation when I started my laptop to begin the writing of the day.

Had I lived in a society and a culture that interpreted these symptoms as signs of my femininity reacting against the intellectual strain of reading or writing, I would not have finished, or even begun, this thesis. However, even though the symptoms are real, the interpretation is another, and so I was merely advised to rethink my work routines. The interpretation of symptoms depends on in which time, culture and frame of thought it takes place, and 150 years ago a doctor could have diagnosed my nausea as hysteria. The fact that I, a young woman, am allowed by the norms of the culture in which I live to graduate from a university, proves that the view on women has changed. However, as I will argue in this thesis, some remnants of the Victorian view on women influenced Kate Brown, the protagonist of *The Summer before the Dark* published in the midst of the women's liberation in the 1970'es, as well as it did Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe of *The Woman in White* written in the Victorian period more than a century earlier.

The story of Kate Brown was first published in 1973, while Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe came into existence more than a century before; in 1859.³ However,

¹D. A. Miller: *The Novel and the Police*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988; p. 191.

²Elaine Showalter: *Hystories. Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*, London: Picador, (1997), 1998; p. 13.

³*The Woman in White* appeared in its serialised form on 26 November 1859. It was first published in the form of a novel in 1860.

despite the many years separating their authors, the expectations that these women strive to live up to seem curiously similar, and firmly based on the assumption that men and women are fundamentally completely different. In this thesis **I will show how a similar ideal of femininity is represented in Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, and how hysteria and madness occur and function in the novels.** I will do this on the basis of second wave feminist theory, specifically *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan and *The Cinderella Complex* by Colette Dowling.

In both of the novels analysed in this thesis, women are struggling to come to terms with their femininity, or rather with the femininity they are expected to embody. Kate Brown of *The Summer before the Dark* and Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe of *The Woman in White* are all subjects to the notions about femininity and gender roles of their (respective) times. Society's expectations of how they are to act and live collide with their own wants and needs, especially with regard to Kate Brown and Marian Halcombe. The two writers, Doris Lessing and Wilkie Collins, allow the characters different ways of solving this conflict.

The interesting point when comparing the two novels is that the women are facing very similar problems even though they are characters in novels written more than a century apart, in periods which are usually seen as hugely different, especially in their attitudes towards women. *The Woman in White* is written in the Victorian period, which is now remembered for its harsh restrictions on women's lives and possibilities.

Furthermore, it is written by a male author. *The Summer before the Dark* is written in the 1970's; after the sexual liberation, and at a time when women had been granted the right to vote and had entered the labour market in large numbers. Being written by a woman, *The Summer before the Dark* could be supposed to be positioned firmly at the very other

end of the spectrum from *The Woman in White*, with regard to its view on and representation of women. However, as I will argue in this thesis, that is not the case. On the contrary, when judging from the analyses of these two novels, the basic understanding of the sexes has not changed radically in the course of the century.

One great similarity between the female characters' situations is that they all strive to live up to an ideal mode of femininity which seems to be rooted in the same assumptions about women and gender, irrespective of the year being 1859 or 1973. In the first chapter of this thesis I will define this "ideal of femininity", comprising what Betty Friedan and Colette Dowling described in 1963 and 1981 respectively, as a part of what is termed "second wave feminism". The ideal of femininity is an ideal both from society's point of view, and for the women themselves, as the ideal has been internalised. Not only the norms and traditions of society, but also the women themselves, tell them how to live and act, and they thus retain themselves in their subordinate position. This is also a common feature of both of the novels.

Inherent in the traditional view on women is a close connection between femininity and hysteria and/or madness. The hysteria and madness can be actual or perceived by society, and it can work to free the woman from the expectations of society, or to reinforce her confinement within them. Hysteria and madness occur in several forms in both of the novels, and I will analyse which functions they fill and how.

I have chosen to compare two novels from the Victorian period and from the second half of the 20th century because both periods were concerned with issues of gender and femininity - and because so many good novels were written in these two periods. That the focus was on gender in the novels of the 1970'es may seem obvious, but gender was also an important issue in the Victorian period, where human equality and women's rights were emerging and slowly becoming a part of the political concerns. Also science, with

the emergence of anthropology, phrenology and its concern with racial differences, was seeking to map the differences between the sexes.

I have chosen to focus on *The Summer before the Dark* and *The Woman in White* because issues of gender and femininity play a large role in both of them. Furthermore, both were, and still are, popular within a broad audience, and hence reaching and influencing a large number of people. The novels can, as mentioned above, be seen as positioned at each end of a spectrum, being written in two very different periods of time, and by a female and a male author respectively. For that very reason, it is interesting to compare them and their representation of the same issue.

Since my point of departure is *The Summer before the Dark*, I have chosen to use the feminist theory of its time as my theoretical basis. *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Cinderella Complex* are books which Kate Brown herself could have read on the plane to Spain, as they are positioned on the borderline between feminist theory and self-help books. This makes them accessible for readers from all layers of society, exactly as the novels are. However, I am aware that feminism has moved on since the periods with which I am concerned, and I will therefore refer to more recent feminist works as well, primarily *The Beauty Myth* written by Naomi Wolf in 1990, which very much continues the discourse of the second wave feminism. However, I will not be concerned with the further development of feminism, as that would fall beyond the limits of this thesis.

Another interesting theme that I have chosen not to engage in, is the discussion about difference versus androgyny, that is whether the difference between the sexes is (mainly) due to biological or social factors.⁴ However, I cannot do otherwise but assume that any individual, regardless of his or her sex, is to some degree influenced by its surrounding society. Hence, in this thesis I will investigate the cultural and social

⁴A corner stone of this discussion would be Judith Butler's works *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*; cf. Nina Björk: *Under det Rosa Tacket. Om Kvinnlighetens vara och feministiska strategier*, Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, (1996), 2003.

phenomenon which I call the ideal of femininity, which indeed covers a social construction of gendered identity.

In the analyses of both novels I have taken a postmodern approach. This seemed inevitable, as both novels have features of postmodern literature, encouraging a reading in terms of meta-narration, de- and re-construction, changing voices and naming. In both novels the presentation of truth and reality is being changed and re-presented to the reader, and scenes are being remembered or re-membered differently by different characters or at different times. Furthermore, the basic term of the ideal of femininity is in itself a manual for the construction of a desired female identity, which must be said to be a fundamentally postmodern thought.⁵

However, the two novels must naturally be analysed differently, as the one is specifically about women and femininity, whereas the other only indirectly deals with these subjects: *The Summer before the Dark* explores the femininity of its time, while *The Woman in White* does not have as its primary objective to question this, and hence only indirectly describes femininity. This difference in point of view is also the reason why I have chosen to analyse the novels in the reverse order instead of chronologically. I hope that this will help me to prove my point: that the features of femininity, hysteria and madness which can be found in *The Summer before the Dark* are similar to and reflect those which can be found in the novel written more than a century before.

The outline of this thesis will be as follows: I will begin with a theoretical chapter whose object is to establish a historical and theoretical framework on which I will base my analyses of the two novels. I will then turn to the two novels, the second chapter being an

⁵I am aware of the fact that *The Woman in White* is written some century before the advent of postmodernism, but the presence of postmodern features in even pre-modern literature is not uncommon. Another striking example of this is Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.

analysis of *The Summer before the Dark*, and the third an analysis of *The Woman in White*, both with focus on the ideal of femininity, and on hysteria and madness. Chapter four consists of a short comparison of the two novels, after which the conclusion will follow.

Chapter 1 The ideal of femininity

1.1 Introduction

In this thesis I will analyse and discuss how women in two novels respond to the demands that what I refer to as “the ideal of femininity” imposes upon them. This chapter will establish the term “the ideal of femininity” and its connection with hysteria and madness.

The ideal of femininity is my term for the set of culturally created expectations of women, which are rooted in the Victorian view on women, but which prevailed and developed far into the 20th century. In the late 19th century, the feminists or “New Women” revolted against this ideal of femininity, and in the 1960'es, -70'es and -80'es, the so-called second wave feminists⁶ pointed to the fact that many of the systems of repression of women inherent in the ideal of femininity still existed to a very large degree, regardless of the political advances such as universal suffrage and the revolutionary methods of and attitude towards contraception.

In order to define the ideal of femininity, I will begin by describing the prevalent view on women in the Victorian period⁷, and proceed to a description of second wave feminism and some of its key terms, focusing on the two works *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan⁸ and *The Cinderella Complex* by Colette Dowling⁹. In the third section of the chapter I will describe the interplay between femininity, hysteria and madness.

⁶The first wave feminism being the early women's movements which emerged in the 1860'es. The second wave feminism is usually dated from the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, but when (or whether) it ended is not clear. A strand of feminism may be seen to move into a new era with the publication of Susan Feludi's *Backlash* in 1981, but for instance Naomi Wolf continues the discourse of the second wave feminism in 1990 with her book *The Beauty Myth*.

⁷The Victorian period is usually defined as the period of Queen Victoria's reign: 1837-1901.

⁸Betty Friedan: *The Feminine Mystique*, Middlesex: Penguin, (1963), 1992.

⁹Colette Dowling: *The Cinderella Complex. Women's Hidden Fear of Independence*, London: Fontana, (1981), 1982.

1.2 The Victorian view on women

The view on women in the Victorian period was centred around a contradictory image of women as both inferior and superior to men.

The superior image is contained in phrases used about the period such as “the cult of domesticity”, “the cult of true womanhood”, and “women worship”. The housewife and mother was praised as “the angel in the house”¹⁰, and was an almost holy institution in society. Women were seen as innocent and fragile, and thus in need of protection from the crude world surrounding the home. Not having been tainted with the bestiality of the world, women were morally superior and saint-like in their symbolical virginity.

The innocence and fragility of women leads to the other image, that of the woman as inferior. Women belonged to the sphere of children, both in terms of innocence, fragility and intellect, and had to be taken care of accordingly. This conviction was reflected in the legal system, which only allowed women a limited power over their own lives: The Marriage Act of 1857 made divorce formally possible, but only in very rare cases did it come through, since the woman “had to prove adultery *plus* bigamy, cruelty, desertion, incest, or unnatural sexual offences to get a divorce.” (Heyck, p. 287¹¹). Only the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 enabled women to hold property. Women's colleges were established at Cambridge and Oxford in 1869 and 1878 respectively, but women could not take degrees at the universities until 1920. Not until 1928 were women given the full right to vote.¹²

Richard D. Altick sums up this contradictory view on women as both inferior and

¹⁰This was the title of a verse-novel by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1857, celebrating the wife and mother.

¹¹Thomas William Heyck: *The Peoples of the British Isles, A New History, From 1688 to 1870*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992.

¹²Cf.: J. P. Kenyon (ed.): *The Wordsworth Dictionary of British History*, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Reference, (1981), 1994; Richard D. Altick: *Victorian People and Ideas*, London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1974 and Heyck.

superior:

“[W]oman was inferior to man in all ways except the unique one that counted most (to man): her femininity. Her place was in the home, on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs.” (Altick, p. 54)

At the root of this view on women lies the conviction that men and women are fundamentally different, and created to complement each other.¹³ This notion of the gender roles being natural and instituted by God, made any criticism or refusal of them an act of blasphemy. The two categories of men and women, mutually exclusive and living to complement each other, did not only function on the practical level (the man earns the money, the woman cooks the food), but also on a higher level of abstraction. The list of dichotomies paralleling the basic one of female/male or feminine/masculine is endless. A few examples are: impotence/potency, passive/active, body/mind, irrational/rational, weak/strong, submissive/dominant, insanity/sanity, nature/culture, silence/discourse, introvert/extrovert, chastity/sexual activity, emotion/intellect. Any transgression of these innate values or capacities was not only unnatural, it was also unhealthy. For example, too much intellectual strain would cause a woman to become sterile, according to the contemporary medical science.

The ideal of femininity thus presented women with a catch-22: if they acted out the ideal, they were inferior to men and treated accordingly, and if they did not, they were inferior both to men and to other women, because of their lack of femininity.

This definition of femininity as the opposite of masculinity, of the two categories as mutually exclusive, and with the female defined as inferior to the male, creates a de-centering of women. From this follows a definition of the woman as the Other, defined in

¹³The idea of the sexes created to complement each other can be traced back to Plato who describes men and women as two halves of one body once separated, and now striving to find its complementary half. Aristophanes' speech in: Plato: *Symposium*, on: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1600> (17/1 2005).

terms of absence,¹⁴ in terms of what she lacks compared to a man. This also leads to a woman defining herself not in terms of her individual personality, but in terms of her sex. Furthermore, since being a woman means to fill the role of wife and mother, a woman is only valuable or “a real woman” if she fulfils these roles. Thus, a woman comes to define herself as wife and mother, and in terms of her husband's achievements or her children's accomplishments.

Within this scope, women's otherness poses a mystery and a potential danger to men, whose task it is to control them. The image of the woman as a beast which must be mastered is a recurrent theme in literature, and embeds the dichotomy of the Madonna and the whore. The inferior and the superior come together in one figure of unpredictability which is at the same time dangerous and desirable. And perhaps the desirability lies exactly in the danger.¹⁵

Importantly, the Victorian view on women is exactly that, a *view*, an idea of an ideal behaviour and order of things. Naturally, there were different degrees to the realisation of the ideal, among other things depending on economy, which only in the upper-class families would allow women to be absolutely free of work and responsibility. But direct revolution against the ideal, or refusal of it, posed problems of inconceivable consequences. The New Women and the suffragettes were a threat to the entire system of society, which, in this heyday of the British Empire, was supposed to be the world's most refined civilisation.

1.3 Second wave feminism

¹⁴This thought originates in the works of Sigmund Freud, and was treated in a feminist perspective by Simone de Beauvoir, cf. Chris Weedon: *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, London: Basil Blackwell, (1987), 1989; ch. 3; and Björk, ch. 7.

¹⁵The image of the Other is also used within post-colonial theory, where a very similar double image of the savage can be found, as both repulsive in his primitivism and attractive in his closeness to nature. Also the term of de-centering is found within post-colonial theory, describing the culture of the colonised country suddenly being “wrong” or subordinate in relation to the imperial power.

In the 1960's, several decades after women had gained formal access to education, career, private property, divorce etc., the second wave feminism emerged. It was argued that women were still repressed, still judged narrowly in terms of their sex, and were still expected to live up to the Victorian image of the passive, irrational, weak, innocent, inferior woman. Also the Madonna/whore dichotomy could still be seen; now slightly changed but in essence the same:

“In an earlier time, the image of woman was also split in two – the good, pure woman on the pedestal, and the whore of the desires of the flesh. The split in the new image opens a different fissure – the feminine woman, whose goodness includes the desires of the flesh, and the career woman, whose evil includes every desire of the separate self.” (Friedan, p. 40)

The second wave feminism argued that being a woman is not something you are born, but something you become¹⁶, and that the battle against this repressive cultural construct of gender must be fought within the women, who have spent their lives internalising the inherently Victorian ideal of femininity.^{17,18} Two of the most prominent theorists of the Anglo-American second wave feminism were Betty Friedan and Colette Dowling.

In 1963 Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*. It took its starting point in the development in the United States of an increasing number of college- and university educated young women settling down in suburban nuclear families to fill the role of housekeeper, wife and mother. *The Feminine Mystique* explores the mechanisms keeping women away from the labour market, and what this marginalisation of women does to them. In 1981, Colette Dowling's *The Cinderella Complex* was published, and despite the 18 years separating the two works, Dowling continues very much in the same vein as

¹⁶As was first stated by the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*. The book was published in France in 1949 and translated into English 1953, but took a decade to impact the British and American feminists.

¹⁷In the terms of Michel Foucault, the ideal of femininity is a discourse of repression, underlying any aspect of society. Cf. Pip Jones: *Introducing Social Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003; ch. 7.

¹⁸Within the second wave feminism, the feminist strain of socio-linguistics also emerged, pointing to how the ideal of femininity was reflected in language itself (which is also a part of Foucault's theory of discourse), in words such as *mister/mistress*, or *chairman*. This was initially argued by Robin Lakoff in *Language and Women's Place* from 1974.

Friedan.

Friedan defined her term “the feminine mystique” thus:

“The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity. It says that the great mistake of Western culture, through most of its history, has been the undervaluation of this femininity. It says this femininity is so mysterious and intuitive and close to the creation and origin of life that man-made science may never be able to understand it. But however special and different, it is in no way inferior to the nature of man; it may even in certain respects be superior. The mistake, says the mystique, the root of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfilment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love.” (Friedan, p. 38)

So Friedan recognised a return to or an enhancement of the legacy of the Victorian ideal of femininity: a focus on the so-called “natural” values and capacities of women.

Furthermore, the mystique encouraged a woman to define herself as the Other; through her relation with a man:

“The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question “Who am I?” by saying “Tom's wife... Mary's mother”. [...] An American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be.” (Friedan, p. 63)

The term “the Cinderella complex” refers to the state of passivity and patient waiting which women, like the long-suffering Cinderella in the fairy-tale, position themselves in. Instead of actively taking their lives into their own hands, Dowling saw women suffer quietly and passively for the sake of their husbands and families. “Like Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to transform their lives.” (Dowling, p. 28)

1.3.1 *Dependence, internalisation and beauty*

A central term of the second wave feminism is dependency. Dependency, which is inherent in “the Cinderella complex”, is what prevents women from standing up for

themselves; what makes them think that they need the support of a man to lead their life. Dowling writes that “[f]or years, femininity has been associated – indeed, identified – with dependency.” (Dowling, p. 58), in that: “[e]verything about the way we were raised told us we would be *part* of someone else – that we would be protected, supported, buoyed up by wedded happiness until the day we died.” (Dowling, p. 11) In its essence, dependency leads to the woman regressing to the state of a child, unwilling and unable to take care of herself, make decisions of her own, etc.

Another central term is internalisation. At the basis of women's dependency lies “women's hidden fear of independence”, as the sub-title of *The Cinderella Complex* says. So women are not dependent because they *cannot* be independent; they are dependent because they *dare not* be otherwise. And this is because, through their upbringing, they have internalised the values and norms of the ideal of femininity rooted in the Victorian view on women sketched above. Thus, internalisation is a powerful means of keeping women conforming to the ideal of femininity, much more than for instance legal restrictions, because the women themselves administer it. In this way, women come to play the main role in the cultural construction of women's identities in accordance with the ideal of femininity – the main role in their own repression. One of the tools of internalisation is a romanticising of motherhood and of the role of the housewife. Mechanisms similar to those which worked in the Victorian period condemn a woman's wish for independence as “unnatural”, “unfeminine” and “ungrateful”. In Dowling's words: “I recognized that I had a hand in keeping things the way they were, that there were certain distortions in the way I was seeing things, and that *I was actively maintaining those distortions.*” (Dowling, p. 21)

A third important focus, and a means of repression also incorporated in the internalisation, is beauty, or the socially constructed idea of beauty. In her book *The*

Beauty Myth,¹⁹ Naomi Wolf describes how society's image of beauty as an essential part of femininity influences women. In the words of Wolf:

“The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless.” (Wolf, p. 12)

And she continues: “None of this is true.” (Wolf, p. 12) The demand for women to live up to the expected level of beauty (defined by the advertising industry and fashion magazines etc.), is a demand for being feminine. A woman who is not beautiful is not feminine, and hence she is “unnatural”, since beauty is defined as an innately feminine trait. The internalisation of this expectation leads women to eating disorders, low self-esteem and an increasing use of cosmetic surgery.

1.3.2 *Fixed matrices of identity*

The internalisation of the ideal of femininity, indeed internalisation as an integrated *part* of the ideal of femininity, and its romanticising the role of the wife and mother, makes the choice of that role an easy one. This is what Friedan terms “the mistaken choice” (Friedan, p. 180). In this way, the ideal of femininity can be used as a ready-made matrix of identity which can be adopted unproblematically, instead of one's having to create an identity for oneself. In doing this, the woman can be certain of fulfilling the norms of society, but lacks an independent identity.

Of course, the critical question is to what extent it is ever possible to create an

¹⁹Naomi Wolf: *The Beauty Myth*, London: Vintage, (1990), 1991. Although written some years later than Dowling and especially Friedan, it describes and develops their thoughts, with focus on the socially created myth about beauty, and how it contributes to women's repression.

independent identity for oneself. Will it not always be modelled on some norm of society – or as a reaction to one – and thus to some degree mimic others? Furthermore, it could be argued that when Friedan and Dowling encourage women to break free of the ideal of femininity, they are also providing another matrix for the women to adopt instead, another well-defined role to assume. And the basis for this new role of the liberated woman is still founded on the disempowering assumption that women are victims – of men, of social norms, of history.

1.4 Hysteria and madness – traits of femininity

Hysteria and madness are traditionally “female maladies”,²⁰ and their connection to femininity is both strong and old. The historian Norman Davies²¹ writes that:

“According to Hippocratic treatises on medicine, hysteria was exclusively a woman's disease associated with uterine disorders. *Hysteria* in Greek meant “womb”; and the state of nervous agitation was caused when menstrual blood was unable to escape. [...] In another variant, the womb itself was thought to become displaced and to wander round the body cavity. By pressing on the heart or brain, it provoked anxiety and eventually uncontrollable panic.” (Davies, p. 123)

Although the theory of the wandering womb did not survive modern surgery, hysteria continued to be linked with the female sex, and indeed with femininity itself. And it was not necessarily a negative characteristic: “In the United States, novelists regarded hysteria as primarily a white middle-class woman's malady, but also as a sign of superior refinement and femininity.” (Showalter (1997), p. 82) Furthermore, in the Victorian period, hysteria – and its kin madness - was seen as a refinement of the civilized age, linked with the superior British imperial nation: “madness was a disease of the highly

²⁰Cases of male hysteria, esp. before the advent of the hysteria called “shell shocks” during the first world war, were an oxymoron – if a man was hysteric, he was effeminate, and hence not a man. On the nature and dilemmas of the concept of male hysteria, cf. Elaine Showalter: *The Female Malady. Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980*, London: Virago, (1985), 2004; ch. 7; and Lisa L. Diedrich: “Hysterical Men: Shell-shock and the Destabilisation of Masculinity” in: Shildrick, Margit and Price, Janet (eds.): *Vital Signs. Feminist Reconfigurations of the Bio/logical Body*, Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

²¹Norman Davies: *Europe. A History*, London: Pimlico, 1997.

civilized and industrialized; as Dr. Andrew Halliday explained: “We seldom meet with insanity among the savage tribes of men...” (Showalter (1985), p. 24)

The line separating the “nervousness” - the fragility and irrationality – natural to and expected from women within the Victorian frame of thought, and the hysteria that so many women suffered from²² was a fine one, and difficult to define. Since “nervousness”, “weakness of the brain” or “hysteria” was seen as a trait of femininity, *not* to display this weakness was “unfeminine”. Hysteria thus came to constitute the core of a basic dilemma in the Victorian view on women, echoing the Madonna/whore dichotomy: Women are not capable of leading an independent life, because they are essentially hysteric. If they resist this, for instance by acting independently, it will be interpreted as “unfeminine” behaviour caused by hysteria, a sort of personality disorder which must be treated. Hysteria thus becomes a double reason for taking care of women, and for confining them within the ideal of femininity. Furthermore, any extrovert reaction against this view and treatment, in the form of self-assertion or rage, will thus be perceived as hysteria or even madness. Ironically, an introvert reaction provoked by this lack of intellectual stimulation and independence can be illnesses such as depression or eating disorders, which are included in the term hysteria, or actual madness.

Thus, the terms hysteria and madness can be used for controlling women, both if they do act in a “hysterical” way, that is, not in accordance with the ideal of femininity, and if they do not. And this function has survived even to our days, when a woman asserting herself, for instance by entering a heated discussion, can be rejected with the words “no reason to be hysterical” or “you're so sweet when you're angry”. This way of dismissing women when they are assuming traditionally masculine behaviour can still be encountered.

Another function of hysteria being a trait of femininity is that women themselves

²²Women were and still are overrepresented as psychiatric patients, cf. Showalter (1985) p. 52.

use it, more or less consciously, depending on to what degree it has been internalised: The assumption that women are inherently hysterical, or irrational, or weak, poses women with the possibility of taking advantage of it. It *allows* women to be ill; allows women the option of “opting out”, in the words of Kate Brown of *The Summer before the Dark*. It makes it completely acceptable for a woman to ask a man to carry her suitcase, even though she is as strong as he is. And furthermore, in the process of exploiting this possibility, she is also demonstrating her femininity, perhaps even enhancing it. This is a circular process: when women are seen as potentially ill, they can use this resource, which again confirms this image.

1.4.1 *Symptoms, definitions and cures*

Through the ages, symptoms of hysteria have included anything from anaemia, dizziness, insomnia and headaches to more violent symptoms such as depression, self-mutilation and eating disorders. The latter group of symptoms could also be interpreted as madness, along with symptoms such as the wish to leave one's husband, to read or write or express oneself artistically, or displaying “masculine behaviour.” In short, the terms hysteria and madness have been used about any behaviour not conforming to the ideal of femininity, or in some way expressing distress, anger or frustration. Elaine Showalter uses the expression “a wastebasket diagnosis” (Showalter (1985), p. 16), and proposes that a way of looking at hysteria would be not to see it in terms of a list of specific symptoms, but “to see it as plural rather than singular, cyclical rather than linear. [...] Hysteria is a mimetic disorder; it mimes culturally permissible expressions of distress.” (Showalter (1985), p. 15)

Thus, the symptoms vary according to the culture and time. Dowling describes “phobias” or panic attacks (Dowling, ch. 3), and Friedan recounts the “housewife's fatigue” (Friedan, p. 28) both of which comes under this definition of hysteria. Also in

the case of the latter, the symptoms vary:

“During the 1950'es, psychiatrists, analysts, and doctors in all fields noted that the housewife's syndrome seemed to become increasingly pathological. The mild undiagnosable symptoms - bleeding blisters, malaise, nervousness, and fatigue of young housewives – became heart attacks, bleeding ulcers, hyper-tension, broncho-pneumonia; the nameless emotional distress became a psychotic breakdown. Among the new housewife-mothers, in certain sunlit suburbs, this single decade saw a fantastic increase in “maternal psychosis”, mild-to-suicidal depressions or hallucinations over childbirth.” (Friedan, p. 254)

On the basis of this, I will in this thesis apply a broad definition of hysteria and madness, encompassing both of them as two positions on the same spectrum, and including all manifestations from Laura Fairlie's nervousness to Kate Brown's hallucinations. The definition is not only in terms of the symptoms, but also in terms of how they are being perceived by society. Thus for instance the madness of Laura Fairlie is also included in this, despite her being wrongfully confined in the madhouse, because she was defined as mad due to her confinement.

Even though hysteria and madness were seen as female maladies, and essential to the female sex, a variety of cures were developed and applied. In the Victorian period, S. Weir Mitchell's rest cure was popular, and its more crude variant, the confinement in madhouses, was widespread. Also different kinds of surgery, such as clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris), removal of the ovaries, and lobotomy, were performed. In the 20th century electroshock came into use, and as well as lobotomy it was performed well into the 1970'es (cf. Showalter (1985), p. 210). Also an increasing use of medication came to dominate the area.

Regardless of the level of medical research put into these cures, they can and must be interpreted in terms of power. For instance, Showalter describes Dr. Isaac Baker Brown, one of the doctors of the Victorian period who performed clitoridectomy in order to cure what was diagnosed as female insanity:

“[...] he operated on patients as young as ten, on idiots, epileptics, paralytics, even on women with eye problems. He operated five times on women whose madness consisted of their wish to take advantage of the new Divorce Act of 1857, and found in each case that his patient returned humbly to her husband. In no case, Brown claimed, was he so certain of a cure as in nymphomania, for he had never seen a recurrence of the disease after surgery.” (Showalter (1985), p. 76)

The Weir Mitchell rest cure²³ is also reminiscent of torture, and the element of “unpleasantness” was, according to Showalter, indeed seen as part of the cure:

“The Weir Mitchell rest cure, often prescribed for women intellectuals and artists in the United States and England, required the patient to spend six weeks or more in bed without any work, reading or social life, and to gain large amounts of weight on a high-fat diet. Many women found the treatment itself maddening, and indeed Mitchell wanted the treatment to be more unpleasant than the symptoms so that patients would be eager to get out of bed.” (Showalter (1997), pp. 50-51)

The rest cure's silencing and confinement, and the humiliation, mutilation and probable pain involved in the surgery, are inflicted on the women by men who have power over them. And the dilemma of hysteria arises if the woman wants to protest, in that this resistance could be interpreted as just another sign of her mental instability, and thus increase the force or duration of the cure. And in the end this could become a self-fulfilling process, if the women subjected to these “cures” actually end up going mad from them.

This function of madness: to escape from the restrictions of the ideal of femininity into the bliss of “real” madness, is what is described in Charlotte Perkins Gilmore's short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”.²⁴ Here the female protagonist is subjected to the rest cure due to her wish to write and express herself, possibly combined with a postnatal depression. After a number of attempts to negotiate the “cure” with her husband, she ends

²³The exact opposite of the rest cure must be psychoanalysis, slowly emerging in the 1880'es, which was named “the talking cure” by Josef Breuer's and Freud's prominent hysteric patient Anna O., cf. Showalter (1985), p. 155.

²⁴Charlotte Perkins Gilman: “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) in: *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Shorter Fourth Edition*, New York: Norton & Company, 1995.

up hallucinating and drifts into raving madness. Even though the protagonist does not end up succumbing to her husband's demands for her, she does not gain the freedom to lead her life according to her own wishes. She uses this mode of self-destructive protest as a last resort of exercising power over her own life, but without gaining anything beyond escape.

1.4.2 *Hysteria, madness and feminism*

Following from the above, hysteria and madness, in the sense that it was, and is, applied to women, are relative terms. What seems perfectly reasonable to one person, may be perceived as madness by another. And when it is the latter who holds the power of pronouncing the diagnosis, the “cure” comes to function as a punishment. The transgression punished is a transgression of the ideal of femininity, and thus hysteria becomes a revolt against the ideal of femininity, consciously or unconsciously:

”Throughout history, hysteria has served as a form of expression, a body language for people who otherwise might not be able to speak or even to admit what they feel. In the words of Tobert M. Woolsey, hysteria is a ”protolanguage”, and its symptoms are ”a code used by a patient to communicate a message which, for various reasons, cannot be verbalized.” (Showalter (1997), p. 7)

In these terms, hysteria and madness are a “dis-ease” caused by the restrictions of the ideal of femininity; caused by being forced into a narrowly defined matrix. Hysteria and feminism become “two sides of the same coin”. (Showalter (1997), p. 55)

Chapter 2 The Summer before the Dark

2.1 Introduction

The Summer before the Dark is written by Doris Lessing and was first published in 1973. Doris Lessing has written a large number of novels and short-stories, many of which are concerned with women and their problems. Being, as it is, published in 1973, *The Summer before the Dark* deals with the contemporary debate about women's position in society and role in the family. Indeed, the choices which have led the protagonist of the novel to the situation she is in in the novel were made long before the advent of the second wave feminism, but this was all constructed by Lessing in the beginning of the 1970'es, and it is with this in mind that I will analyse the novel.

The novel follows Kate Brown, a housewife of 45, through a summer of change and introspectivity. Faced with a summer without her husband and children, all of whom will be travelling abroad, she is offered a job with an international organisation. Her job in Global Food takes her from London to Turkey, and from there she goes to Spain with Jeffrey, a young man she takes as her lover. He falls ill, and she returns alone to a London hotel, where she lies in bed with a fever for several weeks. When she rises, she is thin, and her clothes do not fit. She rents a room in a basement flat in a poorer part of London with the young woman Maureen, and here she finishes her de- and re-construction of her life, her identity and her role as a woman and mother. At the end of the summer, she leaves Maureen's flat to return to her home and family.

When we first encounter Kate Brown, she is a nice, ordinary, British housewife. In the course of the novel she leaves her home and her role as a wife and mother, sets out on a journey both interior and exterior, and finally returns to her home and family. This is the typical plot outline of a quest novel, a popular form in the 1960'es and 70'es. The

quest novel is an heir of the Bildungsroman, of which Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* are examples²⁵. In the 18th century, when the Bildungsroman became popular, one main reason for its popularity was the fact that it is about "ordinary people", not about kings and queens. The readers could relate to the protagonist and his or her trials and tribulations, and this came to be an important aspect of the modern novel. The quest novel, and indeed the quest novel with a feminist point of view, has a similar function. Through the reader's identification with the protagonist, the quest novel could be used in the process of consciousness raising among women of all social and intellectual levels. The word "quest" is related to the verb "to question", and the quest is not for a holy grail, but for a new understanding of the protagonist's life, identity and/or role in society. By questioning the fundamental aspects of her life, the protagonist breaks loose from the social norms in which she is or feels trapped, and can return to her life more free and on her own terms.

The Summer before the Dark is written as a third person narrative. The narrator is omniscient, but in some cases it is difficult to distinguish whether or not we are reading the voice of the protagonist, as there are many cases of reported inner monologue. The result of this is that the narration is vivid and easy to follow, as it should be in a novel meant for a broad audience.

2.2 Kate embarking on her quest

The novel opens with the words: "A woman stood on her back step, arms folded, waiting." (Lessing, p. 5)²⁶ This very sentence describes Kate's situation at the beginning of the novel. The opening words of the sentence: "A woman" are repeated several times

²⁵Cf. Franco Moretti: *The Way of the World. The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, London: Verso, (1987), 2000.

²⁶Doris Lessing: *The Summer before the Dark*, Reading: Penguin Books, (1973), 1981. All further references to the novel in this chapter will be marked merely by a page number within a parenthesis.

during the first chapter and throughout the novel, and the anonymous use of the indefinite singular suggests that Kate has the function of an "everywoman", and that she herself as a person is insignificant. This I will return to below.

Her position is passive, and this is underlined as she is *waiting* as opposed to acting. Half a page further down, the sentence is repeated, with an addition: "A woman stood on her back doorstep, arms folded, waiting for a kettle to boil." (p. 5) Now her waiting has a purpose, and significantly, she is waiting in connection with doing a household chore. In between the two sentences we are presented with a third person narrative with features of stream-of-consciousness. This tells us that Kate is "trying to catch hold of something, or to lay it bare so that she could look and define; for some time now she had been "trying on" ideas like so many dresses off a rack." (p. 5) We are told that Kate would not call this thinking, but it seems that she is feeling an insecurity as to her position in life, and instinctively she is "trying on" phrases representing different modes of life, such as: "*Ah, yes, first love!... Growing up is bound to be painful!... My first child, you know... But I was in love! Marriage is a compromise... I am not as young as I once was.*", "*I wouldn't like to be a child again!*" (p. 5) and "*Youth is the best time of your life, or Love is a woman's whole existence*" (p. 5) These clichés, which continue to emerge throughout the novel, embed many of the conflicts of Kate's emotional and physical life.

At the beginning of the novel, Kate is only on her way to embark upon her quest. She tries to pinpoint her life and her problems by trying to find a cliché that fits her situation; "trying on" pieces of "common knowledge" and considering what they really mean, and mean to her. The strategy of finding a cliché that fits, and most importantly deciding that that is the one that fits, is related to what Kate calls "false memory", which I will return to below. By this process, Kate is starting to realise her situation, the extent of it, and trying to analyse whether she is satisfied with it or not, and what her

alternatives are - if any. This impulse (what she thinks of as a cold wind blowing from the future) to analyse her life and identity is what starts her on her quest towards an independent identity. That this is the goal of her quest only gradually becomes clear to her, as she begins to realise that her situation is that of an object in other people's lives, not a subject in a life of her own.

Throughout her life, Kate has adopted existing matrices under which she has defined, understood and acted out her life. As a young woman in Portugal she tried on the role of the innocently seductive Latin *femme fatale*. Later that of the liberated woman in an open and modern relationship, in the period before she had children. And for the remaining part of her life, she has acted out the role of dutiful housewife and mother, according to the ideal of femininity. Now that the children have left home and the housewife and mother is no longer needed, she is looking for a new matrix, but in the course of the novel she comes to realise that this time she has to invent it herself, if she wants a role more satisfying than the one she already has.

2.2.1 *Caught in the maternal role*

Kate is a mother of four, and has been a housewife for about 25 years. Now that she is no longer needed in that role, she is discovering to what large degree motherhood is what determines her identity. All her other facets, such as the intellectual academic and the sexual woman, have been swallowed by time.

Ironically, Kate's maternal identity becomes clear to her when she enters the labour market. Although starting out as a simultaneous interpreter, she soon finds herself in a function very similar to the one she filled within her family. Even before the promotion to organiser of conferences, she recognises that she has become the person who gives advice to her colleagues, helps them, takes care of them. Kate likes her job as an interpreter and is good at it, but is quickly promoted to a job which basically is the

function of a carer - within weeks she is back to the maternal role. The question is how this happens. Is it a result of a coincidence, or of an unconscious act on her employers' or her own part? Kate herself asks the question:

"[S]he, Kate, had been promoted: because she had allowed herself to emanate an atmosphere of sympathetic readiness, which had been "picked up" by the bureaucracy of the organization? Were they conscious why they had chosen her to be a group-mother in Turkey? "A warm personality" is what they said. "Sympathetic". *Simpatica*." (p. 41)

And later she answers : "[...]she could swear the people who had engaged her had not any idea of why they were engaging her, why they were so very set on having her." (p. 46)

So, Kate reasons, her employers are hiring her because of her maternal "skills" and training, but without being aware of this. And the reason why they see that she has the necessary skills is that she lets them. Not because she wants to show it, but simply because she is incapable of *not* doing it, after having filled that role for so many years. She has no other role; there is no other dress on the rack for her to slip on. Kate herself realises this:

"This is what women did in families - it was Kate's role in life. [...] *It was a habit she had got into*. She was beginning to see that she could accept a job in this organization, or another like it, for no other reason than that *she was unable to switch herself out of the role of provider of invisible manna, consolation, warmth, "sympathy"*. Not because she needed a job, or wanted to do one. She had been set like a machine by twenty-odd years of being a wife and a mother." (p. 47, my emphasis)

Kate has played the maternal role for so long that she does not know what else to do. She cannot "switch herself out of the role" for which "she had been set like a machine".

Several factors have contributed to her "setting" into that role. One is society, with its norms for women – the ideal of femininity: "(...) she and her contemporaries were machines set for one function, to manage and arrange and adjust and foresee and order and bother and worry and organise. To fuss" (p. 91) Another is her internalisation of the

ideal of femininity, which keeps her in her role.

An alternative interpretation of Kate's quick lapse back into the maternal role at Global Food, would be that Kate herself, more or less unconsciously, has positioned herself (back) into this role, because of her dependency. She can see that she is good at the "real work" of simultaneous interpreting, but due to her having internalised the ideal of femininity she positions herself out of it, and into the well-known maternal role.

Irrespectively of how and why Kate returns to the maternal role at Global Food, her return is presented negatively within the logic of the novel. Kate is on a quest which is supposed to lead beyond the maternal role, and the fact that she now earns a high salary, in fact as much as her husband who is a respected neurologist, and that she is good at the administrative task the job presents her with, is not important. In the logic of the novel, the work Kate does is unimportant because it is maternal. It is "feminine", as opposed to a "masculine" job, which would be connected to producing something or using academic skills, as Kate did as an interpreter.

Also beyond Global Food, Kate is caught within the maternal role. She acknowledges that she feels maternal towards her husband (p. 63), but also in relation to her lover Jeffrey she quickly subsides into a position of carer. She does this at an early stage, by taking the position of the listener towards Jeffrey while he talks about himself (pp. 60-61), and later, when he falls ill and she feels obliged to stay in the Spanish village long after the actual nursing is out of her hands. She plays the role of mother to Maureen as well, but not to a large degree, which signifies that at that point she is moving on towards a more independent identity.

Kate's ongoing dream about the seal also tells a tale about taking care of others. However, if interpreted symbolically, the dream is about Kate learning to take care of herself and seeing and fulfilling her own needs, not those of others. If the seal represents herself and her individuality, she learns in the course of the dream to value herself more

highly than others, including men sexually attracted to her, symbolised in the lover she meets on her way (p. 98). The dream continues as a parallel story throughout the novel, and when Kate is embarking on her quest, the seal is still in her arms, wounded and in need of care. It is in this position that Kate realises that she sees herself as a mother and wife, not a separate individual. Only then can she continue on her quest towards breaking free of that role and finding a separate identity which relates to her as a subject in her own life, not as an object in others'. A person capable of swimming freely in the sea, not having to be carried by others. When the dream ends with Kate reaching the sea and releasing the seal into it, Kate feels that her quest has ended and she is ready to go back to her family.

2.3 Kate's mirror images

In the traditional quest story, the hero encounters a number of helpers who assist him in reaching his goal. In *The Summer before the Dark*, three helpers appear in the form of mirror images of Kate, in different ways reflecting her choices and her position in life, and thus helping her to progress.

Two of these are Mary Finchley and Maureen, Kate's neighbour opposite and friend, and the young woman from whom she rents a room. Both are economically dependent on men, like Kate, but they both lead very independent lives, and hold the absolute power in the relationship with their "providers". Kate uses both of these women to compare her choices and opinions with, and to allow herself to give voice to thoughts and ideas unbecoming or unfamiliar to her. The third mirror image is Jeffrey Merton, her short-time lover. Although he is a man and much younger than her, his situation in life is similar to hers, and she coolly observes his struggle and breakdown before embarking on her own.

2.3.1 *Mary Finchley*

Mary Finchley is in many ways Kate's opposite. But Kate also uses her to constitute an opposite onto whom she can project thoughts and ideas which she cannot face that she has herself. In this way, Mary herself, as well as Kate's notion of Mary, helps Kate in her "trying on new ideas", as she lets Kate broaden her imaginative range and conceptual universe.

For instance, when Kate has been employed by Global Food, she reflects on Mary's reaction: "In fact she had been annoyed by her old friend's reaction to the news of this new job. It had been the jolly laugh which had always seemed crude to Kate, and: "Well, thank God for that. And about time too!" (pp. 37-38). Kate has agreed with her husband that it was a good thing that she stayed at home as a housewife, even though it was not absolutely necessary any more because the children have grown up. However, Kate, by contemplating Mary's reaction, can voice the opposite view: that Kate should have entered the labour market, or in some other way used her intellectual resources, a long time ago.

Kate thinks of Mary not only in terms of what Mary has said, but also in terms of what she *would* have said, or done, had she been in Kate's situation. At one point when Kate is contemplating her relationship with her husband she asks herself: "But why should that matter? Mary would have yelled with laughter at the suggestion that it should. (She was thinking more of Mary now than she did when she lived opposite to her.)" (p. 66) So Kate is using her idea of Mary, of the wild, liberated, sexual woman free of social conventions, to confront herself with alternative ways of leading her own life.

Kate does this partly unconsciously, but registers that (her mental image of) Mary intrudes and contradicts when she is reflecting upon her life. Also in the instance of Kate contemplating married life which is quoted below, Mary is very much present:

"This is something no married woman does (Except Mary!) But look what her family went through because of it - no, she was not to be envied, not copied; she probably ought not even to be listened to, let alone enjoyed for roaring sessions of laughter and old wives' talk. Never mind about Mary. No, *really* married women set their thermostat for Tom, Dick and Harry (In discussions on this theme with Michael both were pretty definite on what being *really* married meant.) Not if she wishes to stay married. (Or doesn't mind being like Mary, whose life for the fifteen years Kate had known her had been like a French farce - toned down, of course, for the mild airs of South London.) For what Kate did know, did indeed know, was that not every marriage was a real marriage, and that such marriages were getting rarer and rarer. She was lucky in hers. If you wished to use words like "luck" instead of giving yourself credit for being, and continuing to be (despite Mary), the sort of woman who is really married to a real husband. Being a partner in this sort of marriage means that one cannot adjust the thermostat in any way but one. Except of course for those brief and unimportant occasions that Mary so derided, because she said they provided the maximum amount of misery with the minimum of pleasure... If she was not able to think seriously about her marriage without Mary Finchley coming in at every moment, then she had better stop thinking altogether." (pp. 38-39)

In the course of the 261 words, Mary is mentioned 6 times, in almost every other sentence. Kate tries to dismiss Mary's view, but the more she does it, the more present it becomes. She finally ends her discussion because she is not able to avoid Mary's opposite view and does not like the confrontation.

As Kate becomes more conscious of her role and identity, she begins to see how she uses her image of Mary. As a result of this process, she begins to acknowledge "Mary's view" as her own, becoming a little less certain of her own points of view. Kate explains this to Maureen:

"Every time I do anything - or *don't* do anything, that's more it, I like the look of a man and think: I wouldn't mind him but of course I'd never do anything about it - then I think of Mary. At one time thinking of Mary was a kind of comfort and support - I'd think I'm much better and finer-feeling and sensitive than that irresponsible creature. But now I wonder." (p. 215)

However, within Kate Mary also represents a force which holds Kate in her place. Mary functions as Kate's Other, as she represents everything that Kate is not. This also means

that as long as Mary holds these values and modes of life, Kate must provide a counterweight to them, being forced by the balance of their relationship to stay the same. So when Kate after her illness, now thin and worn, returns to her home road and Mary does not recognise her, "She realized that she was relieved that Mary did not know her. More: she was elated, as if she had been set free of something." (p. 141) Kate discovers that she is held in her role and position in life not only by herself but also by other people's views upon her. And now she realises that these can actually be easily dissolved: "Far from being saddened by it, she was delighted, she felt quite drunk with relief that friendship, ties, "knowing people", were so shallow, easily disproved." (p. 144)

With Mary, Kate takes her first steps towards the deconstruction of her life and role. This they do in what Kate terms the "cow-sessions", which take place a whole year prior to the summer in which the novel takes place. Maybe because she senses their importance, Kate refers to the cow-sessions as if they were an often recurring phenomenon, but actually there were only two of them (cf. p. 142) At the cow-sessions Kate and Mary are ridiculing the established values of their world; the very corner stones of Kate's way of life:

"They were deliberately searching for the words that could release the laughter, and soon quite ordinary words were doing this, not only the jargon like "parent-and-child confrontation", "syndrome", "stress situation", but even "sound", "ordered", "healthy", and so on. And then they were shrieking at "family", and "home", and "mother", and "father"." (p. 143)

And the cow-sessions are described as "a ritual, like the stag parties of suburban men in which everything their normal lives are dedicated to upholding is spat on, insulted, belittled." (p. 143) But at the second cow-session Kate suddenly falls silent, perhaps suddenly realising that the concepts they are deconstructing are not open to discussion within the frame of her current way of life. She is at this point not yet ready to challenge her way of life.

2.3.2 *Maureen*

Maureen, being much younger than Kate, represents the younger generation, the future. Maureen is facing the question of marriage, as Kate did when she was young, and because of her youth, Maureen is in the process of establishing her identity. However, even though Maureen is looking forward and Kate is looking back, both are facing the same problems, as Kate is revising her marriage and trying to rebuild or rethink her identity. Both are facing the same questions and dilemmas of femininity, of being a woman.

Kate can see her own problems reflected in Maureen's, but Maureen also functions as a sort of "neutral ground" for Kate. Since Maureen does not know Kate and her "old" identity and personality when they meet, Maureen does not take as much for granted as for instance Kate's family would. Thus, in her relation to Maureen, Kate is allowed, or can allow herself, to break free of her old norms and modes of behaviour. Because Maureen does not know Kate, she can ask Kate questions that it takes a total outsider to ask, such as "Are you sorry you married?" (p. 173). These questions force Kate to continue with the analysis of her life, also into areas that are fundamental and may be unpleasant to consider.

From her encounter with Mary discussed above, Kate begins to see identity as role-playing, dressing up, an acting out of random parts. This Maureen takes for granted and continually explores. She can change her clothes several times a day, and her clothes are almost costumes, and very different from each other. She is literally trying on different identities like clothes off a rack:

"The next day Maureen said she wanted to buy a dress: she had clothes in heaps all over her room. She went out behind heavy dark-glasses, in search of a fresh identity, or mask. Or uniform? She could come back as anything at all; she might just as well be wearing a nun's habit as a belly-dancer's... Envy, oh yes, this was envy all right. Maureen could choose to dress as a gipsy, or as a young boy, or a

matron, in the course of a day: it was some kind of freedom." (p. 206)

Kate is considering the fact that Maureen does this, and why. She tries to compare it to her year in Portugal as a young woman, where she wore the white dress of the innocent beautiful heart-breaker, but concludes that that was nothing as drastical as what Maureen is doing.

"So if the girl was putting on the clothes of the circumscribed women of the past, out of need to be like them - because being herself was too much of a strain? - then it was never for long, and she indulged in another change of mood... Why did she, Kate, use words like "indulged": because for years her own fantasies had had to be muted to what the family could stand in her? There was nothing in the world to stop her going out now, and buying her fantasies, and wearing them there, in Maureen's flat." (p. 207)

Two aspects are interesting in this passage. Firstly, that Kate realises that Maureen's change of clothes may sometimes be because she cannot stand being herself. Secondly, Kate realises that she can have the same freedom as Maureen, but nevertheless she limits it to be acted out inside Maureen's flat. Of course, objectively speaking, Kate could perfectly well dress up in some obscure dress and promenade the streets, as Maureen does, but she cannot take her new-found freedom that far. The act of dressing up differently all by herself is drastic enough.

Nevertheless, Maureen is considering to settle into one role: that of a married woman. She is wondering *whom* to marry rather than *whether* to marry. Maureen recognises that she may be doing what Kate once did: that she is on her way to slipping into the ready-made matrix of the ideal of femininity instead of going through the invention and assertion of an independent personality, and she is struggling against this: "I want a uniform, don't I. I'm probably longing for one. Well, I'm not going to!" (p. 206) Kate witnesses Maureen's struggle, which again forces her to reflect upon her own marriage and role.

Kate sees Maureen as a reflection of herself, but Maureen also reflects herself in

Kate. When Maureen returns to the flat after having decided to marry Philip, she finds Kate in the middle of making arrangements to return to her home. In Kate's organising the cleaners, the groceries, the keys, Maureen catches a glimpse of what she may become through marriage and breaks off the engagement. To Kate she says: "'I'd do anything, I'd live alone for *always* rather than turn into *that*.'" (p. 193) This again influences Kate, who sees how easily she can lapse back into her old role. Kate realises that her quest is not yet finished, and that she is not yet ready to return to her home.

The question is, why Maureen feels drawn towards marriage in the first place. When Maureen breaks off the engagement with Philip, she says to Kate:

"I'm not going to be like you - it's my responsibility, saying no. I'm not going to be like my mother. You're maniacs. You're mad." "Yes," said Kate. "I know it. And so you won't be. The best of luck to you. And what are you going to be instead?" (p. 195)

This suggests that Maureen has no realistic alternatives. She may be able to live the independent life she does as long as she is young, but when entering the world of adulthood, she really has no choice. This may be Kate's or even Lessing's critique of society: that there is only room for women who live according to the ideal of femininity. But it may also be a demonstration of how the internalisation works. Maureen has, like Kate, been raised with the ideal of femininity as the norm, and even though she is struggling to avoid it, it is so deeply rooted in her that she will eventually force herself into the accepted role of wife and mother. It is because Maureen too is a victim of the internalisation of the ideal of femininity that she is drawn to marriage.

Kate refuses to give Maureen advice as to whom she should choose for her husband. That Kate refuses to give advice to Maureen could be because she sees herself as having failed and thus not in a position to give advice to others. Or it could be because she resigns herself when faced by the ideal of femininity in action. Maybe Maureen's desire for marriage is so deeply rooted that Kate cannot bear to influence her. Or it may

just be because she realises that even though they belong to the same sex and the same culture, they live in different worlds due to their belonging to different generations, and so Kate cannot possibly know what would be the best for Maureen to do. A last reason for Kate not wanting to advise Maureen could be that Kate is now beginning to learn that one has to choose for oneself, instead of being chosen for, and she is thus trying to force Maureen into making her choices on her own. In that way, Kate hands down her newly acquired experience to Maureen.

2.3.3 *Jeffrey Merton*

Jeffrey Merton, Kate's young lover with whom she goes to Spain, functions as a third mirror image, though less predominant than the other two. Jeffrey is having problems deciding on which path to choose in life, and the nature of Jeffrey's problems is opposite to Kate's to such a degree that they appear similar. While he is expected to have a career, she is and was expected not to. He is expected to act, by concentrating on a career, but is not, while Kate is expected not to act, but is travelling Europe. Thus Jeffrey is also in many ways caught in a web of gender roles and social norms. But we do not hear much about this subplot, and Jeffrey's story never comes to a close, as Kate leaves him in the convent and does not hear from him in the remains of the novel. The fact that Jeffrey's problems mirror Kate's, irrespective of their differences in generation and gender, suggests that their problems at some level are not tied to age or gender, but may be applied to everyone's life.

Jeffrey is having to choose what to do with his life, and Kate reflects on this that: "Yes, but *he's got to choose* either one or the other, he's got to be a lawyer or a vagabond, *for no other reason than that he sees it as a choice*." (p. 114, my emphasis) This is what Kate is beginning to do as well, in the Spanish village. She is beginning to see that she has actually got a choice as to how to lead her life. And because she now acknowledges

this choice to be an option, she has to make the choice.

Also in his illness, Jeffrey is a mirror image of Kate. When Jeffrey runs a fever and stops eating, Kate diagnoses his illness as the "condition of *opting out*" (p. 108), that is, as psycho-somatic. This is a diagnosis similar to the one she applies to herself in the hotel later on. But Jeffrey's falling ill has a direct influence on Kate, as it sets off her interior journey, which she has felt coming on for perhaps three years. Stranded in the Spanish village she has absolutely nothing to do, and is thus forced into beginning the analysis of herself and her life.

2.4 Internalisation & femininity

In the course of the novel, Kate deconstructs her identity and role, and with that her femininity. She does this in two steps. Firstly, by acknowledging that she has constructed it and maintained it by internalisation, which she refers to as "false memory". Secondly, by realising and recognising what functions have held it together; that is, why she has constructed it in the first place. In the course of this process she analyses what this has meant to her life. After having deconstructed her role and identity of the past 25 years, she reconstructs her (new) identity, by re-telling and re-membering her life and identity, much of which she does in relation to the unprejudiced Maureen.

2.4.1 "False memory" - constructing identity

Throughout the novel, Kate refers to the term "false memory". "False memory" is Kate's unconscious efforts to make her life match the ideal. Or in postmodern terms: "False memory" is a tool which Kate uses for narrating and thus constructing her reality into matching the ideal. The result of this is that she avoids confrontation with any aspect of her life which does not comply with her projection of the ideal life and identity. When the novel opens, Kate is slowly starting to realise that this is what she does; that she is

shaping her reality and making it conform with what she has decided are her ideals, by sorting in her memories, removing those which contradict her ideal, and even adding some that support the ideal.

Kate becomes aware that she is manipulating reality when she is quoting clichés to herself in the passage from the first page of the novel, quoted in the beginning of this chapter. She suggests the clichés of common knowledge to herself in order to justify the life she is leading, and the role she is playing. Seeing that this is what she does, trying to accommodate her life to the clichés instead of actually considering her life as it is, she bursts out:

"I'm telling myself the most dreadful lies! Awful! Why do I do it? There's something here that I simply will not let myself look at. Sometimes with Mary I get near to it, but never with anyone else. *Now*, look at it all, try and get a hold of it, don't go on making up all these attitudes, these stories - stop taking down the same old dresses off the rack..." (p. 15).

She is "taking the same old dresses off the rack", using clichés to support her projection of life, instead of trying on new ideas, ideals, ways of thinking and seeing herself.

This way of shaping reality is also part of how her family works. Both her relations with her husband and with the rest of the family are based on discussing and analysing any disturbance that the smooth surface may undergo. Emotions are being rationalised and intellectualised in the midst of the family, leaving no space for irrationality. This maintaining of the role has been carried out mainly by Kate herself; she has been the master instrument of her own submission to her role. She now realises that she has been using "false memory" to avoid acknowledging that her role within the family has been long played out:

"The fact was, the picture or image of herself, as the warm centre of the family, the source of invisible emanations like a queen termite, was two or three years out of date. (Was there something wrong with her memory perhaps? It was seeming more and more as if she had several sets of memory, each contradicting the

others.)" (p. 52)

She has also manipulated her relationship with her husband, instead of acknowledging that it may not be as satisfying as she would like it to be. In the following example she is not aware that she is using "false memory": "[...] she had not been much liking the way her husband was dressing these days, or the way he cut his hair. But better not think about that, for after all it wasn't important." (p. 20) Instead of asking herself why she is not satisfied with her husband in this area, and whether this might be the case in other areas as well, she dismisses the thought before it takes root. As Kate analyses this strategy, she becomes aware of how often she uses it, and forces herself to acknowledge her emotions instead of rationalising them away, as in this passage in which she is thinking about when her husband was attracted to Mary: "Kate had even been a little jealous - damn it, she was doing it again, using false memory: the truth was she had burned with jealousy, had made herself ill with it." (p. 141)

The question one must raise here, in line with my critique of Friedan and Dowling, is whether it is possible to lead a life without to some degree using a form of "false memory". In the novel "false memory" is presented as self-deception, a way of repressing one's "real" or "true" emotions and impulses, even one's "true" identity. But one could argue that this always takes place, that this is necessary if one seeks to lead a coherent life. There will always be some degree of rationalising emotions, of considering and dismissing impulses and justifying actions and thoughts to oneself; this may well be a condition of the conscious mind. The argument against this is that in Kate's case the use of "false memory" is so extreme that she cannot trust her own thoughts, and has locked herself into a situation where she is unable to reflect on her life and way of living.

Furthermore, in order to see the rest of her argument through, Lessing needs to present "false memory" in this somewhat narrow way. Then the rest of the argument is clear: that "false memory" is a part of making one's life concord with the socially

constructed gender norms of society.

During her quest, Kate is analysing and deconstructing those social norms which make up the image of the good wife and mother – the ideal of femininity. She realises that this role she has been playing all these years is exactly that, a role, and that, like Jeffrey, she has got a choice as to whether to play the role or not. She begins seeing this at Global Food, sitting in at the coffee tables:

"Soon she discovered that if she wanted to be alone, she should sit badly, in a huddled or discouraged posture, and allow her legs to angle themselves unbecomingly. If she did this men did not see her. She could swear they did not. Sitting neatly, alertly, with her legs sleekly disposed, she made a signal.[...] It was a matter only of a bad posture, breasts allowed to droop, and a look of "Yes, if you *have* to" and people did not see her. It gave her a dislocated feeling, as if something had slipped out of alignment. [...] This is what it must feel to be an actor, an actress - how very taxing that must be, a sense of self kept burning behind so many different phantasms." (pp. 44-45)

Yes, it must be taxing, and Kate starts realising that it has been difficult to retain a sense of self and individuality behind the acting out of the role of wife and mother. She feels how she is de-centred, she sees that her self is out of focus; what really matters is the role she chooses, more or less consciously, to present to the world.

Kate adopted the role of mother and wife because she did not see that she had any other option. And moreover, she did not seek another option, because the role came to her slowly as her family grew. Her life with four children, combined with her upbringing, shaped her into the role, which she now, on her quest, realises is not necessarily the only option, nor a "natural" one, and whether her choice of role was good or bad can actually be discussed:

"With three small children, and then four, she had had to fight for qualities that had not been even in her vocabulary. Patience. Self-discipline. Self-control. Self-abnegation. Chastity. Adaptability to others - this above all. This always. [...] But virtues? Really? Really virtues? If so, they had turned on her, had become

enemies. Looking back from the condition of being an almost middle-aged wife and mother to her condition as a girl when she lived with Michael, it seemed to her that she had acquired not virtues but a form of dementia." (p. 89)

She now starts to realise that what she used to see as virtues, because they are an integrated part of the ideal of femininity, may be seen as vices. They are vices, both in her relation to others, as all she can do is fuss over her children and feel maternal to her husband. But also to herself, always feeling guilty towards her family, and frustrated with her life. She now sees that she is caught in this limited role, and that she is turning into a middle-aged woman, about whom she thinks that: "the faces and movements of most middle-aged women are those of prisoners and slaves." (p. 90)

This new insight leads to fundamental questions about Kate's femininity, indeed her very personality, which she has built up during her entire life. Now her focus has shifted, and: "Looking back over nearly a quarter of a century, she saw that that had been the characteristic of her life - passivity, adaptability to others." (p. 21). This passivity with which the novel begins, which is inherent in the dependency of the ideal of femininity, follows her through her quest. It is what lets Jeffrey take her to Spain, and what keeps her at the London hotel for weeks. Not until she rents the room with Maureen does she *act*; she actively takes charge of her own life. "She knew now, she had to know at last, that all her life she had been held upright by an invisible fluid, the notice of other people." (p. 171) Kate realises that she is only fulfilled when she feels other people's attention upon her, but also that she has internalised this as well. The external gaze, other people's point of view, has become her own. This is represented by the mirror in front of which she finds herself several times during the novel, inspecting which image she presents to the surrounding world:

"Long ago, a young girl lay on her bed, with a hand-mirror held close to her face, and she was thinking: That is what *he* is going to see. What *he* very shortly did see was a face that could only be described as "elfin" or "piquant", despite eyes of a depth of brown that could not be anything else but a spaniel's. For years Kate,

who spent the requisite amount of time in front of many different mirrors, had been able to see exactly what *he* was seeing, when his face was close above hers. Oh, it was all so wearying, so humiliating... Had she really spent so many years of her life - it would almost certainly add up to years! - in front of a looking-glass? Just like all women. Years spent asleep, or tranced. [...] For the whole of her life, or since she was sixteen - yes, the girl making love to her own face had been that age - she had looked into mirrors and seen what other people would judge her by. And now the image had rolled itself up and thrown itself into a corner, leaving behind the face of a sick monkey." (pp. 152-153)

This is a point in Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*. Since adolescence, Kate has defined herself in terms of what others see when they look at her, and hence always tried to live up to the standards and norms of beauty defined by society. She now discovers that she can dress up or refrain from doing so as she chooses, and in experimenting with this she also discovers that how she is dressed influences how people treat her, and that this again makes her behave in a certain way:

"A woman walking in a sagging dress, with a heavy walk, and her hair - this, above all - not conforming to the prints made by fashions, is not "set" to attract men's sex. The same woman in a dress cut in this or that way, walking with her inner thermostat set just so - and click, she's fitting the pattern. Men's attention is stimulated by signals no more complicated than what leads the gosling; and for all her adult life, her sexual life, let's say from twelve onwards, she had been conforming, twitching like a puppet to those strings... next day [...] Kate wore the dark-green dress and was Mrs. Michael Brown all day, for with the mask, the charade, the fitting of herself to the template, came the old manner, the loving lovely Mrs. Kate Brown, whom the shopkeepers served with a smile, and waiters liked to hover over." (pp. 176-177)

Kate realises that the role she is dressing up to play has become internalised to such a degree that she does not *play* the role, she *is* the role, defined by society, by other people's reactions to her, instead of by her own desires, wants and needs.

Kate's passivity and dependency are symbolised by her name, or rather her names. In post-colonial theory *naming* is seen as a central means of objectifying and taking something into possession, which is what has happened to Kate. Her birth name is Catherine Ferreira, the last name being the Portuguese word for blacksmith. This may

suggest a romantic connection to the rural; definitely the common and non-distinct "Brown" does not. Her first name brings to mind Catherine of the gothic romance novel *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brönte, but also significantly the heroine of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. In this novel, Catherine is shortened to the easily shoutable shorthand "Kate", and thus her name is reduced by marriage to a functional minimum. She is also Mrs. Michael Brown, which is the ultimate objectifying and possession. In this she is only defined in terms of being her husband's wife, not in any way as being an individual.²⁷

2.4.2 Re-membering - reconstructing identity

In recounting the construction of her identity as a woman and mother, Kate simultaneously deconstructs it, and must now reconstruct her identity to fit her new situation in life. She does this by narrating her past to Maureen, and by re-telling she is re-membering parts of her past memories into the new identity she is constructing.

“Kate began telling things out of her past. She could not remember how they had begun on this, but soon it was how they were spending their days. Her memories were not the kind of thing that had struck her before as important or even as interesting: now she was assessing them before Maureen's reactions. It almost seemed as if the things she remembered were because of Mureen's interest – Maureen's need? It was Maureen who was doing the choosing?” (p. 210)

In her re-membering her past, Kate uses Maureen to reflect herself upon. She borrows Maureen's open-mindedness and freedom from conventions to see her life in a new light, and thus reconstructs her identity to fit her new circumstances, wants and needs.

However, as was the case with her old identity, constructed by the use of “false memory”, the re-membering of her past also consists of omissions. Kate tells Maureen

²⁷This echoes the scene in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, in which the protagonist Esther Greenwood is asked by her boyfriend if she would like to become “Mrs. Buddy Willard?” (p. 98). She rejects the proposal. Sylvia Plath: *The Bell Jar*, London: Faber and Faber, (1963), 1999.

about the happy memories of spontaneity when she was still young and her children small, but she does not re-member the pain of discovering Michael's infidelity, for example. So Kate's reconstruction of her identity is a construction as well as her former identity was, as it involves not only re-membering but also omissions.

So what is the difference between Kate's old and her newly constructed identity, one might ask, seeing that both are constructs. As I touched upon above, the concept of an identity without more or less conscious constructions and omissions would be naive, but one could argue that in constructing her new identity Kate is contributing more to the shaping of it, instead of adopting one already fixed by society. Furthermore, whereas her former identity in the end was decades out of date, this one is constructed to fit Kate's present circumstances which she may now be capable of seeing in a clearer and more honest light.

2.5 Hysteria and madness

2.5.1 Hysteria

The illness that forces Kate to stay in the London hotel is easily defined as psycho-somatic – or hysteric. The doctors are unable to diagnose her, despite of her symptoms of nausea and throwing up. The functions of Kate's illness are clear. Firstly, she escapes her role or personality by escaping her body, which is altered when she loses weight. This leads for instance to Mary not being able to recognise her. Secondly, she escapes or avoids having to decide how to lead her life. Or in the terms of the previous section, Kate avoids the decisions involved in having to re-construct her identity. In short, she is opting out, just as Jeffrey did.

Kate herself sees that her illness is psycho-somatic, when she speaks to Marie, the young woman who is taking care of her in the hotel:

”[Marie] said that Madame did not have a temperature, but perhaps she was

worried about something? This made Kate laugh, and they both laughed, Kate's tailing off in a tearful wail that was like a demand for instant love. There was nothing wrong with her; both of them thought this. Yes she was light-headed, nauseous, and the flesh was melting off her." (p. 138)

So even though she does have symptoms, they are not a sign that she has a physical illness, but her body expressing her mental strain.

Significant in this quote is that Kate's laugh was "tailing off in a tearful wail that was like a demand for instant love." Through her illness, Kate allows herself to be taken care of. The roles are reversed, as she takes the position of the child in need of mothering, and this position she only gradually lets go of, after she has rented the room with Maureen. Here she starts eating again, and the first she eats is babyfood, offered to her by Maureen. Later they eat "nursery food" (p. 211), as if she is to slowly recover from the effort of breaking free of her maternal role.

This is exactly what Dowling warns about (cf. section 1.3.1): that women, instead of taking charge of their own life, regress to a child-like state, in which they are being taken care of by others. However, Kate realises that: "[...] being so long in that hotel, being looked after by Silvia, by Marie, had done her no good at all. She had been returned to childishness, she needed to have someone's flattering attention all the time" (p. 163), and she starts taking her life into her own hands, starts to act.

2.5.2 *Madness*

In the novel two different kinds of madness occur. One is the traditional one, in the sense of breaking with social conventions and not being able to control oneself. This Kate experiences the first time she enters the world in her new shape after her illness in the hotel. She is thin and haggard, her clothes do not fit, and she has lost the looks and ways of the respectable upper middle-class woman. She goes to the theatre, and suddenly sees everything in another light. During her stay at the hotel, and through her change in

appearance, she has become alienated from her own culture, and sees people as animals - as fundamentally different from herself. She reacts to this by acting in a mad way: muttering and talking aloud, even shouting, to the people in the audience and the actors on the stage.

The other type of madness is one to which Kate repeatedly refers during the novel, when looking back at her life. She recalls her way of behaving, which now strikes her as mad, the behaviour of a lunatic. An example of this is when she looks back at her fight with her youngest son, when he told her that she was suffocating him with her fussing attention: "[S]he was able to look at herself, the worrying woman at whom the boy had shouted, as a creature who had been really mad. Crazy." (p. 92) Another type of acting that she now looks back upon as madness, is that of striving to live up to "The Beauty Myth", for instance by colouring her hair. Now the grey is emerging from under the red dye, and she "...looked at the grey, encouraging it to grow, fast, to spread, to banish the dye with the truth, "oh, no, never again, I must have been mad."" (s. 199).

Kate now sees this madness to have been an imprisonment, caused by her (false) memories, her internalisation of the ideal of femininity. This, at some level self-chosen, confinement within one role she sees already in the Spanish village when she meets a nun:

"This bride of Christ smiled at Kate; Kate smiled back. Mad, she was thinking. All of us, the whole bloody parcel of us, the whole thing, crazy, men and women both, we're all mad, and don't know it. Here was this woman in her self-chosen prison, here was she, a prisoner of her memories [...]" (p. 123).

But Kate knows that the alternative to this madness is difficult. So even though she is revising her former way of living, she is also longing for it, for the security and comfort of it, "[w]hich her mind was judging as being a kind of madness." (p. 121) Nevertheless, she is moving towards a future which differs from her past:

"The future was not going to be a continuation of the immediate past, with this summer seeming in retrospect like an unimportant hiatus. No, the future would continue from where she had left off as a child. For it was seeming to her more and more (because of this sexuality, something displaced, like an organ lifted out of her body and laid by her side to look at, like a deformed child without function or future or purpose) as if she were just coming round from a spell of madness that had lasted all the years since that point in early adolescence when her nature had demanded she must get herself a man (she had put it romantically then, of course) until recently, when the drug had begun to wear off. All those years now seeming like a betrayal of what she really was. While her body, her needs, her emotions - all of herself - had been turning like a sunflower after one man, all that time she had been holding in her hands something else, the something precious, offering it in vain to her husband, to her children, to everyone she knew - but it had never been taken, had not been noticed. But this thing she had offered, without knowing she was doing it, which had been ignored by herself and by everyone else, was what was real in her." (pp. 120-121)

The puzzling thing about this paragraph is that the reason for Kate's "madness" is explained as being rooted in "her nature" which "had demanded she must get herself a man". This indicates that the act of conforming to social norms is in some way innate, and not to be escaped. However, since the behaviour that Kate now looks back upon as madness is perfectly ordinary for the role and position she was in, her critique of the social norms must be not of herself, but of society. A possible conclusion to this is that Kate - or Lessing - is blaming the combination of being forced by innate instinct to find a mate, and what norms society then lays down on this. That is, blaming society for the frame it offers within which a woman can act out her innate desire for "getting herself a man". These different interpretations point towards that it is possible to view the entire novel both as an optimistic and a pessimistic novel.

2.6 *The Summer before the Dark* – a pessimistic novel?

The question that strikes one when reading *The Summer before the Dark* is whether or not it should be read as a pessimistic comment on the role of women in society and the changes that took place in the 1970's. The ambiguous ending and the somewhat cryptic

title could be interpreted both ways. Furthermore, if Kate Brown is to be seen as an allegory of all women, as an “everywoman”, as has been suggested by many critics (cf. Draine, p. 114²⁸) the novel becomes a general statement – positive or negative - about women's role in society.

2.6.1 The title: “*The Summer before the Dark*”

An obvious interpretation of the title is that “the dark” refers to old age, in which a woman according to the ideal of femininity is useless, since she can no longer inhabit the roles of a mother and a sexual object. Hence, the title works as a heading for the novel, which is the last summer in Kate's life, both in the literal sense and in the sense of a time of light and warmth, before she will be swallowed by the darkness of old age. This very negative interpretation of the title and thus the novel has been disputed by many critics, who do not feel that this corresponds with the general tone of the novel.

Susan M. Klein²⁹ refers to Linda Chown's suggestion that “the dark” is to be seen as a positive image of wisdom in accordance with eastern philosophy. However, I do not find it very plausible that Lessing should make use of a system of symbols which her core readers – western women – cannot be expected to be familiar with.

However, Klein proposes another reading of the title, suggesting that “the summer” refers not to the one in which the novel takes place, but the one Kate spent with her grandfather in Portugal as a young girl. Hence, “the dark” refers not to her future, but to her period of being a wife and mother. This results in an optimistic interpretation of the novel as a whole, as it comes to be about moving out of the dark, not into it.

Another optimistic interpretation is that of Betsy Draine, who suggests that the

²⁸Betsy Draine: *Substance under Pressure. Artistic Coherence and Evolving Form in the Novels of Doris Lessing*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983.

²⁹Susan M. Klein: “First and Last Words: Reconsidering the Title of *The Summer before the Dark*”, in: *CRITIQUE*, Spring 2002, vol. 43, Iss.3: pp. 228-238.

title refers to Kate's perception of her life, this summer being the last bright time of her life before being swallowed by the darkness of old age. However, Kate's view changes during the novel, and after having set the seal – symbolising her newborn, individual personality – free into the sea, “[s]he was no longer anxious about the seal, that it might be dead or dying: she knew that it was full of life, and, like her, of hope.” (p. 227) Kate emerges from the summer full of hope, and now sees her future in a positive light, not as darkness. In Draine's words: “The ageing process may have seemed all darkness and loss; here, at the end, it shows itself – surprisingly – to be light and gain instead.” (Draine, p. 129). So in Draine's interpretation, the title should be read as a question, to which the answer turns out to be “no”.

2.6.2 *The ending: Kate returning to her family*

The interpretation of the title must depend on how one interprets the entire novel, and most importantly the ending. As well as the title, the meaning of the ending is ambiguous, especially because it is in contrast to the somewhat typical 1970's story: Contrary to what one would expect of a novel about a woman breaking free of her role in society, the novel ends with Kate leaving Maureen's flat to return to her home and family.

This may be seen as an anti-climax, the novel having built up to Kate's breaking free of her former life, and can easily be seen as a puzzlingly pessimistic ending. It seems to imply that all of Kate's struggling has been worthless, and that the quest has only been one of self-deception. The subplot of Maureen can be seen to support this view of the novel. The implication of the novel's final pages that Maureen will marry one of her three stylised suitors: the hippie, the fascist and the aristocrat, can be interpreted as pessimism on behalf of Lessing: that not even the younger generation can break free of the ideal of femininity.

The question which remains with the reader is why Kate returns to her home. She

is not passionately in love with her husband, and she does not feel appreciated by her children, who do not need her any more. Furthermore, she seems to have acquired a new independence which could enable her to lead a life on her own. However, several reasons for Kate's return can be thought of.

In the interpretation of the novel as a pessimistic statement, the obvious reason for Kate's return is that she does not have an actual choice to do otherwise. Kate accepts that the ideal of femininity is so deeply rooted in her that she cannot escape it. She is disillusioned by Maureen's failure to escape the ideal of femininity, and returns to her home to face her destiny of a woman fading into the darkness of old age. In Kate's own words: "I'm unemployed! There's nothing for me to do. What do you advise? Social work? Soup kitchens?" (p. 228)

Another interpretation in the same strand is that Kate deliberately chooses to return to her old way of life, because she feels comfortable and secure in it. Even though she now sees that it is only one of several ways of being a woman, she chooses the role she was trained to fill. She thus stays in the matrix she has always inhabited, but now it is as the result of a conscious choice; what Betty Friedan refers to as "the mistaken choice" (cf. section 1.3.2).

However, the ending can be, and indeed has been, interpreted optimistically as well. The return of Kate to her home can be seen as the return of a changed woman, going home to alter her life. This is symbolised by her hair, which she now refuses to dye and cut:

"The light that is the desire to please had gone out. And about time too... Her hair – well. no one could overlook that! Her experiences of the last months – her discoveries, her self-definition, what she hoped was now strengths – were concentrated here: here she would walk into her home with her hair undressed, with her hair tied straight back for utility; rough and streaky, and the widening grey band showing like a statement of intent." (p. 230)

Kate is hoping that she has gained new strengths, and returns with an intention to make use of them. But nevertheless, her return is an ambiguous one, and the extent of Kate's change is not clear, even to herself:

"Going back home, the way I'm going to make statements - though I'm not quite sure what about. But my area of choice - do you know what I mean? - well, it's narrowed down to how I do my hair? Isn't that extraordinary?" (p. 231)

Draine interprets Kate's return to her home in terms of the novel being a quest novel. In this light Kate's return is inevitable in order to maintain the structure of the quest, and she returns changed to an altered situation, not to her initial outset:

"Kate returns home, with the wisdom of old age to guide her in the conduct of a battle beyond the scope of the novel – the struggle to maintain and expand her new identity as she fulfils (or divests herself of) the responsibilities that she inherits from her former self." (Draine, p. 129)

A further argument in favour of a positive interpretation of the novel's ending, which Draine also points to, is the ending of Kate's dream. It is light and calm, and Kate is feeling "a fresh, warm breeze" (p. 227) instead of the cold wind she has been feeling before. When she has released the seal into the water, it swims away.

"Her journey was over. She saw that the sun was in front of her, not behind, not far behind, under the curve of the earth, which was where it had been for so long. She looked at it, a large, light, brilliant, buoyant, tumultuous sun that seemed to sing." (p. 228)

Several other interpretations of the novel have been put forward, for instance by Lorelei Cederstrom³⁰ who calls it "Doris Lessing's most misunderstood novel" (Cederstrom, p. 151), and interprets it in terms of satire. In my opinion, the number of different possible interpretations is itself the main point of the novel. Had Lessing wanted the novel to be obviously optimistic or pessimistic she could have made it so, but in its present form its

³⁰Lorelei Cederstrom: *Fine-Tuning the Feminine Psyche. Jungian Patterns in the Novels of Doris Lessing*, New York: Peter Lang, 1990.

ambiguity makes the reading of the novel a much more thought-provoking experience.

The novel forces the reader to consider the dilemma of Kate Brown, and wonder why she chooses as she does. Furthermore, the open ending leads to speculations as to how or even whether one can change one's life, and how one sustains such a change. These are relevant questions for any woman trying to rethink her place in society and in life, as was the case for many women in the 1970'es, and this may be the best argument for Kate Brown to be seen as an everywoman.

Chapter 3 The Woman in White

3.1 Introduction

The Woman in White was first published in 1859, and was the first novel to be termed a sensation novel due to its occupation with suspense, action and drama. It was first serialised in Charles Dickens' periodical *All the Year Round*, and later compiled into a novel. Both were a huge success, and continued to be so, as the novel has never been out of print. Furthermore, it has been adapted for the screen a number of times, this very autumn (2004) it has been staged in London's West End and on Broadway as a musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber.³¹

The Woman in White is a truly sensational novel, entertaining, filled with action, and imaginative and unpredictable even when read today. As Matthew Sweet writes in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition³²: "[Wilkie Collins'] novels are rich with troubling households. *The Woman in White* assembles a dubious aristocrat, an obese Italian count with a passion for white mice, vanilla bonbons and poison, an effeminate hypochondriac and a moustached lady." (Sweet, p. xiv) Indeed, the gallery of persons is packed with colourful and somewhat stylised characters, and the action is no less spectacular. The novel features madness, true, heart-breaking love, an arranged marriage, fraud, illness, women mistaken for ghosts, and death by heart-failure (twice), by fire, and by the hand of the "Carbonari", a mysterious Italian brotherhood. All of this is centred around the fragile and beautiful Laura Fairlie and her ugly, but faithful, half-sister Marian Halcombe.

The complicated plot of *The Woman in White* is about these two wealthy sisters

³¹Cf. www.thewomaninwhitethemusical.com.

³²Matthew Sweet, "Introduction" in: Collins, Wilkie: *The Woman in White*, Middlesex: Penguin Classics, (1860), 1999.

and the drawing-master Walter Hartright. At the beginning of the novel, Hartright is engaged to teach Laura and Marian water-colours, and he and Laura fall in love. However, Laura has promised her now deceased father to marry Sir Percival Glyde, and chooses to keep this promise. Soon after the marriage it becomes clear to the sisters that Percival Glyde has married Laura only in order to get access to her money. He and his friend, the exotic and very 'foreign' Count Foscoe, endeavour to obtain Laura's personal fortune of 20.000 pounds. From this follows the illness of both Marian and Laura, and an intricate replacement of Laura with her unacknowledged, backward half-sister Anne Catherick, with the result that Laura is declared dead and locked up in a madhouse bearing Anne Catherick's identity. Marian discovers this and rescues Laura, and Marian and Hartright restore her from the shock her feminine sensibility has received and unravel the mystery of the fraud. In a grand finale, displaying a hat trick of *deus ex machina*, Percival Glyde (standing in the way of Hartright and Laura's marrying) dies in a fire, Laura's uncle Frederic Fairlie (refusing to acknowledge Laura's identity, and thus keeping them in poverty) dies from a heart attack, and Count Foscoe (challenging Hartright to meet him in a duel) is killed by the Carbonari. This leaves Walter Hartright and Laura Fairlie, now married and having reclaimed Laura's social status and wealth, to settle back at the Limmeridge estate with Marian and their first-born son.

The Woman in White is a sensation novel, a genre coming out of the Gothic novel, and which later developed into the thriller and detective novel.³³ As mentioned above it was written for serialisation, which implies the characteristic structure of building up the action and ending every chapter with a cliff-hanger or an unresolved situation. Furthermore, in order to give the novel an air of authenticity it is written as an epistolary

³³Cf. Margaret Drabble (ed.): *The Oxford Companion to English Literature, Revised Edition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; p. 880.

novel, recording "narratives" from most of the involved parties. The greatest part of the novel is constituted by Hartright's own narrative, extracts from Marian's diary, and Count Foscoe's final written confession, but also shorter texts are included such as a narrative of the solicitor Mr. Gilmore, Mrs. Michelson the housekeeper, and the inscription on the tombstone raised over Laura's (supposed) grave. Furthermore, the longer narratives quote letters, pieces of dialogue and reported monologues. All of these different narratives are held together in a frame story about Walter Hartright collecting these narratives in order to prove Laura's true identity, and the crime committed by Percival Glyde and Count Foscoe. This technique and its consequences I will return to below.

Even though *The Woman in White* is not a typical quest novel, it has the features of one. Firstly, there is the physical or geographical quest of Laura and Marian. In the beginning of the novel they are living at the Limmeridge estate. When Laura is married she goes on a honeymoon to Italy and the Tyrol, and when she returns, both sisters move into Blackwater Park, the gloomy estate of Percival Glyde. From here Laura is put into the madhouse and then escapes to London with Marian, and at the end of the novel they return to their starting point, Limmeridge. Secondly, this physical quest is accompanied by a quest on another level, as is also the case in the traditional quest novel. The quest of Laura is the same as that of most women of the Victorian period: to marry and thereby secure her future life - a quest for stability. Marian is prevented from having a similar quest by her inferior looks, which I will return to below, but as she is dependent upon Laura, her quest becomes Marian's as well. In these terms *The Woman in White* can be seen as a story of a quest almost gone wrong: Laura marries, and marries within her social class, but her husband turns out not to be able to provide her with a good future. In fact, he wishes her dead. When the quest is finally accomplished, Laura has got herself a husband who can take care of her, and settles into the childhood home, now under better circumstances. Laura has closed the circle and secured the future, also beyond herself, as

she has provided a (male) heir. Of course, one reason for the novel's public appeal is that Laura's quest is also a quest for love, the romantic love of Walter Hartright, instead of the designing love of Percival Glyde, but even though Hartright's love for Laura runs like an undercurrent through his parts of the novel, the securing of Laura's mental health, social status and money is the prime concern of both Marian and Hartright, and the main objective of Laura's quest.

3.2 Different kinds of femininity.

The novel opens with the words: "This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve." (Collins, p. 9)³⁴ In this single sentence, the ideal of femininity is established: women are patient, enduring, passive, while men are resolute, ambitious, active. The two central women of the novel, the half-sisters Laura and Marian, are both locked in the ideal of femininity, but they handle this very differently. While Laura is passive and obliging, Marian is active and questioning, although she struggles to repress this side of her personality.

In the novel, two women function as mirror-images of Laura, each enhancing different aspects of her perfect person. The first mirror-image is of course Marian, who is dark and moustached, where Laura is fair and beautiful. Hartright describes the two sisters as: "two women, one of whom possessed all the accomplishments of grace, wit, and high-breeding, the other all the charms of beauty, gentleness, and simple truth, that can purify and subdue the heart of man." (p. 64). Also Marian describes the mirror-image-quality of Laura and herself:

"I have got nothing, and she has a fortune. I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel; and I am - " (p. 37)

³⁴Wilkie Collins: *The Woman in White*, Middlesex: Penguin Classics, (1860), 1999. All further references to the novel in this chapter will be marked merely by a page number within a parenthesis.

Laura's second mirror-image is Anne Catherick, her unknown half-sister. Physically the two women are so identical that their identities are substituted, but Anne is to some degree mentally retarded, and acts like a child. This is an interesting contrast to Laura, who is praised several times throughout the novel for her childlike innocence. Anne's behaviour may be what puts Laura's childishness into perspective, and makes us see that Laura is not retarded, but only very feminine. Furthermore, Anne disobeys the authorities, both by fleeing the madhouse and by dressing unconventionally in white only, actions which Laura would never undertake on her own initiative. In an interview, Wilkie Collins remarked on the mirror-image of Laura, the protagonist of the novel, and Anne, the protagonist of the subplot: "The victim [of the substitution of identities] to be interesting must be a woman, to be very interesting she must be a lady, and as a foil to her, the person who is to represent her must be of inferior birth and status." (Yates, p. 648³⁵) So Anne functions to reflect Laura in order to enhance not only her beauty and (other) feminine qualities, but also her social position.

Whereas the somewhat flat character of Anne first of all fills the function of assisting the plot and providing the eerie ghost-scenes, the much more round characters of Laura and Marian mark the opposite limits of the ideal of femininity represented in the novel.

3.2.1 *Laura Fairlie - the ideal woman*

As quoted above, the victim of the crime of the novel had to be a woman in order to be interesting, and to be very interesting a lady. What is interesting about a woman victim, as opposed to a male one, is the vulnerability and helplessness of her position as a woman: a crime committed against a woman, defenceless by definition, is more cruel

³⁵Edmund Yates: "Appendix B, Wilkie Collins on the Composition of *The Woman in White*" (1860) in: Collins, Wilkie: *The Woman in White*, Middlesex: Penguin Classics, 1999.

than one committed against a man, and thus more likely to provoke the compassion and sense of justice in the reader³⁶. Laura is the perfect protagonist in this respect: fragile, innocent and beautiful; in need of masculine care.

When Hartright recalls his first meeting with Laura, he spends two pages describing her beauty, with phrases such as: "A fair, delicate girl, in a pretty light dress, trifling with the leaves of a sketch-book, while she looks up from it with truthful, innocent blue eyes" (p. 52) The innocence of her childlike behaviour - "a child she is still in many things" (p. 185), her way of acting and dressing (in light dresses) adds to her beauty.

Another prominent feature of Laura is her fragility. The first reference to Laura is when Marian tells the newly arrived Hartright that her sister "is in her own room, nursing that essentially feminine malady, a slight headache" (p. 35). The fact that the headache is only slight may be the reason for its being a feminine malady; only a woman, already weak due to her gender, would have to stay away from breakfast because of a *slight* headache. But the fact that she is absent due to it, and in many other instances throughout the novel, significantly supports the ideal of femininity. Laura's absence is not commented upon, it is a natural part of her femininity.

Another example of Laura's fragility is the way in which her confinement in the madhouse affects her. Even though it seems to be a nice place, devoid of the usual Gothic features, when Marian comes to visit³⁷, and even though Laura is only there for two and a half months (26. July to 13. October 1850), she is shattered literally beyond recognition, as her uncle fails to recognise her afterwards. For months afterwards she cannot bear

³⁶Who is male. Even though the 19th century featured a rise in female readers, *The Woman in White* is addressed to a male reader, as D.A. Miller (pp. 153-154) points out. An example of this is when Hartright describes Laura: "Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir." (p. 52).

³⁷The madhouse is private, which at the time was not uncommon for the wealthy patients to be placed in, and here the conditions could be of a high standard, with trained personnel and activities and exercise for the patients. Cf. Showalter (1985); ch. 1.

even to think about that period: "At the slightest reference to that time, she changed and trembled still; her words became confused; her memory wandered and lost itself as helplessly as ever." (p. 556)

Laura's passivity is vast, but it is not without limits, which proves her to be conscious of her role and what is expected of her. Twice in the novel she stands up for herself. The first time is when she decides, against Marian's advice, to tell Percival Glyde about her being in love with Hartright. Marian narrates:

"I looked at her, and listened to her in silent surprise. Through all the years of our close intimacy, this passive force in her character had been hidden from me - hidden even from herself, till love found it, and suffering called it forth." (p. 167)

The second time is when Percival Glyde tries to make Laura sign the document without letting her read it first:

"'I will sign with pleasure,' she said, 'if you will only treat me as a responsible being. I care little what sacrifice is required of me, if it will affect no one else, and lead to no ill results -'" (p. 246.)

In both cases she could have chosen the easier solution, that of remaining passive, but both situations do not fit into the role she knows and plays. She is not supposed to have fallen in love with another man, and her husband is not supposed to force her into signing documents. The results of these few instances of revolting are, firstly, that the extent of the wrongs done to her becomes obvious to the reader, since she would not react contrary to expectations unless it was an extreme situation. Secondly, she appears to be an intelligent person who is conscious of which role she is playing, and knows what comes with it and what does not. All of this contributes to the reader's image of her as a heroic and sympathetic victim.

Laura is in every respect the perfect Victorian heroine, acting out the role of the

patient, enduring woman, a passive victim of life. But the novel gives no hint as to whether Laura is actually satisfied with her position or not, or whether she reflects on her identity as a woman. As opposed to both Kate Brown and to Marian, the internalisation seems to have succeeded in Laura's case; there is no sign that she is not content with her position. In fact, she is a model woman, and goes to extremes to fulfil her role. For instance she chooses not to break off the engagement with Percival Glyde, even though he gives her the choice. Instead she chooses to obey her (diseased) father and marry a man she does not love.

However, we can only establish that "it seems" that Laura is satisfied, because she is one of the few characters in the novel who is not given a voice of her own. Typical of Victorian women, Laura's voice is only heard through others', in this case Marian's and Hartright's. She is even further silenced by her stay in the madhouse, which leaves her unable to speak about it even after her release, as in the quote above.

3.2.2 *Marian Halcombe - a woman in conflict*

From the point of view of this thesis, Marian is by far the most interesting character of the novel, divided as she is between the imposed passivity of the role she is expected to fill, and her impulse to act.

Marian is one of the three main characters of the novel, but her function is that of a catalyst, an observer, a vehicle for others' interest. More than a quarter of the novel consists of her "narrative", but we are shown only excerpts with relevance to "The Lady Glyde Case", which means that she does not say much about herself. For instance, we are not told anything about her childhood and adolescence, and the six months in which Laura is on her honeymoon are hardly mentioned. But Marian is not silent like Laura, she plays a prominent role also in Hartright's narratives, and he praises her for her help and vigilance. Even though the woman he refers to in the opening paragraph of the novel

(quoted above) must be Laura, he closes the novel with the words: "Marian was the good angel of our lives - let Marian end our story." (p. 27). Ironically, as D.A. Miller notes (Miller, p. 190), not Marian but Hartright himself ends the story, as the sentence is followed by "The end" - and Marian is left silent.

Functioning to enhance Laura's beauty, Marian is characterised by her lack of beauty. When Hartright encounters her for the first time he cannot see her face, and he spends some time admiring her beautiful body. The description which follows firmly establishes her appearance:

"She left the window - and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps - and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer - and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly! [...] The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead. Her expression - bright, frank, and intelligent - appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete." (pp. 34-35)

Significantly, Hartright is surprised at her "ugliness", and fastens on her expression appearing to be "altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability". Obviously, the appearance of being "bright, frank, intelligent" is not a feminine attraction; it is not included in the ideal of femininity.

Furthermore, the novel contains repeated references to Marian having male characteristics, such as: "She caught me by both hands - she pressed them with the strong, steady grasp of a man" (p. 124, in Hartright's voice), and "she has the foresight and the resolution of a man." (p. 324, in Count Foscoe's voice). Marian is obviously aware of this, and seems to rebuke herself for her lack of femininity: "My tears do not flow so easily as they ought - they come almost like men's tears, with sobs that seem to tear me in pieces, and that frightens every one about me." (p.164), and: "My hands always were, and

always will be, as awkward as a man's" (p. 230).

Simultaneously, Marian has the impulse to act like a man, and is inadvertently regretting that she is forced to act like a woman. In some cases she even longs to be violent, here towards Percival Glyde:

"I started to my feet as suddenly as if he had struck me. If I had been a man, I would have knocked him down on the threshold of his own door, and have left his house, never on any earthly consideration to enter it again. But I was only a woman - and I loved his wife so dearly!" (p. 245)

Marian is clearly conscious of the restraints it imposes upon her to be "only a woman". Later, when Hartright is going out to have his final confrontation with Count Foscoe, she repeats the phrase: "Oh, Walter, for God's sake not alone! Let me go with you. Don't refuse me because I'm only a woman!" (p. 583)

Marian does not fit the ideal of femininity, neither with regard to her personal appearance, nor to her impulses to act. She is eager to be in activity, and enjoys discussion and even chess-playing ("with the inevitable female drawbacks" (p. 38), as she remarks to Hartright). It seems that she knows that she is an imperfect woman (as opposed to her perfect sister), and accepts this as fate. However, she repeatedly scorns women harshly, not least herself, for their way of behaviour, which she sees as natural and inherent in them. A few examples of this are:

"How can you expect four women to dine together alone every day, and not quarrel? We are such fools, we can't entertain each other at table. You see I don't think much of my own sex, Mr. Hartright [...] - no woman does think much of her own sex, although few of them confess it as freely as I do." (p. 36)

"I am as inaccurate as women usually are." (p. 36)

"Women can't draw - their minds are too flighty, and their eyes are too inattentive." (p. 37)

"I tried hard to feel that Sir Percival was to blame, and to say so; but my womanhood would pity him, in spite of myself." (p. 172)

"I answered him - more because my tongue is a woman's, and must answer, than because I had anything convincing to say." (p. 175)

[confessing to her diary that she listens by the door]:"I dare say it was very wrong and very discreditable to listen - but where is the woman, in the whole range of our sex, who can regulate her actions by the abstract principles of honour, when those principles point one way, and when her affections, and the interests which grow out of them, point the other?" (p. 225)

In these statements Marian places the woman as the Other, the opposite of men: irrational, cowardly and ruled by emotions. She is clearly not satisfied with the gender role she has been dealt, but it also seems that she does not know what else she wants - probably because she is given no other choice. So while she blames herself for not being sufficiently feminine, she rebukes herself for what she sees as her female traits.

However, Collins does not allow Marian to be completely masculine, even though she is much more active than she is expected to be. In a few instances she exceeds the limit of her masculinity, and she is "punished" for these breaks with the ideal of femininity by relapsing into a feminine weakness. For instance, when she has crawled onto the roof in order to overhear Percival Glyde's and Count Foscoe's plotting, it starts to rain and she catches a cold which develops into typhoid fever. Another instance is when she recognises Laura in the madhouse:

"[Marian] had for a moment sunk altogether in the effort to keep her own senses under the shock of the discovery. After waiting a few minutes in the fresh air and the cool shade, her natural energy and courage helped her a little, and she became sufficiently mistress of herself to feel the necessity of recalling her presence of mind for her unfortunate sister's sake." (p. 421)

In these lapses into femininity the reader sees that Marian *is* a woman, albeit an untypical one, and this may be important in order to keep the sympathy of the reader. Furthermore, despite her independent behaviour, Marian is dependent on men. She is a spinster, an orphan, and does not have an income of her own. This makes her economically

dependent on first Frederic Fairlie, then Percival Glyde, and finally on Hartright.

It seems to be an established fact that Marian will go on being a spinster, and the question of Marian marrying is never raised. In the first half of the novel, however, Marian feels attracted to the strange foreigner Count Foscoe, even though she (rightly) suspects him of foul play.

"He looks like a man who could tame anything. If he had married a tigress, instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress. If he had married *me*, I should have made his cigarettes as his wife does - I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as she holds hers. I am almost afraid to confess it, even to these secret pages. The man has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him." (p. 217)

Here is a hint of the theme of the woman in need of being tamed like an beast - the woman's dangerous sexuality in need of masculine domination. Furthermore, it suggests that Marian *would like* to be dominated by someone matching her own strength, and the reason for her remaining unmarried is that she has not found her match. And where Count Foscoe matches her is, significantly, on the intellectual level. She writes in her diary about Count Foscoe that: "He flatters my vanity, by talking to me as seriously and sensibly as if I was a man." (p. 222). The contempt towards him wins over in Marian, however, when he violates her privacy by reading her diary and even making an entry in it, which, in the words of D.A. Miller, is "what the novel encodes as rape" (Miller, p. 180)

The reason for Marian not finding a husband could be her lack of beauty. But Hartright describes her body in very flattering terms, and perhaps her resourcefulness did not turn out as frightening as Collins wanted it to. Anyhow, Collins says in an interview that: "No sooner was [*The Woman in White*] finished than I received a number of letters from single gentlemen, stating their position and means, and their wish to marry the original of Marian Halcombe at once." (Yates, p. 649) But another reason for Marian's

being a spinster could be that she actually prefers this to marriage, especially when her relationship with Laura allows her to vicariously experience both love and motherhood. This is backed by her strong outburst when Laura is getting married:

"No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us women. Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace - they drag us away from our parent's love and our sister's friendship - they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel." (p. 181)

Judging from this, Marian is a feminist, but if this is the case, she does not put this much into action. She may prefer the comfortable life of spinsterhood, as opposed to earning her own living as a single woman, as long as she has the financial security that Laura provides her with.

A third possible explanation of Marian's not marrying could be that she is a lesbian, and the relationship between Marian and Laura does seem very intimate and loving. Of course, homosexuality was not an issue openly raised in Victorian fiction, so within the logic of the novel, this cannot be the case, or at least not openly stated. However, as D.A. Miller states, Marian definitely is a lesbian, if by lesbianism we mean "a woman's unwillingness to lend her full cooperation to male appropriations of her" (Miller, p. 182).

In terms of the mechanics of the novel, however, the function of making Marian not too attractive or interested in men is clear: to prevent the novel from turning into the eternal triangle. Hartright frequently expresses his love for her, but it is clear that Marian poses no threat to Hartright's and Laura's relationship. Similarly, the fact that Marian is attracted to the strange Count Foscoe of all men, functions to show how different Marian is, both from Laura and from the ideal of femininity.

3.2.3 *The effeminate men*

Laura and Marian interpret their roles as women differently, the one by complying fully

to the expectations of her, the other by struggling with herself to live up to the ideal, and yet failing. But the novel also contains three male characters who do not fully comply with the norms of masculinity.

One is Laura and Marian's uncle, Frederick Fairlie, who suffers from "a nervous condition": what we would term hypochondria. This, and his feminine appearance, dressing "in a waist-coat and trousers of spotless white.", with feet "effeminately small, [...] clad in buff-coloured silk stockings, and little womanish bronze-leather slippers", wearing rings on his "white delicate hands", makes Hartright conclude that: "upon the whole, he had a frail, languidly-fretful, over-refined look - something singularly and unpleasantly delicate in its association with a man" (p. 42). And as Frederick Fairlie says about himself: "As usual [...] I am nothing but a bundle of nerves dressed up to look like a man." (p. 348)

The fragility and irrational helplessness of Frederick Fairlie is a nuisance to everyone surrounding him, and is presented in such a way that also the reader can only be irritated by him. However, had he been a woman, these features would only be what was expected from him, carrying the heavy burden of managing the Limmeridge Estate. Marian says about Frederick Fairlie and Laura that "they are also, in widely different ways, rather nervous and sensitive..." (p. 39). But the wide difference in their ways of being nervous and sensitive may first and foremost lie in their difference of gender. Laura does not complain of her fragility as Frederick Fairlie does, but she is allowed and even supposed to be fragile and irrational. And Frederick Fairlie actually dies from a heart-attack, so perhaps he is not so much of a hypochondriac as we are led to believe. Nevertheless, whereas Laura's feminine fragility only makes her seem more sympathetic, the femininity of Frederick Fairlie works to make him unsympathetic and ridiculous.

Count Foscoe is another effeminate man of the novel. He is vain, dresses elaborately, sings and plays the piano, and has white mice for pets. Marian describes him

thus:

"All the smallest characteristics of this strange man have something strikingly original and perplexingly contradictory in them. Fat as he is, and old as he is, his movements are astonishingly light and easy. He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women; and, more than that, with all his looks of unmistakable mental firmness and power, he is as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us. He starts at chance noises as inveterately as Laura herself. He winced and shuddered yesterday, when Sir Percival beat one of the Spaniels, so that I feel ashamed of my own want of tenderness and sensibility, by comparison with the Count." (p. 219)

But despite, or perhaps even because of, his effeminacy, Count Foscoe is not irritating or pathetic. As Marian notes, he has a "look of unmistakable mental firmness and power"; he can master any creature, from the chain dog to his wife, once a suffragette. Thus, this paradoxical combination of effeminacy and masculinity contributes to making him unpredictable, odd and "foreign", all of which adds to his being dangerous.

A third man who is if not effeminate then at least very sensitive, is the hero of the novel, Hartright. In Hartright, sensitivity is an attraction, a part of him being an artist, and a reason why one, as a reader, finds him well suited for Laura. When Marian tells him that Laura is engaged to be married, his eyes go dim, and his voice fails him (p. 72). He flees to the Honduras, and when he returns, he is a changed man:

"From that self-imposed exile I came back, as I had hoped, prayed, believed I should come back - a changed man. In the waters of a new life I had tempered my nature afresh. In the stern school of extremity and danger my will had learnt to be strong, my heart to be resolute, my mind to rely on itself. I had gone out to fly from my own future. I came back to face it, as a man should." (p. 406)

And only then does he take action towards winning Laura's hand, cunningly solving the mystery of the substitution of Laura and Anne, and bravely confronting Count Foscoe, but mercifully letting him get a head start of the Carbonara. So the change in Hartright has given him the courage or masculinity needed to conquer Laura and to confront the Count, but his old sensitivity still prevails, letting him give the Count a chance of escape,

and still being a perfect match for the sensitive Laura.

3.3 Internalisation & femininity

The ideal of femininity in *The Woman in White* is clearly embodied in Laura's character, and Marian can be seen as an example of what happens if one fails to live up to it - it is implied that it is no coincidence that the outspoken and moustached Marian is a spinster, and the gentle and beautiful Laura is not.

That men and women are completely different species is beyond any doubt. The theme of the woman in need of being tamed by a man, as touched upon above, is explained:

"Human ingenuity, my friend, has hitherto only discovered two ways in which a man can manage a woman. One way is to knock her down - a method largely adopted by the brutal lower orders of the people, but utterly abhorrent to the refined and educated classes above them. The other way (much longer, much more difficult, but, in the end, not less certain) is never to accept a provocation at a woman's hands. It holds with animals, it holds with children, and it holds with women, who are nothing but children grown up. Quiet resolution is the one quality the animals, the children, and the women all fail in. If they can once shake the superior quality in their master, they get the better of *him*. If they can never succeed in disturbing it, he gets the better of *them*." (p. 323)

Admittedly, the speaker is Count Foscoe, the villain, but the fundamental idea of his description matches the Victorian view of men and women, and which positions they should take towards one another. The moralistic point of the scene quoted above is that while Count Foscoe is lecturing Percival Glyde on this, Marian is lying on the roof outside the window spying on them. The direct consequence of this transgression of her femininity is, as mentioned above, a typhoid fever.

This strategy towards women which Count Foscoe is advocating has certainly worked wonders with his own wife. Elanor Foscoe happens to be Laura's aunt, so the sisters have known her before. Marian recalls that:

"As Elanor Fairlie (aged seven-and-thirty), she was always talking pretentious

nonsense, and always worrying the unfortunate men with every small exaction which a vain and foolish woman can impose on long-suffering male humanity." (p. 217)

We are later told that Elanor used to advocate the rights of women. This may be what Marian is referring to by "pretentious nonsense". She continues:

"As Madame Foscoe (aged three-and-forty), she sits for hours together without saying a word, frozen up in the strangest manner of herself. [...] A plain, matronly cap covers her head, and makes her look, for the first time in her life, since I remember her, like a decent woman. [...] On the few occasions when her cold blue eyes are off her work, they are generally turned on her husband, with the look of mute submissive inquiry which we are all familiar with in the eyes of a faithful dog. [...] For the common purposes of society the extraordinary change thus produced in her, is, beyond all doubt, a change for the better, seeing that it has transformed her into a civil, silent, unobtrusive woman, who is never in the way." (p. 217)

We may here recall Kate Brown, who also had the look of a spaniel, with faithful brown eyes. The transition Elanor Foscoe has gone through is powerful; Count Foscoe definitely has succeeded in taming her, and changing her into "a decent woman".

The novel generally enforces a conservative view on women, which firmly establishes the ideal of femininity with the reader. For instance, the very fact that the substitution of Laura and Anne can take place, suggests a view on women which regards them as representatives of their sex, rather than individual persons. Two women of the same age and height, both dressed in white, are impossible to distinguish.

Furthermore, throughout the novel almost proverbial statements on men and women are presented to the reader, such as: "Women, as everybody knows, constantly act on impulses which they cannot explain even to themselves [...]" (p. 255), and: "Women can resist a man's love, a man's fame, a man's personal appearance, and a man's money; but they cannot resist a man's tongue, when he knows how to talk to them." (p. 256). What is puzzling about this is that a large part of these statements are in Marian's voice.

They are presented as statements of common knowledge,³⁸ and the fact that a woman gives voice to them bears witness of a high degree of internalisation. In the words of D.A. Miller, Marian “remains the prolocutor of a masculist discourse that keeps her in place” (Miller, p. 185). That Marian has internalised – or perhaps is trying to internalise – the ideal of femininity is obvious. On the contrary, Laura is never heard discussing issues of gender. It seems that Laura has internalised the ideal of femininity to such a degree that she does not reflect upon it at all, it has become an integrated part of her identity to be the gentle, passive, beautiful woman.

Seen in contrast to Kate Brown, Laura and Marian do not, or only on a small scale, question the expectations of society of them as women, and this may be because they, as opposed to Kate Brown, are not given any choice. They have, as far as we know, no female role models who have successfully broken free of the established norms. Mrs. Catherick, Anne Catherick's mother, could be a possibility, as she has lived alone since her youth. But she is socially stigmatised and represented as pathetic and tragic. Another role model could have been Elanor Fairlie, but firstly, she ended up being “tamed” by Count Foscoe, and secondly, Marian clearly has not taken to her “pretentious nonsense” (p. 217), as mentioned above.

Marian's voicing the masculist discourse conflicts with her feminist outburst quoted above. However, besides the fact that the psychological profile of the fictional character Marian may be a bit incoherent, it strikes one as odd that the author has chosen to put these statements to a large degree in Marian's voice. And furthermore, why at all allow for an individual and active female character such as Marian, if that is so much against the conviction of the (male) author?

³⁸“Common knowledge” or “common sense” is an expression of the prevailing discourse of a society, and is extremely difficult to fight or change, because it is taken to be a fact, and taken for granted. This echoes Kate Brown's quoting of clichés, which are also expressions of common sense. Cf. Weedon, ch. 4.

One answer to that question could be that it is to provide the unexpected angle in the novel. Thus, Marian's digression from the ideal of femininity can be seen as a subplot reinforcing the strength of the main plot, and diverting the reader throughout the novel's 600 pages. Another answer could be the moralistic message of Marian's story: if you act like Marian, you will end up a spinster, without romantic love and motherhood. But still, the presence of a character such as Marian acknowledges the fact that women *can* be intelligent and active.

D.A. Miller argues that the subplot of Marian is a quest in itself, and that Marian in the course of the novel develops from being in opposition to the ideal of femininity, into becoming "feminised", ending with the scene in which Marian is holding Laura's son in her hands. In his words:

"[...] however "phallic, "lesbian" and "male-identified" Marian may be considered at the beginning of the novel, the implicit structuring of these attributes is precisely what is responsible for converting her – if with a certain violence, then also with a certain ease – into the castrated, heterosexualized "good angel" (646)³⁹ of the Victorian household at the end." (Miller, p. 176)

However, I do not see the full justification of this reading, even though it ties up the loose ends of Marian's confused signals very conveniently. The obvious reason why Marian mainly shows her independence in the beginning of the novel is that Marian's narrative only runs until p. 336, after which the focus shifts with Hartright resuming the main narration. This is not necessarily a sign that Marian has been "domesticated" or "tamed". On the contrary, she remains a spinster throughout the novel, and I see no reason why she should not return to her former life of leisure and (relative) independence at Limmeridge.

3.4 Hysteria and madness

3.4.1 Hysteria

³⁹In my edition, the reference is on p. 627.

Hysteria is encountered in the novel at two different levels. Firstly, in some of the characters as a marker of weakness, and secondly on the textual level, functioning as a driving force.

Both Frederick Fairlie and Laura can be seen as hysterics. The former in the form of hypochondria, the latter in the form of psycho-somatic symptoms such as headaches as a result of the stress she experiences. As mentioned above, the surroundings react very differently to the hysteria of the two, as Laura is allowed and even expected to be to some extent hysteric because of her gender. But the two also share a condition which allows both of them to take to their beds in fits of hysteria: wealth. As is the case with Kate Brown, who stays for weeks in an expensive hotel in London, Laura and Frederick Fairlie simply could not live the way they do, were they forced to make a living by e.g. manual work. So in that respect, the hysteria which conditions “true” femininity, and thus “true” femininity itself, is only available in and to the upper classes.

Hysteria, in the form of nervousness, runs as an undercurrent in the novel. The main voices of narration, Hartright and Marian, are both under a nervous strain, as they witness Laura's nerve-wrecking situation. And their unease transmitting itself through the narration to the reader, is a basic part of what makes the novel a sensation novel. The “nervousness” of the narration, and indeed of the very plot, works as a driving force in the novel, urging the reader to continue, “insofar as it validated the attempt to read, to uncover the grounds for *being* nervous.” (Miller, p. 151)

3.4.2 *Madness*

There are two mad characters in the novel, or at least two characters who are being perceived and defined as mad by their surroundings. The first is Anne Catherick, whom we first meet when she escapes from the madhouse, and the second is Laura, who is confined in the madhouse in Anne's place.

Anne is “mad” in the sense that she does not comply with the ideal of femininity, as described above, but the diagnosis she would receive today would be backwards or retarded, or perhaps autistic. Whether she is capable of taking care of herself is doubtful, but she is not dangerous to others, and Mrs. Clements can take care of her. So the confinement of Anne cannot be seen as a necessary arrangement.

Neither can the confinement of Laura be said to be necessary, but two interesting points must be made in connection to Laura's “madness”. The first is that the personnel at the madhouse are convinced that she *is* mad. They are convinced even though she says the contrary, actually *because* she says the contrary. Her insistence on being sane and falsely confined is so much in contrast with the ideal of femininity that her assertion in essence *becomes* her insanity. The second is the effect that her stay in the madhouse produces upon Laura. As touched upon above, Laura becomes (more than usually) nervous, incoherent in her memory, fragile. When escaping from the madhouse she has regressed into a state of childhood, which could perhaps be seen as madness.

The cure for this, applied by Marian and Hartright, is to treat her as a child:

"We helped her mind slowly by this simple means; we took her out between us to walk, on fine days, in a quiet old City square, near at hand, where there was nothing to confuse or alarm her; we spared a few pounds from the fund at the banker's to get her wine, and the delicate strengthening food that she required; we amused her in the evenings with children's games at cards, with scrap-books full of prints which I borrowed from the engraver who employed me - by these, and other trifling attentions like them, we composed her and steadied her, and hoped all things (*sic*), as cheerfully as we could, from time and care, and love that never neglected and never despaired of her." (p. 435)

When Laura complains: “Oh, don't, don't, don't treat me like a child” (p. 478), “Walter immediately takes the plea as further evidence of her childishness and accordingly gives her some more pretend-work to do.” (Miller, p. 175) In this way Laura is being further fixated in her role as fragile, sensitive and childish – a situation parallel to the one she was in inside the madhouse. This is also reflected in Hartright's comment on Laura's

confinement, that: "No man could have gone through it, and come out of it unchanged." (p. 428). Of course the comparison is not valid, as a man could never get into a similar situation, exactly because he is a man. Hartright's comment, however, serves to enhance the trials of Laura, and allows for her to remain a victim, suffering its after-effects.

Common to Anne and Laura is that they have been confined not because they are dangerous to others or cannot take care of themselves, but because someone wants to eliminate them. They both possess power over Percival Glyde, and since the silence that the ideal of femininity usually imposes upon women has proved not to be sufficient, they are silenced by being confined. The power they possess is in Anne's case that she knows (or Percival Glyde thinks she knows) the secret which can ruin his position and name, and in Laura's her very existence is the hindrance for Percival Glyde to save himself from bankruptcy.⁴⁰

This of course can be read as an allegory of the relationship between men and women in the period: Men are in charge. Women who hold power over men are dangerous, because it exceeds the limits of the ideal of femininity, and therefore they must be eliminated. And this is done, continually, by turning the fragility, which is inherent in their femininity, against themselves. The result is a deadlock, a catch-22, rendering the women completely powerless: If they protest, they will seem even more mad, as is the case with Laura, and if they accept the situation they will soon become truly mad from being locked up with "other" "lunatics".⁴¹

3.5 *The Woman in White* as a postmodern narrative

Even though postmodernity had yet to wait a century to be invented, *The Woman in*

⁴⁰It should be noted that the case of men purposely confining sane women in madhouses is not only a grim remnant of the Gothic novel. Such cases did actually occur (cf. Sweet, p. xxiv; Showalter (1985), p. 103), and thus lend the novel even more authenticity, while echoing the sensation press.

⁴¹Cf. Showalter (1985), ch. 3.

White can easily be read as a postmodern narrative, as it contains a number of postmodern features. Among these are its meta-fictional aspect, as Hartright interrupts the narrative and explains how and when this or that piece of narrative was obtained. Another postmodern feature is the fragmentation of the text into multiple texts by multiple narrators, sometimes in even more voices, and sometimes by unreliable narrators. The way the novel is swarming with texts, is almost obsessed with text and writing, is reminiscent of the postmodern concern with inter- and intratextuality. The characters are continually corresponding with each other by letters, writing diaries, signing documents, quoting each other and entering each other's texts. Also a text is what brings about the death of Percival Glyde, as he dies in the attempt to secure the (forged) text of the church register which will mean his downfall.

The novel's fragmented structure and constant change of perspective gives, to the modern reader, a postmodern appearance. Whereas *The Summer before the Dark* is presented to the reader by an omniscient narrator with glimpses of interior monologue, *The Woman in White* is thrown at the reader in fragments, and "without the comfortable distancing device of an authorial voice" (Sweet, p. xvi). The different narratives are collected by what Sweet refers to as a "neurotic narrator" (Sweet, p. xxv) in the shape of Hartright, who is himself highly and emotionally involved in the story. Sweet poses the question: How can we trust that Hartright is telling the truth? And he argues that the fact that the reader does not know whether the narrator of the frame narrative is reliable adds to the nervousness and "sensation" of the reader. For instance, it is extremely convenient for Hartright that Percival Glyde dies in the fire. We are told that Hartright does all he can to save him, but is that likely? Sweet continues:

"How much does Hartright live up to his sunnily emblematic name? As one reads *The Woman in White*, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish a broad, empirical view of its events [...] The bundle of documents we are handed might be a full and true account of the Laura Glyde Affair. On the other hand, these papers might be the self-justifying trickery of their editor, the middle-class upstart

drawing-master who, by the book's conclusion, has his feet comfortably under the table at Limmeridge." (Sweet, p. xxxi)

I agree with Sweet that that is a possible reading in the eyes of a postmodern reader, and that such a reading certainly adds a layer to the novel. But the novel does not in any way encourage such a reading, nor does the genre. So even though the reading may be obvious to a postmodern reader trained to expect such a plot, Hartright must be trusted as our reliable hero within the logic of the novel.

3.5.1 *Involving the reader*

A text such as the "narrative" on the tombstone is, strictly speaking, absurd, as the fact that a text is engraved on a stone is not an expression of its truthfulness. However, in the logic of the novel these texts are equally important as the ones giving information of more substance, as they add to what Peter Brooks⁴² refers to as the "documentary evidence" - "authoritative texts that nevertheless require decipherment" (Brooks, p. 297). The texts lend their authority to Hartright's exposition, but still need his decipherment, his placing them in a context, to make sense of the story.

This direct way of presenting the story to the reader makes the reader feel involved in the novel and that she is being asked to take a stand on the plot, and this involvement of the reader is what characterises the sensation novel. The form of the novel adds further to the suspense of the plot, in that the reader is often presented with facts and hints from one narrator which is of importance to another, such as Percival Glyde's solicitor informing Mr. Gilmore that he has put a person under surveillance (p. 154), and Hartright telling Marian that he is being watched (p. 436). These two pieces of information are not connected, except by the reader. Artifice like this adds to the reader's feeling of involvement, even though it undermines the authenticity of the seemingly

⁴²Peter Brooks: *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, (1984), 2000.

"scientific" way Hartright presents the "case" to the reader: Facts are laid on the table, but in a way that makes the reader speculate and jump to conclusions. For instance, the fact that Count Foscoe is seen near the post-bag and Marian's letter has been opened, does not necessarily mean that it is Count Foscoe who has opened it, but this is implied. As D.A. Miller points out, "the novel accords itself the status of a quasi-legal document" (Miller, p. 156), but is the exact opposite, going into an endless number of insignificant details, unfounded suspicions and, as it were, sensations.

Another result of the fragmentation of the novel and the communication between the different texts is that the narratives not only point back in time, as it is common in a novel, but also forwards. One among several instances is Mrs. Michelson's narrative, in which she says of Count Foscoe that: "I am informed that a dreadful suspicion has been raised, and that some very serious constructions are placed upon his Lordship's conduct. My persuasion of the Count's innocence remains, however, quite unshaken." (p. 398) At this point in the novel, Count Foscoe has not yet been established firmly as a villain. This break with the narrative linearity creates an anticipation of events with the reader, which functions as a driving force throughout the novel.

3.5.2 *De- and reconstructing narratives*

The de- and reconstruction of narratives lies at the heart of the novel. The fact that the novel itself consists of different narratives results in that the novel becomes the tale not only of Laura Fairlie, but also of Hartright's compiling and ordering the narratives, and thus constructing the text that we are given to read. Furthermore, two instances of de- and reconstruction occur at the centre of the novel's plot. One is in the form of Count Foscoe's written confession (pp. 598-613) in which he carefully describes his own construction of the substitution of Laura and Anne, by way of actions and statements, in order to simultaneously deconstruct the act by narrating what really took place.

The other case of de- and reconstruction is Laura's identity. Both when Laura enters and when she escapes the madhouse, she takes on a new identity. In the first instance, she is literally given another identity, namely that of Anne Catherick. In the second instance, she acts differently, and is, as mentioned above, correspondingly treated differently by Hartright and Marian, namely as a fragile child. However, it still remains for her to recover or reclaim her public identity, i.e. in society. This is done by way of Hartright narrating the de- and reconstruction of Laura's identity to an audience of people gathered at Limmeridge. In this way, Laura's identity is re-membered by re-telling, much as is the case of Kate Brown (cf. section 2.4.2). This act of reconstruction is concluded by erasing Laura's name on the tombstone, and replacing it with Anne's.

As is clear from the symbolic act of replacing the name on the tombstone, naming plays an important part also in this novel, and Laura's changes of identity are reflected in her change of names, from Laura Fairlie to Lady Glyde, via Anne Catherick to Laura Hartright. The very plot of proving the crime of the substitution rests on the question of names, and it reaches its climax when the deconstruction is pronounced in public, and Laura is thus “un-named” as dead.

Chapter 4 Two novels a century apart

4.1 Introduction

The Summer before the Dark and *The Woman in White* were written in two decades both characterised by their strong views on women. The 1970'es are now remembered for the sexual liberation, the entering of women into the labour market and the emergence of sex equality. The 1860'es, or the Victorian period, on the other hand, are remembered for a stern view on women's role in society, for repression of sexuality, and for the conviction that men and women are fundamentally different.

However, in the two novels here examined, one written in each period, a similar ideal of femininity can be traced. This ideal positions the women as victims, as objects in other peoples lives instead of subjects in their own. It focuses on their appearance above their intelligence, and demand of them to be fragile, submissive and maternal. Both novels feature women who feel confined by this ideal of femininity, and who turn to hysteria or madness in order to cope with this strain. They use the traditional feminine trait of hysteria to avoid making decisions, to avoid taking their lives in their own hands: Laura Fairlie becomes feeble and pale, and Kate Brown takes to the bed in a hotel. Furthermore, Kate must lose her good looks and sensual appearance in order to take charge of her life, just as Marian Halcombe must be moustached and awkward in order to be resolute and active.

The fact that these and more similarities can be found in two novels written in so different times and by authors of different gender indicates the existence of a similar fundamental view on men and women, stretching across time, deeply rooted in the British (or Western) culture and novel.

4.2 Similar representations of the ideal of femininity

4.2.1 *Women in white*

A striking similarity between the two novels is that the symbol of the white dress is being used repeatedly in both of them. As the title of *The Woman in White* indicates, this symbolism plays a large role in it and its representation of women. Also the title of *The Summer before the Dark* is rooted in colour symbolism, but focuses on dark as the opposite of white, as discussed above.⁴³

Both Kate Brown, Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick wear white dresses, but with different connotations. In *The Summer before the Dark*, in which there is an emphasis on clothes and dressing, representing how women are made to conform to socially defined matrices, Kate wears white on several occasions. In the opening scene of the novel, Kate wears a white dress (*SbD*, p. 10), and so does she in the flash-back to her time in Portugal (*SbD*, p. 17). When she leaves for Spain with Jeffrey, her lover, she is wearing a “shocking pink dress” (*SbD*, p. 69), but when he falls ill and Kate nurses him, she is wearing a “white frilly robe” (*SbD*, p. 96). Laura wears light or white dresses, and has fair hair as opposed to Marian's dark. Anne wears only white, and this eccentric way of dressing is one of the signs of her not conforming to the ideal of femininity. She is taken to be a ghost both by Hartright at their first encounter (*WiW*, p. 24) and by a village boy seeing her at the churchyard (*WiW*, pp. 87-88), just as Laura is when meeting Hartright again after her assumed death (*WiW*, p. 411).

The symbol of the white dress is used differently, or with different connotations, in the two novels. The young flirting Kate in Portugal assumes the innocence of the white dress, and the contrast with her inviting attitude makes her a *femme fatale*, whereas the white dress of Kate, the wife and mother, is that of the nurse or carer. Apart from being mistaken for ghosts, Anne and Laura are child-like and innocent, which is supported by

⁴³In the notes the two novels will henceforth be referred to as *SbD* and *WiW*.

their light or white dresses. In the words of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar⁴⁴: "Anne Catherick's white dress [...] suggests the pathos of the Victorian child-woman who clings to infancy because adulthood has never become a viable possibility." (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 619).

As is clear from the above, the colour white has two contrasting sets of connotations. One is that of childishness, innocence, fragility, purity and the figure of the angel. Another is that of shroud, death and the figure of the ghost, and this doubleness reflects Madonna/whore dichotomy. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note on the white dresses that: "although in one sense whiteness implies an invitation, in another, it suggests a refusal, just as passivity connotes both compliance and resistance." (Gilbert & Gubar, p. 616)

4.2.2 *Confined women*

Both novels deal with the confinement, imprisonment and silencing of women on many levels. Kate is confined within her female body, which she (unconsciously) tries to escape by starving herself during her confinement in the hotel, and in the dresses of Mrs. Michael Brown. Furthermore, she becomes isolated in the Spanish village, which forces her to engage in the process of reconsidering her life. Marian is confined within a female body and role with which she struggles, and Anne and Laura are literally imprisoned in madhouses and with that, in the role of the mad. Also marriage works to imprison both Kate and Laura, and the secluded life that Laura and Marian live at Limmeridge and Blackwater can also be seen as both mental and physical confinement. All of these confinements work on their different levels as an allegory of the silencing of women, of the repression of the female sex.

⁴⁴Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar: *The Madwoman in the Attic*, New Haven: Yale University Press, (1979), 1980.

Both Laura and Kate partly escape their confinements; Laura from the madhouse and Kate from her maternal role, but at the end of the novels both are still to a large degree confined within the ideal of femininity. Laura's marriage to Hartwright may be a love-match, but it is also Laura's only escape from disgraceful spinsterhood. Kate has broken free of her role, represented by her discarding her hairdo, but the very fact that she is still concerned with her hair, her looks, is, as Lorelei Cederstrom remarks, a sign that she is still thinking within the same framework and thus has not fully escaped. (Cederstrom, p. 166)

4.2.3 *The absent men*

In literature from the second wave feminism, the men tend to be absent. Friedan and Dowling wrote about women and women's lives in the scope of their time, and this did not leave much space to deal with the men and their conditions. However, this silencing of men, parallel to the silencing of women described above, may be seen as functioning as a kind of internalisation on the social level. In both of the novels with which I am here concerned, as well as in reality, there are as many men as women, and the repression of women or confinement of them into one, well-defined space, leaves the men in a completely similar situation. A narrow construction of gender influences both sexes, so that when women are defined as the Other, men are equally forced into taking upon them the role of their opposite, and this is an issue is not much touched upon by either Friedan or Dowling.

The Summer before the Dark is explicitly about a woman and women's role and condition in society, so blaming it for almost exclusively dealing with female characters would not be fair. However, its few male characters are as unfaceted and even stereotypical as the female characters of *The Woman in White*, which is written in a time and genre in which this was the common way of representing women, and by an author

who, due to his gender and his audience, was indeed expected to do so. Admittedly, the male characters of *The Summer before the Dark* are different from each other, but the characters of both Michael, Jeffrey and Phillip never rise beyond the level of their functions. The function of Michael, for example, is to provide a background for Kate, and we are never given his view on his adultery, for instance, only Kate's interpretation. Similarly, the women of *The Woman in White* fulfil their functions and roles dutifully, but only rarely do anything unexpected, as discussed in section 3.2.1.

An example of how the representation of the repression of women works as repression of men is the scene from *The Summer before the Dark* in which Kate is beginning to discover the importance of dressing up, and how one can change in and out of roles. Kate walks past a group of (male) building constructors:

“Kate realized that she was standing still, staring; had been for some minutes. The men took no notice of her. The fact that they didn't suddenly made her angry. She walked away out of sight, and there, took off her jacket – Maureen's - showing her fitting dark dress. Then she strolled back in front of the workmen, hips conscious of themselves. A storm of whistles, calls, invitations. Out of sight the other way, she made her small transformation and walked back again: the men glanced at her, did not see her.” (*SbD*, p. 207)

I can only read this as an extremely chauvinistic and derogatory representation of the male sex. The workmen are represented as a group, not individuals, which displays singularly primitive reflexes triggered by a small change in Kate's appearance. The men are too stupid, or too blinded by their animal impulses to recognise her in her different guises, but also when she returns, *coming from the same direction as before*, they do not notice this obscure pantomime, but react as before.

A representation like this, of men as primitive brutes, and clearly the opposite of the sophisticated Kate who masters this manipulative game of dressing and changing, separates the sexes into entirely different spheres. The result of such a representation is to maintain the basic assumption that men and women are fundamentally and innately

different. The downgrading of the male sex and thus the elevation of the female sex which Lessing presents with this scene, can thus be seen as equivalent to Collins' almost comically stylised representation of the beautiful Laura who must be protected from the crudeness of the world.

Naturally, it is not men's but women's cause which is the concern of Lessing, and the awareness of the male aspects of women's liberation had not yet developed when *The Summer before the Dark* was written. Furthermore, the scene can be interpreted alternatively; namely that it is objectively *showing* the workings of society, and thus criticising the conditions – the ideal of femininity – under which the workmen are living, thinking and reacting. However, if this is that case, Lessing does not succeed in explicating this to the reader, and the result remains the same: the reader is presented with a subplot carried by a narrow and condemnatory representation of men.

4.3 Reproduction of the ideal of femininity

4.3.1 Fictional reproductions

Within both novels the gender norms are reproduced, or actually in both cases, inherited. In *The Woman in White* the inheritance is natural and expected, and forms the climax of the novel's happy ending. Marian holds up Laura's and Hartright's first-born son and triumphantly pronounces him “the heir of Limmeridge” (*WiW*, p. 627).

Less to be expected, Kate in *The Summer before the Dark* unflinchingly passes on the role of mother and wife to her daughter Eileen. This reproduction is mentioned twice, first when Kate thinks to herself about Eileen that: “she wanted to be married above anything else: this was how one saw her future.” (*SbD*, p. 185) This is not commented upon, but the narrative proceeds with the description of the Brown family. Later, when Kate plans to return from Maureen's flat, she calls her house and reaches Eileen: “Eileen had been running the house all this time. “Oh, it's all right, mother, we have been

managing perfectly well.”(*SbD*, p. 228). At this point in the novel, Kate as well as the narrative are bursting with feminist consciousness, but this time as well Eileen's taking over her mother's former role does not seem to be noted by either Kate or Lessing herself. It seems to me an odd choice by Lessing that the character Eileen, in a time when it would be perfectly plausible for her to have career ambitions, is represented as heir to the ideal of femininity. If Lessing intends to make a point about the hopelessness of the fight between the women's liberation and the traditions in our culture, the point is disastrously played down. In any case, this representation of Eileen and her unproblematic inheritance of the role which her mother is struggling to escape undermines Lessing's feminist message.

4.3.2 *Authorial reproductions*

Both novels to some extent reproduce society's gender norms: the ideal of femininity. In Collins' case it is to be expected from an author of his time, but not only does he put forward a largely stylised representation of women, he also places his masculist discourse in the mouth of a woman, Marian, as discussed in section 3.3.

Lessing presents a narrow and flat image of men, as argued above, but simultaneously she retains women in the traditional position of victim. Examples of this are Maureen, who is considering whom to marry, not whether to marry, and Kate who is bending herself to accept her husband's adultery. Of course, this is represented in order to let Kate discover and criticise this internalisation or “false memory”, but the critique is never taken to its limit as Kate chooses to return, on terms not disclosed to the reader. So even though men are represented in a negative light, the women are still complying with the ideal of femininity, and thus counteracting Kate's feminist quest.

However, side by side with these narrow representations of men and women respectively, both novels feature characters who break with the norms of gender. In *The*

Summer before the Dark, Jeffrey displays a vulnerability not to be expected from the stylised character of the young wealthy idle lover, and in *The Woman in White*, Marian features a resourcefulness uncalled for. Furthermore, *The Woman in White*, which could be expected to be the most prejudiced of the two novels, has the character of Frederick Fairlie, who breaks with every norm of Victorian masculinity. These breaks with the stereotypes add variation and faceting to both of the novels, which makes them bearable and even entertaining to read, and more credible as representations of realistic people.

Conclusion

“A woman, as she might have done any time during the past several hundred years, stood under a tree, holding a crowded tray.” (*SbD*, p. 10)

This quote from *The Summer before the Dark* pinpoints my conclusion to this thesis. Kate Brown is waiting on her husband, as Laura Fairlie would have done had there been no servants at Limmeridge. Women's role, personified here in that of the waiter, has not changed radically “during the past several hundred years”. The quote is from the beginning of the novel, before Kate embarks on her quest, but still it describes the ideal of femininity as it is represented in both novels, irrespective of the century separating their authors.

As I have tried to argue and show in the previous chapters, the two novels represent and even to some extent reproduce a similar ideal of femininity. This they do even though *The Summer before the Dark* has a critical approach, and even though the two novels are written by a male and a female author respectively, and more than a century apart in time. However, both novels also have characters who break with the gender stereotypes, and surprisingly, the amount of characters going against a stereotypical representation of gender norms is even greater in *The Woman in White*, written in the Victorian period, than in *The Summer before the Dark* written in the 1970'es. But this can be seen to be counterbalanced by the fact that *The Summer before the Dark* is explicitly concerned with gender roles and with the critique of them, while *The Woman in White* is not.

Even though there are numerous differences between the two novels, they are similar on central points. First of all, they are both about upper-class women who have their basic

material needs covered, and therefore can concern themselves with the refinements of their lives, such as love, happiness and fulfilment. Secondly, they both have female protagonists who act independently, even though they are dependent on men.

In both novels, the fact that the women are acting independently is presented as a deviation from the norm. And in this dependency which the women are struggling against lies a victimisation of them. However much they are freeing themselves from the constraints of the ideal of femininity, the fact that they need to go through this process at all renders them as a basically de-centered Other. In this also lies that the women in both novels take the place of objects in others' lives, not subjects in their own.

The women are maintained in this position by society's expectations of them and by their own internalisation of the ideal of femininity. In their struggles against this internalisation, they encounter different functions of hysteria and madness, both from within their own bodies, and imposed upon them by their surroundings. Although the terminologies used in the two novels are different, the symptoms are similar, and so are the reactions the women encounter from society. When Laura Fairlie asserts herself against her substitution with Anne Catherick she is taken to be mad, and so is Kate Brown when she is protesting loudly in the theatre against what she sees as the madness of London's high society. But both Laura and Kate also succumb to the hysteria of "nervousness", when Laura becomes feeble and pale by the mentioning of the madhouse, and Kate must stay in bed in the hotel.

The fact that both novels feature women who are subjugated to the ideal of femininity as a norm, and who are met with these different functions of hysteria and madness, shows how similar the view on women is in the two novels. Even though their conditions differ, the women have a similar starting point, and despite their breaking with the norms they may all of them end by closing the circle by returning to this starting point - the ideal of

femininity. Laura and with her Marian, by settling at Limmeridge with a (new) husband, and Kate by returning to her home and family.

Furthermore, both novels display a limited view on men, who are in most cases reduced to stereotypical caricatures who serve a sharply defined function. This is a step backwards in relation to the fact that the female characters of the novels go against the ideal of femininity, as the narrow or even derogatory representation of men echoes the traditional Victorian representation of women which both novels to some degree seek contradict. By their narrow representation of men, the novels can thus be seen as undermining their broad representations of women. In fact, this works as a fortifying of the gulf between the sexes, and thus both novels confirm that the two sexes are inherently different and in essence not to be changed.

This view on the sexes implies that a person is seen as a representative of his or her sex, not as an individual, and this may be the ultimate barrier to sex equality. The substitution of Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick because of a similarity in dresses, looks and gender echoes the workmen's primitive whistling after Kate Brown. Both are cases of seeing the gender instead of the person, and not inquiring into the individual personality. This is the true basis of repression, to hold individuals confined within such fixed matrices of gender, but it is important to stress that the individual can be male as well as female, and the repression can be imposed by all parties, even by a person upon him- or herself.

As long as none of the novels fully succeed in rising beyond this traditional representation of men and women, they may be seen as maintaining and even reproducing the ideal of femininity, across the century that separates them.

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