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“I was my own woman”: Breakdown and Recovery in Sylvia Plath’s
The Bell Jar and Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*

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Abstract

During the 1950's and 1960's an unexplainable phenomenon arose amongst middle class women in North America. Women in the suburbs experienced a feeling of emptiness even though they believed they had everything they could ever ask for in life. This phenomenon is covered by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) where she discusses the identity crisis and loss of self that many women experienced during this time. In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969), the two characters Esther Greenwood and Marian MacAlpin are faced with the housewife ideal of the 1950's and 1960's. The characters follow a similar plot pattern in which they descend into a dark place and rise out of it in the end; Esther falling into depression and Marian to developing an eating disorder. Both characters also express feelings of objectification as Esther feels trapped in a bell jar and Marian relates to food being produced and consumed. This essay examines the characters breakdowns in terms of the starting point, the crisis and the resolution.

Key words: Individuality, identity crisis, housewife ideal, depression, eating disorder, objectification, women's role in the 1950's and 1960's

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Introduction

In the 1950's and early 1960's an unidentified phenomenon that could not be explained arose amongst middle-class women in North America. These women shared a feeling of emptiness even though they believed that they had everything they could ever ask for in life. This phenomenon is known as "the feminine mystique", an expression coined by Betty Friedan in order to explain the anxieties, frustrations and identity crisis in relation to a time when the housewife-mother ideal was women's reality and essentially their only option.

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) are two novels that deal with the emptiness and numbness described as "the feminine mystique", where women lose their place in the world mainly as a result of this unnatural position and ideal they are forced into. When *The Bell Jar* was published it became one of the most powerful novels of its generation (Whelehan 36) and it illuminates the hypocrisy, injustice and differences between men and women. The novel deals with the inner breakdown of the main character Esther and her feelings of being trapped in a bell jar, unable to breathe properly. *The Edible Woman* deals with a similar breakdown and focuses on the entrapment of women within their own bodies and belongs to, as Coral Ann Howells puts it, "a specific moment in the history of North American postwar feminism" (Howells 20). The novel also focuses on society's fixation with marriage through the eyes of the main character Marian, who suddenly connects herself to food that is being produced and consumed. Both Esther and Marian have similar experiences in the way that they are confronted with reality and presented with limited options in life. They both live during a time in which the housewife ideal was to be aspired to and even though Esther and Marian are not yet housewives, that may be the position towards which they are headed.

Esther and Marian do not identify with the stereotypical woman of the 1950s' and 1960's, but they are not being taken seriously as individuals with their own hopes and dreams. With society's predetermined role for how women should be and the absence of other images encouraging them to look into themselves, they are not given a chance to fully explore who they are. They are primarily judged and seen as potential wives by their surroundings and the more they let the society's idea of how they should be to take over, the more they lose touch with themselves. The two characters react strongly to their loss of control over who they are in two different ways: Marian develops an eating disorder and Esther falls into depression with several attempts at suicide as a result. In relation to their individual breakdowns, both characters draw connections to them being seen as objects. Esther explains that she feels

trapped in a bell jar and Marian relates to food being produced and consumed.

Even though their illnesses are uttered in different ways, they are placed in a similar plot pattern where they respond to society's pressure by descending into a dark place and rising out of it in the end. This essay will therefore argue that Esther and Marian gradually lose control over themselves due to the societal pressure of becoming housewives, as well as experiencing feelings of objectification, and that they both manage to break free from the societal demands in the end. The character's breakdowns will be compared in terms of the starting point, the crisis and the resolution. In the starting point, the characters struggle with upholding individuality and adapting to the common ideal of women in the 1950's and 1960's. During the crisis, the characters lose control and slowly turn into objects of society and in the resolution they both take charge by actively regaining control.

Women's Role in the 1950's - 1960's and the Unidentified Phenomenon

During the 1950's and 1960's a certain view on femininity and what it meant to be feminine spread in North America. Books, articles and magazines told women how they should live their lives by presenting a predetermined role for how they ought to be as women. The public image that was displayed for young women during this time in popular magazines is presented by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963): "The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home" (23). This is also discussed by Luke Ferretter in *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study* (2010), in which he mentions how women were advised through fashion magazines to make themselves attractive to men and how there were articles telling women that a career, a higher education or independence was not desirable. The articles also focused on different ways for women to find husbands. Ferretter mentions a specific article called "129 Ways to Get a Husband" which propagated on how the best ways for women were to find husbands and it included a list of scenarios where women were suggested to appear helpless and less intelligent in order to attract a man (141).

Friedan also writes about society's obsession with marriage, and claims that society encouraged women to find a man, get married, have children and to embrace the lifestyle of a housewife and a mother. All this resulted in the fact that the average marriage age for women dropped. At the end of the 1950's a large number of girls were engaged already at the age of seventeen. In addition, many girls went to college for the sole reason of finding a suitable

husband (6). In relation to this, Friedan also shed light upon the unexplainable and unfulfilling feeling that many women shared in the middle of living the housewife life that was chosen for them. She realized that this was a rising problem yet to be named when she interviewed women in the suburbs who explained that they felt empty or incomplete and some even felt like crying for no reason (9-10). This unhappiness started to be reported in the media, and newspapers such as *The New York Times* began to discuss this emptiness in the terms of “The Trapped Housewife” (Friedan 11). However, many people found different ways to dismiss this phenomenon by saying for example that education could be the main problem, arguing that the more educated, the more unhappy women would become in their roles as wives. The problem was also dismissed by saying that women should be lucky to be housewives; after all, they were their own bosses with their own plans and schedules. Finally it was also often simply regarded as if this was what it meant to be a woman and that women should merely accept their destiny (Friedan 11-13).

Friedan also discussed the possibility that the women who experienced the emptiness and who felt unfulfilled, were in fact having an identity crisis. This was, according to Friedan, because of the common social image they were taught to live up to rather than looking into themselves, who they were and what they wanted in life. Because of the lack of role models encouraging women to be true to themselves, Friedan discovered that some young women started out with promise and talent but then stopped their education and started to focus more on being popular and getting boys to like them. Friedan argues that these girls were following a typical “feminine adjustment”, a natural curve, but when examining the situation closer she saw that many of them were also afraid to turn out like their housewife mothers (54). This resulted in the girls not searching for their own identity but turning away from everything they could be and instead ending up in a “beatnik vacuum”, a rootless state (56). One example of this is what one of Friedan’s interviewees said:

I used to write poetry. The guidance office says I have this creative ability and I should be at the top of the class and have a great future. But things like that aren’t what you need to be popular. The important thing for a girl is to be popular.

Now I go out with boy after boy, and it’s such an effort because I’m not myself with them. It makes you feel even more alone. And besides, I’m afraid of where it’s going to lead. Pretty soon, all my differences will be smoothed out, and I’ll be the kind of girl that could be a housewife. (Friedan 55)

The interviewee explains that everything that would give her a promising future and the things she is genuinely good at, are not what is needed to be popular so it is therefore dismissed. She gets lost in a created ideal in fear of becoming a housewife and explains that it will inevitably smooth out everything she is and will eventually lead her to become a housewife anyway.

Living up to the housewife ideal and being true to yourself, was a hard thing to uphold. In *The Feminine Mystique* it is also mentioned by Friedan that she did not know any woman who used her mind, played her own part in the world, loved and had children, all at the same time. She gives examples of another kind of woman - women working as professors, teachers, librarians and women who taught her to truly respect her own mind and use it, but mentions that a lot of them were not married and did not have children. Because of this, women chose actively to give up a career before they even started, due to the inevitability of having to give it up eventually (56). A link between the image provided and the emptiness these women were experiencing is obviously there; the same phenomenon that awaits the two main characters in *The Bell Jar* and *The Edible Woman*.

The starting point – A struggle Between Upholding Individuality and Adapting to Society’s Standards

By definition, individuality is: “The fact or condition of existing as an individual; separate and continuous existence” (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*). In *The Bell Jar* and *The Edible Woman*, the reader is introduced to Esther and Marian, two women who show strong signs of being separate from the stereotypical image of the 1950’s and 1960’s woman. Esther Greenwood lives in New York City and has an internship at a magazine. Already at the beginning, it becomes clear that Esther feels out of place in the superficial life of matching shoes and belts that she is a part of. She is in a position that, as she says herself, should make everyone else feel jealous:

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

I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size seven patent leather

shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocket-book to match. (BJ 2)

Esther describes this feeling further: "I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo" (BJ 2-3). It is clear that Esther does not feel comfortable with the image of what should make her content and happy; an image that makes her look like every other woman. Instead it makes her feel empty and as if everything surrounding her is moving while she is standing still, unable to move forward.

Even though she is in a position that should be the envy of other girls, she does not feel what she is expected to feel. What she admires and what seems to be of importance to her is what is going on inside people. This becomes especially clear when she is talking about her boss Jay Cee whom she looks up to: "Jay Cee was my boss, and I liked her a lot, in spite of what Doreen said. She wasn't one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewellery. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter" (BJ 5). Here Esther passes strong judgements on the other women and sees them through a prejudiced lens, equating their superficiality with lack of intelligence. It is clear that superficiality is something that does not impress her. Instead, she looks up to a woman who does not live up to the popular image presented by the fashion magazines but rather represents individuality and therefore stands out from the rest. This captures Esther's desire of wanting to go her own way as well and reach for something she is interested in herself, which in her case is poetry and writing. Esther therefore applies to a summer writing course that she feels very confident about: "Of course, it was a very small class, and I had sent in my story a long time ago and hadn't heard from the writer yet, but I was sure I'd find the letter of acceptance waiting on the mail table at home" (BJ 99). Esther shows that she has ambitions and specific plans for her future.

When the reader is first introduced to Marian MacAlpin, she lives with her friend Ainsley and is working at a market research company. Throughout *The Edible Woman* Marian also appears somewhat distant from the stereotypical image of the 1950's and 1960's woman in the way she describes other women and how she is seen by her boyfriend Peter. One example is that when she is talking about the women at her workplace, also referred to as "the office virgins", she mentions that they are "artificial blondes" (16). She sees them as being so artificial that they even leave traces after themselves. This is how she describes one of the

office virgins: “Emmy always looks as though she is coming unravelled. Stray threads trail from her hems, her lipstick sloughs off in dry scales, she sheds wispy blonde hairs and flakes of scalp on her shoulders and back; everywhere she goes she leaves a trail of assorted threads” (*EW* 16). She talks about the other women as if she is not a part of what they represent. Peter also describes Marian as different from the other women, seeing her as independent when they meet for the first time. He also says that these are all qualities that he likes about her: “...and he had told me later that it was my aura of independence and common sense he had liked: he saw me as the kind of girl who wouldn’t take over his life. He had recently had an unpleasant experience with what he called “the other kind” (*EW* 61). Peter as well as Marian, places her in the category of “a different kind of woman”, because she stands out from the rest with her radiance of independence and her desire to do something more with her life.

Esther’s and Marian’s stories take place during a time when women aspiring for other things in life than becoming a housewife, for example having a career, were often described as rare and maladjusted by their surroundings (Helson 33). To begin with, the characters are already in a place where they do not relate to the stereotypical image that women around them are a part of. They have plans on having careers and show interests that apply to them as individuals and not something that has been planted in them by society. In *The Bell Jar* it becomes clear to Esther that what she herself wants to do with her life and the common view on what she ought to be doing, do not go well together. The “right” thing for Esther to do as a woman would be to stay at home while her future husband makes a career. The following statements by Esther’s boyfriend Buddy’s mother, illustrate the different expectations that are put on men and women. She says: “What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security” and “What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from” (*BJ* 67). With statements like these, women’s own wishes and dreams are being disregarded and trampled on in front of Esther’s eyes since they automatically turn women into shells without depth or individual desires. It means that for her to be a wife, she needs to put her own dreams aside and a collision therefore appears between “Esther that loves writing” and “Esther eventually becoming a wife”.

Buddy also tells Esther in a “sinister, knowing way” (*BJ* 81) that she will never be able to combine her love for poetry and her destiny as a housewife. He says that once she is married, she will go through an inevitable change: “...after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn’t want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state”. (*BJ* 81) Esther now has a vision

of how her life could end up if she lets society's image of her life as a woman take over. Even Buddy knows that marriage will turn her into a hollow version of herself and it is presented to her as something that cannot be controlled by her but something that is an inevitability.

The conflict that becomes clear to Esther with her not being able to do things for herself and at the same time go through life on the same conditions as men, is also brought up in *The Edible Woman*. Marian's friend Joe talks to her about what he thinks happen to a woman after she gets married and brings up the same phenomenon that seems to await her in the future: "She gets the idea she has a mind, her professors pay attention to what she has to say, they treat her like a thinking human being; when she gets married, her core gets invaded ... The centre of her personality, the thing she's built up; her image of herself, if you like" (EW 259). Joe continues: "So she allows her core to get taken over by the husband. And when the kids come, she wakes up one morning and discovers she doesn't have anything left inside, she's hollow, she doesn't know who she is anymore; her core has been destroyed" (EW 259-260). As a solution to this phenomenon, he suggest that women should perhaps not be allowed to go to university for the sole reason of avoiding a situation like that to happen to all these women. He therefore says: "Maybe women shouldn't be allowed to go to university at all; then they wouldn't always be feeling later on that they've missed out on the life of the mind" (EW 260). What Joe tells Marian is that women are not given a chance to explore themselves before the essence of who they are is taken away from them.

What both Esther and Marian hear from others is also what Friedan shows in *The Feminine Mystique* regarding the vision that one of Freidan's interviewees had about not seeing the meaning of aspiring for something more in life if that would be taken away from her anyway (56). It is also strongly connected to the fear of becoming a housewife and what would happen after they got married. Another one of Friedan's interviewees said: "I can't see myself as being married and having children. It's as if I wouldn't have any personality myself. My mother's like a rock that has been smoothed by the waves, like a void" (55). The more a woman adapts to the role society gives women, the more she loses hold of herself and who she is, which then leads to her waking up one day and realizing that everything she once was is gone. To adapt to the common image of what you are expected to do and be as a woman and still keep your individuality, is not possible for women that aspire for something more in life. That is where their fear is building up and grows from.

The paralyzed, hollow and powerless state that is described and to some extent feared in both novels, is also strongly connected to what the main duty of a wife is; to have children. In *The Bell Jar* Esther understands a woman's destiny when Buddy brings her to witness a

childbirth at the hospital where he studies to be a doctor. The woman giving birth has been given a drug so that she will not remember the pain later which makes Esther think: “I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn’t groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been...” (*BJ* 62). Esther’s view here is that men has a power over women and that they see women are essentially only good for giving birth, thus giving them these kinds of drugs so that they will have babies over and over again.

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian also reflects on the loss of power and individuality in relation to having babies when thinking of her pregnant friend Clara: “She was thinking that now Clara was deflating toward her normal size again she would be able to talk with her more freely: she would no longer feel as though she was addressing a swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead, a shape that had made her think of a queen-ant, bulging with the burden of an entire society, a semi-person...” (*EW* 122). This fits with the societal image where all women are being cast in the same mould to fit with what is expected from them, and as Sofia Sanches-Grant argues, the pregnant body here accentuates these patriarchal demands (83). This image is what both Esther and Marian have been trying to separate themselves from right from the start and this is the image that both characters are struggling with. They see that women are shaped by the influences of society in different ways. Esther sees a woman who is powerless and bound by duty to only give birth, and Marian describes her pregnant friend as being a semi-person, constructed by the burden of society.

The Crisis - Losing Control and Becoming Objects of Society

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian is all of a sudden close to the married life because she gets engaged to her boyfriend Peter. The engagement happens quite quickly and the vision of the future that has been presented to both Esther and Marian about what will happen once they get married, is starting to get at Marian the exact moment that Peter asks how they would be as a married couple. Looking into Peter’s eyes, she sees the reflection of herself, but not in the shape of a person: “As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes” (*EW* 85). Suddenly she is not able to see herself as the person she was a minute before, or even a person at all. It is obvious that a transformation is taking place, a change over which she does not seem to have control. Interestingly, the small and oval

object that Marian sees reflected in Peter's eyes, turn up at breakfast the next morning in the shape of an egg: "I was wondering whether I could face an egg" (*EW* 87). This indicates that the object she actually saw in the image before her reflecting in Peter's eyes, was herself in the shape of an egg; a faceless and featureless object that looks the same as every other egg, lacking individual representations. As eggs also often come in pre-packaged boxes, measured and lined up with other identical eggs, it predicts how she sees and feels about her future as a housewife.

With this transformation and Marian starting to connect herself to a faceless object, she also starts to let go of herself. Marian gradually puts herself in Peter's hands, feeling that she no longer has full control over herself and therefore lets Peter take charge instead. It is a gradual descent into her refusal to make decisions or voice her opinions. For example, she even lets Peter settle their wedding plans: "I heard a soft flannelly voice I barely recognized, saying 'I'd rather have you decide that. I'd rather leave big decisions up to you'. I was astounded at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it" (*EW* 94). What seems to be happening here is that Marian follows the pattern of the "feminine adjustment" mentioned by Friedan, where young women stopped doing things for themselves, and slowly adapted to the image of the potential housewife (54). It could therefore be an indication that the numbness and loss of self that was explained as the feminine mystique, has started getting to her as well. The further she gets into the engagement the more the loss of control progresses and as she mentions herself, she barely recognizes her own voice.

Marian's sudden transformation is emphasized through the shift in point of view from the first person to the third person perspective. A character's point of view refers to the narrator's relationship with what the narrator sees in relation to the world in which the story takes place (Griffith 45). It shows that Marian's relationship with her surroundings is shifting with the perspective in which she sees and experience life. With this change she also continues to let Peter decide and choose more things for her, even what she is going to eat: "She had fallen into the habit in the last month or so of letting him choose for her. It got rid of the vacillation she had found herself displaying when confronted with a menu: she never knew what she wanted to have. But Peter could make up their minds right away" (*EW* 159). Here we see how easily Peter resumes responsibility for Marian or takes charge of her. Another event which shows that Peter is in control of Marian is when he is throwing a party and tells Marian how he thinks she should dress for the occasion: "Peter had suggested that she might have something done with her hair. He had also hinted that perhaps she should buy

a dress that was, as he put it, ‘not quite so mousy’ as any she already owned, and she had duly bought one. It was short, red and sequined. She didn’t think it was really her, but the saleslady did” (*EW* 228). She agrees to make these changes to herself that turns her into someone she does not relate to, moving further away from the Marian she was in the beginning.

Marian’s connection to food gradually becomes worse the further into the engagement with Peter she gets. It is as if she constantly sees similarities with the food she eats and herself in relation to her situation:

The cow in the book, she recalled, was drawn with eyes and horns and an udder. It stood there quite naturally, not at all disturbed by the peculiar markings painted on its hide. Maybe with lots of careful research they’ll eventually be able to breed them, she thought, so that they’re born already ruled and measured. She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. (*EW* 163-164)

After this observation, Marian can no longer eat meat. An eating disorder is usually not caused by one factor only, but it is often a combination of psychological, biological and environmental factors that affect a person’s eating behaviour (Dovey 141). In this case, what Marian is dealing with is her gradual transformation into a constructed version of herself caused by societal pressure. Some women use food as a way of control when they feel that they do not have control over certain societal demands, such as beauty standards or how they should be or act as women (Michel & Willard 37). The reason that Marian makes this observation of the cow being bred, measured and finally eaten, to suddenly not being able to eat it herself anymore, could be that she sees herself as the animals that under constructed forms are fitted to become the best meat (housewife) possible. Similar to the eggs that come in pre-packaged boxes, lined up and looking the same, the animals are also measured to reach an identical end result. As Howell also argues, there is a strong connection between trying to adapt to the housewife ideal and the concept of food in *The Edible Woman*; meaning that Marian subconsciously is rejecting the idea of marriage by controlling her intake of food (29).

Esther in *The Bell Jar* is interested in poetry and writing and she has the ambition to do something with this interest of hers. When she applied for the summer writing course that was important to her, she felt confident that she would be accepted. The turning point for Esther comes when she finds out that she did not make it into the writing course. This news turns her life upside down and this is the point at which her depression starts. She realizes that the

writing course was like a security for her and now that she does not have anything to hold her up anymore, she simply describes it as falling into a gap: “All through June the writing course had stretched before me like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer. Now I saw it totter and dissolve, and a body in a white blouse and green skirt plummet into the gap” (*BJ* 110). Esther’s dreams are suddenly being shattered in front of her eyes.

Poetry and writing were the two things in Esther’s life that she was genuinely interested in. When she no longer has, what for her was a safe bridge over a chaotic place, it pushes her into a feeling of not having control over her own life anymore. In a desperate attempt to find her way again, she tries to picture alternative career paths: “I could be a waitress or a typist. But I couldn’t stand the idea of being either one” (*BJ* 121). Esther looks at these other options but does not find either of them suitable for her and it is as if she does not have anything to hold on to anymore. She ends up in a void similar to the one described in *The Feminine Mystique*, which described girls ending up in a rootless vacuum because of the fear of becoming housewives (56). Esther finds herself being lost between the few alternatives she has in front of her and it therefore leaves her in a passive state where she is unable to see her place in life anymore.

The downward spiral Esther finds herself in, manifests itself in a serious depression. Depression has been described as: “a sneak thief, slipping into a life gradually and robbing it of meaning, one loss at a time. The losses are imperceptible at first, but eventually weigh so heavily that the person’s life becomes empty. Once begun, the course of depression varies with the individual and with the form of the illness” (Ainsworth 3). The exact causes of depression are difficult to pin down and there are several psychosocial and neurobiological theories of what causes a depression. Some risk factors that have been established, especially in adolescence, are “deficits in social support” and “stressful life events” (Stice & Bearman 597). As this is a moment in Esther’s life when her world turns upside down, it of course puts an enormous amount of stress on her. In addition to this, she does not have the support she needs from society, which fails to give her a positive image to live up to. Esther loses hold of that last little piece that was her greatest interest and that has been holding her together. Eventually her depression becomes worse and reaches a stage where she cannot sleep anymore.

However, in the middle of her breakdown Esther does express a desperate wish to be “normal”, signifying that her life would be much easier if she was able to adapt to the common image and be happy and content with that. She reflects about this when she sees a

man one day who works as a prison guard and imagines what her life could have been like if she had married him:

I was thinking that if I'd had the sense to go on living in that old town I might just have met this prison guard in school and married him and had a parcel of kids by now. It would be nice, living up by the sea with piles of little kids and pigs and chickens, wearing what my grandmother called wash dresses and sitting about in some kitchen with bright linoleum and fat arms, drinking pots of coffee. (*BJ* 144)

The reason she imagines this life has probably to do with her desire to rid the emptiness and anxiety that comes with being lost and if she had the sense to stay and live that kind of life, she would. At the same time she cannot adjust to something that does not come natural to her and so she distances herself from it. It is also as if she is carrying a fear that she has to choose one life over another and that could also be adding to the confusion and that she simply is stuck in the middle.

Living in a society where women's individualities are being erased, has made both characters start to see themselves as objects. It can be compared to what happens when a woman's body is being objectified, namely that the body, or parts of the body are being separated from the person. This then leads to the fact that the woman herself sees her own body as "an object to be evaluated" (Muehlenkamp, Swanson & Brausch 24). Here the titles of the novels *The Bell Jar* and *The Edible Woman* are relevant to the character's mind sets and mental illnesses; depression and eating disorder. Esther describes her life and herself as being trapped in a bell jar and that it would not matter where she went in the world because she would always feel trapped: "I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (*BJ* 178). A bell jar is typically used for objects to be observed and examined in and it is therefore interesting that Esther chooses this simile to explain how she feels in relation to her surroundings. She becomes the object here because society and its expectations are turning her into one by removing the layers of who she is, piece by piece until there is nothing left. Marian shares a similar feeling of being exposed and having her individual features slowly removed. It started with her seeing herself faceless like an egg in her fiancée's eyes and then becoming more aware of the similarities between herself and the food that is being produced and consumed around her. Esther and Marian see themselves as exposed

objects due to the gradual removal of their personas in order for them to fit into the housewife ideal.

The societal pressure and feelings of objectification eventually make Esther's and Marian's situation in life unbearable. For Esther it leads to her not finding a way out of the darkness that she has entered by making these observations in which she sees herself in relation to society. Esther therefore finally attempts to take her own life on several occasions due to her depression, and the most common risk factor with the illness is suicidal behaviour (Beautrais 1) which explains why she sees that as her only option. She attempts to take her own life because, as she says herself, it is something deep inside her that she wants to get hold of and kill: "It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at" (*BJ* 142). It is an emptiness that she most likely is referring to here, as if she wants to abolish everything that keeps making her feel different. For Marian it leads to the point where she cannot eat or even drink anything anymore. It becomes obvious to her as she sits in a restaurant with a menu in her hand: "'Nothing. I can't eat anything', she said, 'I can't eat anything at all. Not even a glass of orange juice.' It has finally happened at last then. Her body had cut itself off. The good circle had dwindled to a point, a black dot, closing everything outside.... She looked at the grease-spot on the cover of the menu, almost whimpering with self-pity" (*EW* 283). Marian has reached a severe and critical stage in her breakdown where her body is refusing food altogether, while she stands helpless alongside the turmoil that has taken over her life.

The Resolution – Regaining Control

In *The Bell Jar* Esther is bothered by the predetermined future that is staked out by her society. The more she realizes what is expected from her as a woman, the more she loses control of who she is and where she is heading. She is eventually admitted to an asylum where she meets Doctor Nolan, a doctor who will come to play an important part in Esther's recovery. She is the one helping Esther to get out of "the bell jar" after giving her an electric shock treatment: "All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to circulating air" (*BJ* 206). After this relief, Esther takes action and starts to regain control of her life. With the bell jar standing for entrapment in what society wants her to be, she is now free and can do whatever she feels

like doing. The way she decides to do this is by starting on birth control as she does not want to be controlled by any man: “‘What I hate is the thought of being under a man’s thumb,’ I had told Doctor Nolan. ‘A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line’” (*BJ* 212). When she is on the examination table for getting birth control she says: “I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: ‘I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person...’” (*BJ* 213). After getting birth control she finally says: “I was my own woman” (*BJ* 213). Esther shows a new strength and expresses feelings of freedom and liberation.

The next important action she takes to regain control is to decide that she wants to lose her virginity: “Ever since I’d learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck. It had been of such enormous importance to me for so long that my habit was to defend it at all costs. I had been defending it for five years and I was sick of it” (*BJ* 218). With losing her virginity, Esther does the opposite of what is seen as the right thing for her to do as a woman, in a time when premarital sex was frowned upon (Ferreter 117). It indicates that on a personal level, she revolts against society and takes control over herself and her actions again. It becomes clear that by doing this, Esther no longer feels as lost and out of place as she was feeling in the beginning: “I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition” (*BJ* 219). For her to feel as if she is part of something and is experiencing a sense of belonging, points towards that being an important factor in her road to recovery. Even though she has risen from the dark place where she saw suicide as her only option, she does bring up the risk that she could end up in a dark place again, meaning that she is at risk of losing control and becoming depressed later in life: “But I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure at all. How did I know that someday – at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere – the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again?” (*BJ* 230).

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian decides in the end that she wants to make a cake, and it turns out to be a cake in the shape of a woman, standing for the ultimate proof of her realization that she is on her way of becoming an object of society. She gives the cake woman-like features and gives it eyes, pink lips, painted finger nails and a dress out of icing. As the cake is finished, Marian confirms that the image is complete: “Her creation gazed up at her, its face doll-like and vacant except for the small silver glitter of intelligence in each green eye” (*EW* 298). Marian has created a cake similar to the common image of the feminine and passive woman as described by Friedan (23). To the cake she also says: “You look delicious” and “Very appetizing. And that’s what you get for being food” (*EW* 298), as if she is talking

to herself and all other women who have allowed themselves to become “food” for society by following the predetermined path towards becoming housewives.

Suddenly Marian feels hungry and has some cake herself. If the cake here stands for the housewife ideal of the 1950's and 1960's, it means that she is now fully aware of where she was heading. As a conscious act of control, she is now figuratively “eating” the socially constructed image, in other words she is now the one being active and in charge instead. Sanches-Grant discusses the fact that when Marian eats the cake, she is refusing this constructed femininity (90) and after this event, the narrative perspective changes back to first person perspective. Marian continues her liberation by breaking off her engagement with Peter with the motivation: “I realized Peter was trying to destroy me. So now I'm looking for another job” (*EW* 306). Focusing on the fact that she breaks off the engagement and looks for another job, shows that she is back to discovering herself and what she wants to do with her life. This breakthrough and awakening therefore becomes her final resolution.

Conclusion

In *The Bell Jar* and *The Edible Woman*, the reader is introduced to two women who have aspirations, desires and individualities. Esther Greenwood is interested in poetry and writing and she looks up to her female boss who stands for qualities that she admires. She also distances herself from the stereotypical women whom she refers to as “fashion magazine gushers” wearing “giddy jewellery” (*BJ* 5). Marian in *The Edible Woman* also distances herself from this superficial image in a similar way when she describes the women at her work as artificial, whereas she herself is described as a woman with an aura of independence. All this points to the fact that they do not relate to the image that is constructed to make every woman look and act the same; the image that was provided from magazines and books during the 1950's and 1960's.

Eventually, a clash appears between who they are as individuals and the image constructed by society and both characters realize that they cannot be true to themselves and live up to that image at the same time. Both Esther and Marian learn that women are turning into objects and adapting themselves to this image where women carry the burden of society, especially in relation to having children and giving birth. Esther feels that women are put in a powerless position when she says that it is typical for a man to invent a drug that will make women want to have babies over and over again, as she is not the one in control of her own body. Marian sees her pregnant friend as a semi-person, where the pregnant body becomes a

representation of the patriarchal demands. This leads to the fact that they lose hold and control over themselves because they are faced with this created image as well. As Esther loses the one thing in her life that she has chosen for herself, the writing course, she does not see anything else around her that she can relate to. In the fear of turning into a housewife, she becomes depressed and sees herself as being trapped in a bell jar, as examined and exposed objects of investigation are. When Marian gets engaged, she follows the pattern of a feminine adjustment, where she loses control of herself and gives it to her fiancée Peter instead. Marian then develops an eating disorder, connecting herself to a faceless egg and to animals being bred and measured to become food - lacking individual representations. The eating disorder becomes a desperate attempt to have something to control while struggling with her subconscious rejection of marriage.

What happens with both characters in the end is that they turn away from what society expects them to do and take control over their lives again. This awakening is for Esther caused by a combination of psychological treatments together with an active revolt against society by getting birth control and losing her virginity. These actions make her feel as if she finally is a part of something and that she, as she expresses it herself, is her own woman. For Marian to make a cake in shape of a woman, shows that she has come to a realization that she was on her way of losing herself in a socially constructed image. By eating it, she takes an active role in her life and manifests her power in relation to the ideal. After her realization, she breaks off her engagement with Peter and breaks free from the vicious cycle that she was stuck in. Esther and Marian have therefore both gone from descending into deep darkness to rising out of it again, now standing as stronger women.

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