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The Destructive Performance – A Feminist Reading of Three Texts Written by Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" are three literary texts in which the three protagonists seem to play a role which makes them miserable and suicidal. This essay explores what elements that are involved in making these women unhappy and self-destructive. Based on a close reading of the three texts and Judith Butler's theories on gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix the essay concludes that the three protagonists are performing their gender and that they are affected by the grids and regulations of the heterosexual matrix. Furthermore, the essay concludes that the protagonists are torn apart between on the one hand act the role they have been assigned and on the other hand follow their deepest dreams and desires, and that this tug-of-war between their inner selves and the outside pressure disconnect the women from their own identities and in the end also dismantles their beings until there is almost nothing left.

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1. Introduction

If you were to ask a young woman today what she wants to do when she grows up the answers may vary all between back-packing around the globe, working as a physician or perhaps becoming a police officer, but if you were to ask a young woman growing up in the 60s, she would probably say “I want to be a housewife”. The suburban housewife, Betty Friedan writes in her book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, “was the dream image of the young American women” and as a wife, mother and caretaker she was supposed to find her “true feminine fulfilment” (7). This image of the happy housewife was created and nurtured by the women’s magazines in the 50s and 60s, and was also prominent in television, movies and novels. As if that was not enough, experts also presented plenty of advice on how to be the perfect housewife, how to keep your marriage exciting and how to raise your children appropriately (Friedan 21). Women who wanted more, for example a higher education, a career or perhaps just something else outside the domestic sphere were pitied, since they were regarded unfeminine and neurotic (Friedan 5). The image of the happy housewife versus the unhappy career woman became a modern day feminine morality story in the middle of the 20th century, creating a new, more complex image of the Madonna and the Whore (Friedan 31).

The happy housewife and the unhappy career woman were represented as the only two roles women could play in the 50s and 60s, but for some women, these options were not enough. More and more women began to talk among each other about an issue that was referred to as “the problem”. Betty Friedan called this unspecified and unnerving sentiment “the problem that has no name” (9). The feeling of “is this it?” seemed to haunt women all over the country and as they became more and more unhappy and distressed, Friedan stated “we can no longer ignore that voice within women that says, ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home’” (20).

Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing are three well known authors that were living and writing in this peculiar time, and they all seem to discuss this problem and similar kinds of themes in their fiction. Sylvia Plath’s novel, *The Bell Jar*, portrays a young woman’s breakdown in the hot summer of 1953. The protagonist of the novel is named Esther Greenwood, and her life, upbringing and mental health issues are a reflection of Plath’s own experiences at that time. Esther is ambivalent because she does not want to be a woman on the terms and conditions stated by society. As her depression escalates, she says that it feels as she is trapped under a bell jar. Lois Ames comments on the fact that Plath herself struggled as she

felt that she was split between her life as a poet and her life as a wife and mother, and she wrote that she felt as if she had been going around for most of her life “in the rarefied atmosphere under a bell jar” (5).

Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman* was written in 1965 but was not published until four years later, in 1969, just as the second wave of the feminist movement started to rise in North America. It has been thought that the novel was a product of the movement, but in the introduction to the 2009 edition of *The Edible Woman* Atwood herself claims the novel to be “protofeminist rather than feminist” and, even though naming Betty Freidan and Simone de Beauvoir as her great inspirations, she explains that since there was no women’s movement when the book was written it could not be a feminist novel (x). Atwood’s interest in women’s social experiences and issues are portrayed in *The Edible Woman* as the protagonist, Marian, must choose between a job which will take her nowhere or to marry her fiancé to try to escape, and this compulsion to choose turns Marian’s body into a battlefield.

Just like Plath and Atwood, Doris Lessing is an author with complex female characters. She is famous for her ability to explore questions about life and the human mind but also the relationship between women and men and women’s experiences (Quawas 108). Her interest in women’s situation and their search for identity is visible in her short story “To Room Nineteen” published for the first time in 1963 in *A Man and Two Women*. The story depicts the way in which Susan, the protagonist, is slowly and painfully losing contact with her inner self, and drifting further and further away from her life and family.

The three protagonists presented here all seem to play some kind of role which makes them extremely unhappy and unfulfilled. Their roles and lives are artificial and it seems as they stray further and further away from their true identities. All three women react differently to this self-denial, but what they all seem to have in common is that they fall apart due to unconscious self-destruction. Whereas Esther falls into a clinical depression and actively tries to kill herself, the other two react in more passive, but ultimately equally self-destructive ways: Marian develops an eating disorder which leads her to the brink of starvation and death, whereas Susan goes through a gradual withdrawal from life, until she has isolated herself completely in an empty room, in which she ends her life.

This essay aims to explore what elements that are involved in making these women, who on the surface seem to have it all, so miserable and suicidal. By applying Judith Butler’s theories on gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix on these three literary works, I intend to show that the female protagonists act the role they are expected to act, performing their gender, according to society’s inexorable norms on how a woman should

perform. In the end, it is this acting, this playing a part which is not authentic, that disconnects the women from their own identity and dismantles their beings until there is almost nothing left.

2. Judith Butler: Gender Performativity and the Heterosexual Matrix

Judith Butler begins the first chapter of her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, from 1990, with the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir's well-known statement "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one". In her 1999 preface, she states that her ideas are inspired by and rooted in what she calls "French Theory", and she mentions French intellectuals such as Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva and Wittig as having influenced the language of the text. Additionally, she acknowledges her engagement with feminist theorists, such as Gayle Rubin and Esther Newton, and feminist ideas and debates, such as the idea of the socially constructed character of gender (x-xi).

Early feminist theory acknowledges gender as a social construction, which separates it from the biological sex. Butler questions this assumption by asking the question, "can we refer to a 'given' sex or a 'given' gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means?" (9). She continues her discussion by questioning what essentially defines sex. Does sex have history and is sex depicted as true natural facts to serve various social and political interests? (9). In that case, Butler argues, it would be conceivable to label sex "as culturally constructed as gender [...] with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (9-10). From the assumption that both sex and gender are culturally constructed, Butler argues that gender does not follow sex, nor does desire and sexuality necessary follow gender, as seen in homosexual and bisexual contexts. However, we are taught to think that our identity is closely linked with gender and sexuality, and we live in a social culture where heterosexual context and sexual coherence is depicted to be the ideal (185).

Based on Monique Wittig's notion of "heterosexual contract" and Adrienne Rich's notion of "compulsory heterosexuality", Butler uses the term heterosexual matrix to define these structures that 'heterosexualises' bodies, genders and desires within the heterosexual context. The elementary notion of the heterosexual matrix is that there must be a

“gender intelligibility” which assumes that the only way for differently sexed bodies to coexist is by having oppositional and hierarchal notions of “a stable sex expressed through a stable gender” i.e. masculine expresses male and feminine expresses female (208:6). Butler argues that there is no real “essence” to a gender, nor is there any existing “objective ideal to which gender aspires” (190). Gender is not an objective truth, but since we think we know how a man and a woman should act we continuously act as expected. Consequently, the notion of a true gender is constructed and therefore, it is factual to say that the true origin of gender is “the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders” (Butler 190).

Butler defines our behaviour and performance, as an ideal woman or man, as “acts, gestures, enactments [which] are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs” (185). These acts are not in any way a “originating force of radical will”, since gender performance is a “strategy of survival” within the heterosexual matrix (Butler 190). Our willingness to keep performing is nurtured by our belief that the constructions are fundamental i.e. necessary and natural (Butler 190).

In addition, it is important to understand that like all social rituals, the gender performance must be repeated, because the act of repetition is a “reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (Butler 191). Furthermore, the performance is what Butler defines as a public action. Hence there are both temporal and cultural influences of the performance, and the aim is to uphold gender according to the binary frame (191). As mentioned, our willingness to “play along” is deeply rooted in our belief that this is a necessity and that it is natural, but it cannot be disregarded that gender performance is very much a way of surviving within the “compulsory systems”, and as Butler emphasises: “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (190).

3. The Protagonists and Identity

Our unconscious awareness of our roles, and how they should be performed, might be expressed in the feeling of being wrong when we are ourselves, as it is for Esther in *The Bell Jar*. Esther thinks to herself, “I knew something was wrong with me [...] I was supposed to be having the time of my life” (Plath 2). Instead of “hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other” (Plath 4), as the other girls, Esther is deeply concerned with the political issue of the electrocution of the Rosenbergs (Plath 1). Esther knows that it is out of

performance for a woman to care about politics, and she therefore turns against herself, accusing herself of being wrong, because she cannot stop thinking about these issues.

Susan, in “To Room Nineteen”, is at first much more accepting of her female role than Esther. Both Susan and Matthew “had played the same roles, male and female,” long before they became a couple (Lessing 305). Susan thus knows and does not question what is expected of her as a wife, and they are said to be a “balanced and sensible family” (Lessing 306). Marian, in *The Edible Woman*, is according to Samira Sasani and Diba Arjmandi first accepting of her female role and they also claim that she endorses social norms (1521). I agree to some extent, but I would argue that it seems more like Marian is unaware of what it means to live as a woman in a patriarchal society rather than accepting of the role and the social norms.

When Marian’s relationship with her boyfriend, and later fiancé, deepens, she starts to become more aware of the patriarchal structures around her and she starts to feel uncomfortable in her female role. Her first realisation that something is wrong is when her fiancé Peter bonds with her friend Len over a hunting story. As Peter vividly describes to Len how he caught a bunny, and “slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack” (Atwood 80), Marian is alarmed. The fact that Peter continuously refers to the bunny as “she” and how the story is depicted creates a macabre image of something that could be imagined as an assault. Marian thinks Peter’s voice changes into a “voice [she] didn’t recognize” (Atwood 80), as if he suddenly turns in to another person.

In contrast to Susan, Marian does not seem to know how to perform the role of wife, which is depicted in the text when Marian and Peter discuss their wedding, and Marian hears “a soft flannelly voice [she] barely recognized, saying ‘I’d rather have you decide that. I’d rather leave the big decisions up to you’” (Atwood, 107). Marian is shocked, because she has never said anything like that before. In her confusion of what to do or how to act, she signs herself over to Peter. This is also shown later in the narrative, when Peter and Marian are having dinner together in a restaurant, and Peter demonstrates his “superiority of power in making decisions” (Sasani and Arjmandi 1522) by choosing Marian’s meal, and Marian lets him do so. As the dinner progresses, the couple starts to discuss bringing up children and “Peter thought that all children ought to be punished for breaches of discipline; even physically” (Atwood 180). Sasani and Arjmandi claim that Peter sees it as his role to regulate those who do not follow the rules of the heterosexual matrix (1522), which I think is interesting considering Peter’s occupation as a lawyer where he on a daily basis admonishes people, especially juveniles, for breaking the law (Atwood 180).

Peter's attitude towards bringing up children troubles Marian, and when she tries to give a counter-argument she is diminished by Peter who claims that Marian "[does not] understand these things" since she has "led a sheltered life" (Atwood 180). For the first time, Marian sees Peter as a potential violent person and her mind starts to wander. She thinks of a bloody hunter who just killed a deer, the story of a young boy who recently killed nine people with a rifle and Peter cutting his steak. Marian looks down at her own steak and suddenly she sees it as "a hunk of muscle [...] it was flesh and blood" (Atwood 185). Gayle Greene as well as Sasani and Arjmandi identify this as the starting point of Marian's starvation (106; 1522) and I would argue that this is when she truly realises the violent patriarchal structures around her, and what it truly means to be a woman in this society.

It seems like all three protagonists more or less are aware of the expectations that trail their roles. Their assigned roles appear to have a great impact on their identities, since none of them seem to know who they really are. Susan asks herself, "[w]hat, then, was this essential Susan? She did not know" (Lessing 311), and Esther keeps trying out different identities, for example Elly Higginbottom from Chicago (Plath 11), the famous editor named Ee Gee (Plath 39) and the heroine Elaine (Plath 120). According to Susan J. Behrens this struggle with naming herself is closely linked with Esther's struggle to identify herself (241). It seems like she struggles to identify herself because she knows that she cannot do all the things that are expected of her as a woman: she cannot cook, she cannot write short hand, she cannot dance or sing (Plath 75-76), and she feels "dreadfully inadequate" (Plath 77) since the only thing she is good at is winning prizes for her scholarly achievements. Thus, she tries out other identities, dreaming how it would be if she actually was completely free to choose.

This identity struggle is also visible when Susan adapts the name Mrs Jones (Lessing 325). As Mrs Jones "she was no longer Susan Rawlings, mother of four, wife of Matthew" (Lessing 327). It is noticeable that she identifies herself as mother and wife, nothing else. Friedan claims that the feminine mystique reassures women that they do not need to know who they really are, since they can easily answer that question by saying "I am X's wife" or "I am Y's mother" (53). Susan reflects on those years when she was playing "roles of responsibilities" and thinking "nothing existed of [her] except the roles that went with being Mrs Matthew Rawlings" (Lessing 327). Betty Friedan argues that the conventions of society do not encourage women to grow up and find themselves and their own identity as humans. Instead, Friedan writes, it was argued by the theorist of femininity that "[a]natomy is woman's destiny [...] the identity of women is determined by their biology" (59). Renée Dowbnia also argues that the construction of 1950s femininity was embodied in the housewife, who

essentially is a wife and a mother (581). When their destinies, roles and place in society are determined merely by biology it is not strange that the protagonists feel torn between on the one hand the expectations of giving everything up for the sake of a life as a housewife and on the other hand their own dreams and desires.

Ainsley, Marian's roommate in *The Edible Woman*, is one of the more controversial characters in the texts, but even she seems to be very indoctrinated with what Butler calls the "culturally intelligible grids of an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality [...] and regulations of sexuality within the reproductive domain" (184-185). She condemns marriage since she does not understand why a woman needs a man, but, even though she seems to be a free, modern and educated woman, she is nevertheless convinced that "no woman has fulfilled her femininity unless she's had a baby" (Atwood 193). Ainsley also reacts to the fact that Marian does not seem to agree with her, as she is not very fond of babies. Ainsley tries to reason with her with a voice that reminds Marian of a voice on the radio, as if Ainsley is trying to persuade her to buy the role of motherhood; the true feminine fulfilment. In addition, Marian's good friend Clara is also trying to sell Marian the idea of having a baby– "you really ought to try it sometime" (Atwood 156) and again Marian thinks of someone trying to sell her a thing (Atwood 156). I would argue that this proves how deeply the structures are rooted, since both of the women think that having a baby is the sole purpose of being a woman, and they also try to convince Marian that this is what she needs. Even though Marian does not seem to like children, she has never questioned the fact that she will be a mother one day, and this is strong evidence that deep down she knows that she is expected to give a child to society, and as the day comes closer and people around her start to put pressure on her, she feels that the decision perhaps is not hers anymore, and that therefore she loses her agency and her ability to make decisions.

Esther also struggles with the expectations of motherhood and how to visualise herself as a mother. "How easy having babies seemed to the women around me!", Esther exclaims and then asks herself, "why was I so unnatural and apart?" (Plath 222). Even if the thought of children actually makes Esther feel sick (Plath 117), she accuses herself of being unnatural and asks herself why she cannot accept the role she has been assigned.

Clara talks about the pain of labour, "of course it hurts like hell" (Atwood 157) she says, but she also assures Marian that she will not remember anything of it, because of the drug you will be given. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther is convinced that this drug is manufactured by man to keep women having babies (Plath 66) and she also thinks that marriage and child birth were "like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private,

totalitarian state” (Plath, 85). Ghandeharion, Bozorgian and Sabbagh propose that “at the back of her mind Esther thinks a pregnant woman is susceptible to mental breakdown, not only because of the excruciating pain, but also because of a loss of identity” (66), which I think could explain Esther’s fear of motherhood.

It is obvious that the role of motherhood, assigned to them due to their biology, is intimidating to the protagonists of these texts. Even Susan, who did not seem to find motherhood as intimidating at first, struggles with her role as a mother as she describes her motherhood as a “bargain” between her and her husband Mathew. Her part of the bargain is that her spirit and soul should live in the house “so that the people in it could grow like plants in water” (Lessing 323), which means giving up her job, her access to the world outside her home and family and consequently also the real Susan, her chance of having an identity of her own.

To give up everything outside the domestic sphere, is a big issue for the other two women as well. In *The Bell Jar*, this ambivalence is symbolised by a fig tree. Esther imagines her life as a fig tree, where every fig represents one life choice. One fig is a husband and a life as a housewife, one fig is the life of a famous author or professor, and another is traveling around the world and have many lovers, etc. Esther feels that she must pick one, but she wants all of them and she knows choosing one means losing everyone else. The fantasy ends with Esther starving to death as the figs rot because she cannot make up her mind (Plath 77). It is plausible that Esther is unable to choose because she wants to do so many different things with her life, but Ghandeharion et al. argue that Esther is throughout the novel ambivalent towards “denying the norms altogether [or] accepting them compliantly” (66) whereas Reneé Dowbnia argues that this inability to choose symbolises Esther’s lack of agency due to the restrictions of the contemporary gender roles (582) and that her apprehension about her future is actually fear of being forced into the domestic sphere, either by the norms or by the effects of her sexual desires (583). I would argue that in this case Esther’s biggest fear is being trapped in a role that she has not chosen for herself, and as Dowbnia suggests the restriction of the time depicted in the novel may force Esther into this role against her will. It seems as this imminent threat may cause Esther’s ambivalence towards making a final decision, as the wrong decision could have devastating consequences on her life.

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian also suffers from ambivalence, portrayed in the novel by shopping for soup. She tries to reason with herself, asking: how does one choose? Even if she is talking about soup, it is clear that the cans of soup represent her life choices and that she is unable to make a contemplated decision, and therefore she shuts her eyes and “let[s]

the thing in [her] that was supposed to respond to the labels just respond [...] something in her must care; after all, she did choose eventually, doing precisely what some planner in a broadloomed office had hoped and predicted she would do” (Atwood 214).

It is clear that Marian experiences a lack of agency as she does not know who she is or what she will become. Betty Friedan writes that women of the 50s and 60s were growing up without having the ability to see themselves after the age of twenty-one (51) and she also argues that women at this time no longer had a “private image” of themselves and what they were capable of becoming as adult women (53). The picture women were relying on was the image constructed by the commercial companies, and women were so unsure of who they were supposed to be that they trusted the “glossy public image” for every feature of their life (Friedan 54). The “planner in the broadloomed office” seems to function as a version of this image discussed by Friedan, and the scene in the store seems to show Marian surrendering herself to a higher authority to decide what she should do with her life.

4. The Situation and the Triggers

It is evident that the protagonists suffer from an ambivalence regarding their identities, but to understand how these uncertain feelings appear it is necessary to understand the socially constructed structures which are depicted in the texts.

The texts are set in the span of the 1950s and to the mid 60s, which is by Ghandeharion et al. described as a post-war culture, an era of economic blossoming which increases consumerism and the standards of middle-class Americans. Middle-class citizens are enjoying themselves and the advertisement agencies on Madison Avenue are thriving of images of happy, comfortable families, and in particular the image of the happy housewife (68). As wives and mothers, women were regarded and respected as an equal to man (Friedan 7), which might sound somewhat surprising to a modern-day reader, but that was the status of housewives during this era.

The illusion that becoming a housewife and mother as the only way for a woman to be an equal to man and to find her true feminine fulfilment was, according to Friedan, created by male editors and writers, back from the war, ready to take over the magazines that during war time had been run by women (37). The subjects that were previously dealt with, such as women’s careers and sentiments, were now replaced with images of cosy domestic spheres and happy families. The business of advertising also augmented and became more prominent in

women's magazines. Companies started to promote things that would benefit women in their daily life and help them become experts in housework, a formula which, Friedan says, was a "product of men's minds" (38) rather than women's.

Ghandeharion et al. elaborate on C.J Smith's argument that the society of the time had a confusing idea of domesticity, and that women encountered many different role models along with conflicting messages by media. Smith claims that media encouraged women to travel and explore the world whilst being high-achieving at school and at the same time they were told to stay at home and learn how to cook. Based on Smith's argument, Ghandeharion et al. state that "the duality of the messages in the media breeds uncertainty, anxiety and frustration" (67). Reneé Dowbnia makes a similar statement as she says that the trademark of women's magazines in the 1950s was the illusion of choice (583). The magazines depicted an image where women could choose freely, and celebrated women's accomplishments outside the domestic sphere, but even though homemaking was not the only option provided in the magazines, it was depicted as "the primary and most fulfilling female role" (584). In other words, they were saying, you can be whatever you want, but you will only be truly happy if you confine yourself to your assigned role. Reading Plath, Atwood and Lessing it seems clear that this duality of messages and the illusion of choice contribute to the protagonists' lack of secure identities, and their ambivalence toward their life-choices.

Women's magazines, advertising and consumerism thus had a great impact on society of the 50s and 60s, and in the texts investigated, this is also portrayed by the protagonists' occupations. Esther has won a prize for writing an essay, which gives her an internship at one of the most famous fashion magazines in New York. The prize includes all expenses paid in New York, a job reading and classifying short stories, but also "piles and piles of free bonuses" such as tickets to fashion shows, appointments at famous hair dressers and fashion advice (Plath 3). Not only are the girls invited to visit various posh places, but they are also given gifts, and Esther realises that the only reason they are given these things is because it is free advertising for the companies. Nonetheless, she cannot be cynical about it because "[she] got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to [them]" (Plath 3). I find it interesting that the girls are only given things to enhance their appearance, such as makeup fitted for each and everyone's complexion (Plath 3) and entry tickets to fancy dinner-parties with "young men with all-American bone structures" (Plath 2) instead of things to inspire their ambitions as writers. It seems as their roles as young women who ought to be married soon are more important than the fact that all the girls clearly have great talents in various areas within the field of writing.

Esther is showered with consumer goods (Plath 3), an experience she is not used to coming from a one-parent household which would not have the funds to provide a life like the other girls staying at the Amazon are used to. Living in a world of advertising and consumerism, as proposed by Ghandeharion et al. affects Esther's way of experiencing the world (68). This is seen for example when she describes a man as having a "white toothpaste-ad smile" (Plath 8) and a drink as being "[...] clear and pure, just like the vodka ad" (Plath 11). It is evident that the images provided by women's magazines and advertising have a great impact on Esther's way of processing the world and her experiences and ultimately also her image of herself.

Advertising also has a great impact on Marian's way of experiencing the world. Marian works at an advertising firm and she describes the organisational structure of the company as being "layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust and [...] the gooey layer in the middle" (Atwood 13). The employees working in the upper crust is referred to as "the men upstairs" (Atwood 13) and the lower crust is the "frayed and overworked [operatives with] ink on their fingers" (Atwood 13). Marian herself work in the gooey layer in the middle, along with the other women of the company. She describes her department to be the link between the two other floors and her and her co-workers "are supposed to take care of the human element" (Atwood 13), since they are women. Marian has only worked at the company for four months but she has already realised that her possibilities at the company are limited since she cannot become one of the men upstairs nor can she become one of the workers downstairs. Greene claims that "the office virgins" (Atwood 16) represent the only available option for Marian (99). The office virgins, "all artificial blondes", (Atwood 16) are three young women who work at the company waiting to meet their future husband, marry and settle down (Atwood 16).

Outside work, Marian studies advertisements instead if engaging in conversation with her roommate Ainsley (Atwood 8) and, as discussed in the previous section, she allows herself to be steered towards a decision, in the way the person at the marketing agency had planned and predicted her to do. Furthermore, she often associates her friends' voices with radio and advertising, convinced that they are trying to sell her something, more specifically the role of motherhood. Susan, who worked in an advertising firm before she became pregnant (Lessing 306) is likewise affected by the images of the happy housewife, as she does not "make the mistake of taking a job for the sake of her independence" (Atwood 307), even if this is perhaps what she might have wished for, deep inside, because she is convinced that the "children needed their mother to a certain age" (Atwood 308).

The advertising agencies and women's magazines were equally involved in creating the image, the role, which women of the time so desperately tried to live up to, and another contributing factor was men's expectations of how a woman should act. The world depicted in these texts, it is evidently a man's world.

The male characters in the texts all have a great impact on the protagonists' lives. The men standing closest to Esther, Marian and Susan are depicted as handsome, intelligent and successful. Matthew Rawlings, husband of Susan, is described as being very attractive, which Susan also argues to be an excuse for his infidelity (Lessing 309). The two other men, Buddy Willard and Peter Hollander are not only depicted as handsome, intelligent and successful, but also, somewhat surprising, as clean. Buddy Willard, the intended boyfriend of Esther is described as a "fine, clean boy" coming from a "fine, clean family" and he is also "the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for" (Plath 68), and Peter Hollander, the fiancé of Marian, is also described as clean (Atwood 66) as "he smell[s] of soap all the time", a smell Marian associates with the sterilised atmosphere of a dentist. Peter is also described to be "ordinariness raised to perfection" (Atwood 69) and "nicely packaged" (Atwood 179), as if he was a perfect thing bought in the supermarket.

While reading the texts, I think it is evident that love is not the main reason for any of the relationships, as one would perhaps think it would be. Instead, the protagonists seem to base their relationships on other things. For example, in the opening of "To Room Nineteen", the narrator claims that "the Rawlingses' marriage was grounded in intelligence" (Lessing 305). However, somewhat contradictory, the narrator also says that the couple are in love. I would argue, based on the way their relationship is depicted like a "balanced and sensible family [that] was no more than what was due to them because of their infallible sense for *choosing* right" (Lessing 306), that this marriage is mainly built of intelligence and the ability to choose a partner that is, according to society's norms, suitable as a husband or wife, rather than choosing out of love. This is also shown in *The Edible Woman*, as Marian says that Peter is the "ideal choice" because he is attractive, successful and neat, which she stresses is important since they are going to live together, but she never mentions love (Atwood 124). Peter's wish to get married seems grounded in the fact that "people who aren't married get funny in middle age" (Atwood 124), and that he thinks being married will make him look more serious and therefore be good for his career. So instead of choosing each other out of love, it seems like the characters regard each other as accessories, something you acquire to have that perfect glossy illusion of a life.

As discussed in previous section, Esther suffers from her ambivalent identity, not knowing which “fig” she should pick. The wish to live up to all the older values of being a good and pure girl while at the same time trying to be independent and find her true inner self is finally too much for Esther. During her final days in New York, she says it becomes more and more difficult to decide anything. She does not even manage to pack her bag, as the expensive clothes “seemed to have a separate, mulish, identity of their own that refused to be washed and folded and stowed away” (Plath 104). The same clothes are then thrown from the top of the Amazon hotel on Esther’s last night, and are spread over the roof tops as “a loved one’s ashes” and “to settle here [and] there [...] in the dark heart of New York” (Plath 111), and I propose this as a symbol for Esther’s desperate longing for freedom. The clothes represent her, as she refuses to be moulded into the perfect housewife, instead just wishing to be set free like the clothes. Dowbnia argues that throwing away the expensive clothes is Esther’s “official renunciation of the consumer lifestyle” (579) that she has been schooled into by her employer. I agree with Dowbnia to some extent, but I would also argue that Esther bought these clothes as an attempt to fit in, as a kind of costume for the role she aimed to play in New York, and throwing away the costume can therefore be read as a wish to break free from the artificial world that tries to mould her into someone she does not want to be. Dowbnia also argues that this act also marks the beginning of Esther’s mental breakdown, and I agree (579).

Esther clearly struggles with her ambivalence towards her identity already from the beginning of the novel, but Marian’s and Susan’s struggles slowly escalate as the texts progress. The turning point for Marian is when her relatively free relationship with Peter is fastened into a formal engagement. She starts to feel as she loses control, which is depicted in the novel in a few episodes where she describes herself as being chased like a pray (Atwood 85) and as she tries to hide “they pulled her out from the hole and started plucking her” (Atwood 92). It is not only Marian’s own experiences that prove that her relationship with Peter is threatening. In the moment of their engagement, when Peter asks, “how do you think we’d be, married?”, the narrative indicates that something bad is about to happen as “a tremendous electric blue flash [...] illuminated the inside of the car” (Atwood 98). The image of warning by lightening is recognised imagery from another well-known novel, namely *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. In *Jane Eyre*, the great horse-chestnut is struck by lightning and splits in half the same night Jane and Mr. Rochester get engaged underneath it (306). In both novels, the lightening can be interpreted as a bad omen, since both of the engagements later end up in catastrophe. After Marian’s engagement, she stops caring for anything (Atwood 129) and lets Peter make all decisions for her (Atwood 179). As the novel progresses, the first- person

narrative is changing into a third-person narrative, a strong marker that Marian has now fully lost her voice and control of her life.

As for Susan, I would like to argue that the event that causes her to finally lose her connection with herself and self-worth is Mathew's infidelity. However, Susan herself argues that it is not the infidelity per se that hurt her, since she states that "no one can be faithful to one other person for a whole lifetime" (Lessing 308) and that it is "inevitable that the handsome, blond attractive, manly man, Mathew Rawlings, should be at times tempted" (Lessing 309). Instead, she remembers the years of fidelity and she thinks to herself that "either the ten years' fidelity was not important, or she isn't" and she thinks that if these years was not important, then "nothing is important" (Atwood 309). This sentiment of living a life that is unimportant to the one person that helps her create it, generates a feeling of everything being artificial. Like the sensible person Susan is described to be, she decides to put the whole thing behind her, but something has clearly changed and she starts to withdraw herself from everyone. She now describes how her family feels "as a painful pressure on the surface of her skin" (Lessing 315).

5. The Self- Destructive Reactions

So far, I have discussed the protagonists and their ambivalence towards their identities in connection with the heterosexual matrix within society, showing that their unhappiness is an effect of the restrictions of cultural and social practices. In this section, I will discuss the protagonists' self-destructive reactions and how they mirror the oppression that they suffer from.

Catherine Rainwater describes the characters of Margaret Atwood's fiction as often having "troublesome relationships with their own bodies" (14) and claims that the human body often is depicted as a war zone between the inner self and different variations of "invasive influences", such as other people and cultural expectations (14). She also argues that women are socially constructed to practise "self as object" and to repudiate the self when it fails to live up to society's ideals (17). This description is a profitable entrance to start the analysis of the three protagonists' self-destructive behaviour, since they all seem to attack their bodies, more or less unconsciously, and Esther more actively than the other two.

Greene argues that our identity is defined by our relationships with others, and based on this statement she asks if it is possible to define yourself if you refuse the moulds

proposed by society (103). She refers to MacGinnon's argument that "'accepting one's femininity' means identifying oneself 'as a sexual being, as a being that exists for men,' [and that] gender for a woman is a form of non-being, an absence, a void" (107). Women are taught to view themselves as objects, a form of non-being, which may explain why the protagonists punish themselves and their bodies as they feel that they cannot perform their gender accordingly to the grids of the heterosexual matrix.

The status of Esther's mental health is questionable already in the beginning of the novel and the way in which this is shown is by her obsession with purity. Buddy is described as a boy a girl is supposed to stay clean for, and when Esther finds out that Buddy has been intimate with another girl, she becomes aware for the first time of the inequality of women's and men's sexual pureness (Plath 71). From this point and on, the need to stay pure becomes a struggle for Esther, as she on the one hand wants to become equal to Buddy by going to bed with a man and on the other hand she wants to stay pure. Her fixation with purity manifests itself in purging rituals, such as bathing, which, according to Dowbnia, can be read as a cleansing ritual where she washes away the "original sin" of having "an insatiable female appetite" (578). Esther says that she never feels so much as herself as when she is in a hot bath, that the longer she stays in the hot water the purer she feels, and that she does not leave the bath until she feels as "pure and sweet as a new baby" (Plath 20). This wish to stay pure, and purifying herself through water, I argue, is Esther's way of dealing with the invasive external influences. As she washes her body, she washes away the marks that society leaves on her body, after which she feels new, as if she has a chance to start over and take control of her life.

When Esther receives the rejection letter from the writing course, she realises that the few possibilities she has of choosing her life might be lost. She is diminished from being an aspiring author into the object of a non-being, someone who only exists in relation to others. As this happens, she loses the ability to eat, sleep, read and write, which Dowbnia identifies as the "complete loss of control over her body that mirrors her feelings of social [...] powerlessness" (582). As a consequence of the complete loss of control, Esther attacks her body, the object which is failing to conform to the social expectations.

Her various ideas of ways to attack her body are violent, but as she locks herself in the bathroom with a Gillette blade, ready to cut her wrists open, she thinks to herself,

I thought it would be easy [...] but when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenceless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I

wanted to kill wasn't under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at. (Plath 147)

This might be read as Esther's understanding that it is not her body's fault, it is not her body that is wrong, which she has been taught by growing up in a society that teaches her that her body is merely an object. After this episode Esther realises that her body tries to protect itself by having "all sorts of little tricks, such as making [her] hand go limp at the crucial moment" (Plath 159).

Evidently, Esther's body becomes a battlefield as she struggles with her emancipation and self-punishment. So is Marian's as she tries to acquire some form of self-definition (Rainwater 17). As Marian loses control of who she is, and as Greene argues, tries to conform to society's ideal of femininity, she becomes paralyzed (97) and gradually stops eating. Greene argues that "Marian's starvation is both protest against and correlative to her repression of herself to fit a mold of 'femininity' that requires her objectification" (106) whereas Rainwater argues that Marian stops eating in an attempt to create a clearer distinction between "self and 'Other' by preventing the outside to enter the inside. However, Rainwater also recognises the starvation as a "rebellion" against Marian's female self, that she is denying her body what it needs to exist (17). Already before their engagement, Peter claims that Marian's problem is her rejecting her femininity (Atwood 95), which can be read as a reproach to not step too far away from the regulations of the heterosexual matrix. Even if Marian dismisses the reproach, I would argue that she is unconsciously aware of the grids of the matrix and she knows that she must at some point give her inner self up in order to conform to society's expectations. The engagement is the ritual where she becomes "an object destined for another" (Greene 105), so that promising herself to Peter and therefore accepting her female role, she is diminished into a non-being, and as a consequence, her starvation starts. As Marian conforms to the imprisonment of her role, she is hurting her inner self so the starvation functions as an unconscious punishment. She starts to feel compassion for the things she normally eats because she denies herself any sort of compassion (Greene 106).

The image of the body as a battlefield is prominent in both *The Bell Jar* and *The Edible Woman*, but in "To Room Nineteen" it is shown in a slightly different way, as Susan is not attacking her body in any direct way. Instead she withdraws her body "from the cage of labels and culturally defined roles" (Quawas 111). As Susan is confronted by Mathew's infidelity she starts to realise that she has been "a non-person" (Quawas 111) throughout their relationship. In other words, she has been diminished into the roles of mother and wife, letting

her essential Susan dissolve. The infidelity has caused her to feel as she was “pierced as by an arrow from the sky with bitterness” (Lessing 309) and she starts to have strong sentiments of restlessness, rage and resentments. These feelings are, according to Quawas, represented by the enemy in the garden which haunts Susan as her children goes to school (116). As Susan becomes more and more aware of her status as a non-being she sets out to find the essential Susan and as she starts to visit room nineteen she realises that the only way to find herself is to turn away from society and the social constructions (Quawas 111). Therefore the room functions as a hiding space, “a gap between dominant cultural ideology [...] and her own lived experience as a woman” (Quawas 113). In this gap, the essential Susan has a chance to live, but when Matthew discovers her hiding space, she can no longer find solitude in the room (Lessing 332).

As Susan cannot exist without the room she decides to go there to end her life. As she enters the room she says that the demons are gone forever, “because she was buying her freedom from them” (Lessing 335). Quawas argues that Susan’s death is not a defeat but that by rejecting the demands from society and refusing to conform to the role of an object and “the image of Woman created by patriarchal culture”, Susan remains true to herself, choosing her own life, and her own “elsewhere” (120). Her last act in life is obliterating, rather than being obliterated, and by doing so, she regains her power.

Both Esther and Marian manage to take back the control over their lives. Esther regains control when she finally meets a woman, Doctor Nolan, who guides her towards emancipation from the fear of being trapped “under a man’s thumb” (Plath 221) by helping her getting in contact with a doctor who gives her a prescription for contraception. At the appointment with the doctor as Esther climbs up on the examine table she says, “I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person [...] just because of sex” (Plath 223). With this newly found security, she “was [her] own woman” (Plath 223), and she can live her life in freedom and without fear.

Marian attains freedom as she manages to put into words what it is that she has experienced in her relationship with Peter, and she confronts him by asking him: “you’ve been trying to destroy me haven’t you? [...] you’ve been trying to assimilate me” (Atwood 344). To symbolise what she has been going through, she bakes a cake lady, “a substitute” (Atwood 344), and she offers Peter to have the first bite by saying, “this is what you really wanted all along, isn’t it?” (Atwood 344). When Peter leaves the apartment and the third part of the novel starts, Marian regains her lost voice and “[n]ow that [she] was thinking of [herself] in the first

person singular again [she] found [her] own situation much more interesting [...]” (Atwood 350) and as she finishes the cake she sets herself free.

6. Conclusion

This essay has explored what elements that are involved in making the female protagonists of *The Bell Jar*, *The Edible Woman* and “To Room Nineteen” so profoundly miserable and thus suicidal. My claim is that these women are tormented by the unauthentic roles they have been assigned because of their biology and by the pressure from the patriarchal society that they live in.

When Esther cannot longer stand the fear of being trapped in a role that she has not chosen for herself and when the pressure of living up to the norms of being perfect and pure becomes too much she breaks. It is not until she finally meets a woman who can help her, and guide her in her process of regaining control over her life that she becomes free. Whereas Marian becomes aware of the violent patriarchal structures around her, and as her relationship with her boyfriend Peter is fastened into a formal engagement Marian is confronted with her new role as a wife and potential mother and thus she breaks under the pressure. She passively starts rebelling against the female role she has been assigned, by denying her body what it needs to exist. Marian manages to regain her power and her freedom when she succeeds to put her emotions into words and confronts the one person she feels has tried to destroy and assimilate her, Peter.

Susan realises that her life is artificial and that everything she has and has done is unimportant when the person who helped her create it, Matthew, has an affair. The realisation that nothing is important causes Susan to lose her purpose and feel of self and she slowly withdraws herself from her family and life, until she finally can regain her power in the afterlife.

With Judith Butler’s theories on gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix as a theoretical background, I have shown that the three protagonists are performing their gender and that they also are aware of and affected by the grids and regulations of the heterosexual matrix. I have also shown that they are torn apart between on the one hand act the role they have been assigned and on the other hand follow their deepest dreams and desires, and that this tug-of-war between their inner selves and the outside pressure is the reason that

the women feel disconnected from their own identity and in the end, this also dismantles their beings until there is almost nothing left.

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