



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Exploration of Female Insanity in *The Bell Jar* and *The Faces*** Frederiksen, Lisa Anne van der Meer

### **Citation**

Frederiksen, L. A. van der M. (2025). *Exploration of Female Insanity in The Bell Jar and The Faces*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4259602>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

**Title:** *Exploration of Female Insanity in The Bell Jar and The Faces*

**Student name:** *Lisa Anne van der Meer Frederiksen*

**Student-number:** *4223640*

**Degree programme:** *Cultural Analysis: Literature and Theory*

**Supervisor name:** *Liesbeth Minnaard*

**Date:** *15/08 2025*

## Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	3
<i>Introduction of Tove Ditlevsen and Sylvia Plath—Biographical Parallels (mental illness, troubled personal lives, literary careers)</i> .....	4
<i>Ditlevsen and Plath: Brief Insights Into their Struggles with Mental Illness and how These Shaped Their Work</i> .....	7
<i>Authors' Positions (outside the novels)</i> .....	8
<i>Societal context in 1900s Denmark and the US</i> .....	10
<i>Examples of female rage portrayals in pop culture</i> .....	11
<i>Works Introduced: The Faces (1968) and The Bell Jar (1963)</i> .....	12
<i>Introduction to Esther Greenwood</i> .....	13
<i>Introduction to Lise Mundus</i> .....	13
<i>Autofiction and Semi-Autobiography: Role of Autobiographical Elements in both Novels</i> .....	13
<i>Distinguishing society and literary world (autofiction) in The Bell Jar and The Faces</i> .....	17
<i>Introduction to Female Insanity</i> .....	21
<i>Psychological Fragmentation and Delusion - Lise's Hallucinations and Shifting Perception of Reality</i> .....	22
<i>Esther's Depressive Episodes, Dissociation, and Suicide attempt</i> .....	26
<i>Discussion of Inner versus Outer Identity and Reality Distortion</i> .....	28
<i>Societal Expectations and Alienation</i> .....	31
<i>The Bell Jar: Esther's Aversion to Traditional Female Roles—Motherhood, Marriage, and Passivity</i> .....	35
<i>The Faces: Lise's Diversion and Traditional Female Roles</i> .....	37
<i>Thinking the Künstler-roman in connection to the narrative model of Mieke Bal in The Bell Jar</i> .....	39
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	40
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	43

*Introduction*

This thesis employs a range of literary tools to portray psychological collapse, female resistance to societal constraints, and identity fragmentation, as seen in Tove Ditlevsen's *The Faces* and Sylvia Plath's iconic *The Bell Jar*. Through the use of powerful symbolism, compelling narrative structure, and vivid imagery in both novels, Ditlevsen and Plath construct intense psychological landscapes that reflect the pressures placed on women in 20th-century America and Denmark. Both authors can be analysed through a feminist lens, as both novels were published after America passed legislation for women's suffrage, making it reasonable to situate the works within the context of First Wave Feminism. To argue that both Plath and Ditlevsen were not necessarily feminists but instead actively utilise exaggeration as a form of criticism, I draw on scholarship about feminism and the works of Plath and Ditlevsen, as well as mental fragmentation as a method of critiquing patriarchy. Through this, I aim to illustrate that while *The Bell Jar* and *The Faces* teach how the main characters navigate mental struggles, they may also offer readers insights into the link between women and mental illness. I will also draw on well-known theories about Plath's work as a modernist Künstler roman to explore the inner workings of the protagonists in each novel. However, this part will be very brief.

The journey of the main character in a Künstler-roman is often highly ego-centric. However, in this case, with both novels, it is not negative egocentrism, as both novels focus on mentally unstable women. The reader becomes deeply involved in the protagonists' unreliable thought processes, where there is arguably a lack of well-developed, three-dimensional characters. I do want to argue that both works are feminist since a feminist novel does the following: "A feminist novel, however, is not only about who we are; it must also be about how we live. It is a novel where the concerns of women and womanhood are the alpha and the omega of the narrative, but it also deals explicitly with stories, with the lives of women." (Gay).

Throughout history, there has been a notable lack of female-created literature, art, and music, which often depict women as static beings, lacking substance and depth (Hertler et al. 373). This thesis explores the theme of female insanity in *The Bell Jar* and *The Faces*, not only as a personal affliction but also as a response to societal pressures and gender roles, employing different literary techniques to depict the fragmentation of the self. The works of both Plath and Ditlevsen can be described as highly pervasive, as many traces of their personal life experiences are reflected in both novels, as well as in the main characters, Esther Greenwood and Lise Mundus. *The Faces* and *The Bell Jar* portray

the troubles, struggles, and maternal guilt experienced by the protagonists both before and after their stays at a mental hospital. Patriarchal pressure has a profound impact on how both main characters behave and navigate in a new and unfamiliar environment. The characters exemplify how Plath and Ditlevsen portray the multifaceted woman, rather than depicting women as static.

My analysis will examine how aversion to traditional female roles, such as motherhood and marriage, can lead to passivity, and how this was evident in Sylvia Plath's life. The analysis will also focus on the tension between inner and outer identity, as well as the distortion of reality, mainly in *The Faces*. This will be studied through the perspectives of Esther Greenwood and Lise Mundus, utilising their use of stream of consciousness, which offers insight into their thoughts and may also reveal their behaviour. Additionally, this paper aims to highlight the connection between psychological mental load in both novels and its relevance to contemporary issues. It also seeks to emphasise the complexities of each character's intrusive thoughts and how these influence their decisions and actions. With this in mind, the following research question has been posed: In what way do Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Tove Ditlevsen's *The Faces* explore and depict the influence of patriarchy in their admission into a mental institute, and what implications does this struggle have for both of the novel's themes and the broader examination of female individual identity.

*Introduction of Tove Ditlevsen and Sylvia Plath—Biographical Parallels (mental illness, troubled personal lives, literary careers)*

Tove Ditlevsen was born on 14 December 1917 in the Vesterbro neighbourhood of Copenhagen, Denmark. She is one of Denmark's most prominent 20th-century writers. She came from a working-class family – her father, Ditlev, was a firefighter, and her mother, Alfrida, was a stay-at-home mother. Alfrida was sometimes mentally unstable yet highly dominant in the household, which led to a complicated relationship between Tove and her mother. This theme recurs throughout Tove's writings and is especially visible in the very personal trilogy called *The Copenhagen Trilogy*, depicting her life from childhood into adulthood.

In 1939, 22-year-old Tove Ditlevsen published her debut poetry collection, *Pigesind (Girl's Mind)*, consisting of 32 poems that explore a wide range of emotions. Tove was a versatile writer, and throughout her career, she published articles, magazine short stories, and children's books. She also served as a letterbox editor for the Danish magazine *Familiejournalen*. She was married four times, with her longest marriage being to Victor Andreassen, a paperboy, from 1951 to 1973. Her love life

was also turbulent, and she found it challenging to balance everyday family life, as her constant need for parental and societal validation dominated her daily existence, as exemplified in her poetry collection called *There Lives a Young Girl in Me Who Will Not Die: Selected Poems*. During her writing career, she received many literary awards. Among these was De Gyldne Laurbær (The Golden Laurels) in 1956, one of Denmark's most prestigious literary honours. The internal struggles of Tove are also reflected in her writing, with themes of death and mortality playing a significant role in most of her work.

An example of this can be seen in the poetry collection called *De Voksne* (1969) (*The Adults*): "De fattige gamle grubler/I lange nætter/har ingen at spørge/ligvognen/kommer tit/ og henter en/ for hvem det til slut/lod sig gøre/hastigt og afsides/uden at plejerne så det." (Ditlevsen 9) (The old and poor ponder/for long nights/has no one to ask/the hearse/often comes/and picks one up/ For whom it is over/was feasible/fast and remote/without the caregivers noticing it). Throughout her life, she struggled mentally, and at one of her lowest points, she was a drug abuser and weighed only 30 kg. This led to her being admitted to a psychiatric hospital in 1949. This mental struggle is a theme that is exemplified in the novel *Ansigterne* (*The Faces*).

This mental struggle is also evident in the writings of the American poet Sylvia Plath. Similar to Ditlevsen in Denmark, Plath was a highly esteemed writer in 20th-century America and remains a prominent figure in the literary world today. Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Boston to a German immigrant college professor and his younger student. In her early years, Plath spent a great deal of time by the sea, but her life changed dramatically when her father died in 1940. As with Ditlevsen's work, it is evident in Plath's writing how closely her personal life is intertwined with her work. An example of this is the poem called "Daddy," where Plath conveys the unfairness of losing her father at such a young age while also expressing her fear of him: "I have always been scared of you,/With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo./And your neat mustache/And your Aryan eye, bright blue./Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You." "Bit my pretty red heart in two. /I was ten when they buried you. /At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you. /I thought even the bones would do." (Plath 48)

Due to financial difficulties, the Plath family had to relocate to Massachusetts, where Sylvia attended Smith College on a scholarship. She was an outstanding student, winning numerous awards, and it seemed her future was promising. However, during her undergraduate years, she began to show the

first signs of severe depression, a condition that would ultimately lead to her untimely death. Her first suicide attempt occurred in 1953 at the age of 20, when she tried to overdose on sleeping pills. This resulted in her being admitted to a psychiatric hospital, where she underwent electroshock therapy. Plath transformed this traumatic experience into fiction, which inspired her only published novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963). When Plath recovered, she returned to Smith to complete her degree. Through her studies, she received a Fulbright grant, allowing her to study at Cambridge University in England, where she met the renowned poet Ted Hughes. They married in 1956 and later divorced, leaving Plath with their two children. She then experienced a sudden burst of creative energy, during which she wrote her poetry collection, *Ariel*. In 1963, she committed suicide by inhaling gas from a kitchen oven.

Both Sylvia Plath and Tove Ditlevsen integrated their personal experiences into their works, exploring similar themes of mental illness and the complexities of womanhood in 20th-century America and Denmark. They both highlighted societal constraints faced by women and held ambivalent views on what motherhood should involve. They depicted motherhood as both meaningful and suffocating. Furthermore, both were preoccupied with the theme of death in their writings and, sadly, both took their own lives. Plath and Ditlevsen faced the challenges of being women in a patriarchal society, as they strove for recognition in male-dominated literary fields. Ditlevsen was fully aware of this societal struggle, which she emphasised in an interview with the Danish newspaper *Berlingske*: “Jeg ville så gerne have haft en rigtig uddannelse og have været økonomisk uafhængig meget tidligere. Jeg har kendt så mange akademikere, men alligevel piner det mig, at jeg ikke har nogen eksamen og er uvidende om så meget fra politik til fremmede sprog.” (“I would have liked to have had a real education and been financially independent much earlier. I have known so many academics, yet it pains me that I have no degree and am ignorant of so much, from politics to foreign languages”) (Rasmussen).

Both Tove Ditlevsen and Sylvia Plath published novels that delve into the gradual mental breakdown from within. In *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, faces the difficulties of being a young woman battling severe depression. She is admitted to a psychiatric hospital, which heightens feelings of alienation, especially towards women and their roles within a patriarchal society. The main character, Lise Mundus, in *The Faces*, suffers from hallucinations, causing her to see and hear people who are not present. Based on the similarities between *The Bell Jar* and *The Faces*, the following thesis statement has been formulated: Both novels explore the theme of female insanity not only as a

personal affliction but also as a response to societal pressures and gender roles, employing different literary techniques to portray the fragmentation of the self.

*Ditlevsen and Plath: Brief Insights Into their Struggles with Mental Illness and how These Shaped Their Work*

Tove Ditlevsen did not conceal her struggles and innermost thoughts. Instead, she expressed them on paper for the world to read and interpret. What is quite clear is her internal conflict regarding her role as a woman in the 20th century. In her poetry collection called *De Voksne (The Adults)*, Ditlevsen states in the poem called “Ventetid” (“Waiting time”): “Uanset fremskridtet/og det nye syn/på mange ting/må kvinder stadig/tilbringe Megen/tid med at vente. De venter:/ på manden/på børnene/på fyraften/på håndværkerne/på budene/på døden/og på/at kartoflerne skal koge.” (“Regardless of progress and the new view on many things, women still spend much time waiting. They wait for their husbands, for their children, after work, for craftsmen, for commandments, for death, and for the potatoes to boil.”) (55). This is just one example of many ways Ditlevsen felt trapped in the role of a housewife. The housewife lifestyle is centred around men and designed for their needs. The women, as Ditlevsen states, spend their time waiting for men.

Sylvia Plath was notably candid about her struggles, providing readers with valuable insights into her thoughts, as documented in *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Her vocalisation of her mental health challenges is evidenced through various correspondence and journal entries. “I fear oppressive and crushing forces, if I do not plot and manage and manipulate my path, joining: academic, creative, and emotional & living & loving: writing makes me a small god: I re-create the flux and smash of the world through the small, ordered word-patterns I make.” (Plath 232). Much like Ditlevsen, Plath faced internal conflicts and struggles within a male-dominated society and field of work. She holds herself in high regard and recognizes her talent; however, she is also acutely aware of the fragility associated with the act of writing. On page 224, she offers a more profound insight into her struggles, stating, “let me not hide in drinking and lacerating myself on strange men: let me not be weak and tell others how bleeding I am internally.” This statement nearly functions as a cry for help. For Plath, vulnerability appears to be perceived negatively, as she associates weakness with exposing less societally acceptable emotions.

*Authors' Positions (outside the novels)*

Tove Ditlevsen saw her admittance to a mental institute as a way and opportunity to further explore and evolve with her writing. In her work called *Det Tidlige Forår: Barndom og Ungdom: Erindringer* she states the following: “Jeg, som aldrig havde kunnet udstå spiritus, tog omkring 1967 den faste beslutning at drikke mig ihjel. Jeg valgte whisky som det hurtigste og sikreste middel, men der var endnu mennesker som ikke ville se på denne ødelæggelse uden at røre en finger. De fik mig indlagt på Sct. Hans, og der tilbragte jeg blandt sindsyge og lidende den hidtil lykkeligste periode i mit liv.”

“I, who could not stand alcohol, decided around 1967 to drink myself to death. I chose whisky as the fastest and surest way, but some people could not stand to see me destroy myself. They got me admitted to Sct. Hans, and there I spent the happiest time of my life with crazies and people who suffered.” (Anonym).

On the Danish website citater.nu, there is a section featuring quotes by Tove Ditlevsen. One particular quote can be quite revealing of the lack of mental health support in 1900s Denmark: “I tyve år har min psykiater været intenst optaget af min sjælelige helbred en halv time om ugen. Resten ad tiden har han været beskæftiget med fuldkommen ligegyldige ting.” (“For twenty years, my psychiatrist has been intensely focused on my soulful healing, half an hour per week. The rest of the time, he was preoccupied with things that really did not matter.”).

Sylvia Plath was very open about her hospitalisation and frequently shared her struggles in her journals. She often expresses her loneliness and sense of alienation, and also the fear of being hospitalized : “You saw visions of yourself in a straight jacket, and a drain on the family, murdering your mother....” (Plath 187). This illustrates how Plath pictures being institutionalised – she fears that this could bring out the worst of her, including murdering her own mother. The idea of the world passing her by while she is stuck inside the prison of her own mind haunts her. We also get a glimpse of her self-awareness of her mental illness. She writes the following: “I have been, and am, battling depression. It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative – which ever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it.” (Plath 395).

*Biographical Context - Mental Health in the 20th Century: Overview of how women's mental illness was perceived and treated in the mid-20th century*

In the early days of psychiatric treatment, the focus was on bodily therapies and experiments. 'Hysterical' and 'mad' women, as they were called in the Victorian era, were the subjects of these treatments. Often, when a woman behaved 'abnormally' or differently, she was labelled as mentally unstable. This also led doctors to diagnose women with hysteria whenever they could not find a clear explanation. As early as the 18th century, a gendered bias regarding women's mental health was evident. Doctors believed that a lack of sexual fulfilment and satisfaction caused mental illness in women. They also argued that hysteria was linked to the womb; thus, men would never experience hysteria (Hysterical Victorian Women - Historic UK). The treatment for hysteria was highly unorthodox – women were advised to have sexual intercourse more frequently to release sexual tension. By the mid-20th century, the focus shifted away from bodily treatment, and instead, the emphasis was on the inner workings of a human being, not just women. Here, psychiatrists considered the patient's childhood and its ongoing impact on their daily lives.

The stigmatisation of depression diminished in the 1960s, and it was no longer regarded as a disorder but rather as a disease that was manageable due to the popularity of antidepressants. Neitzke highlights the following in his article titled "An Illness of Power: Gender and the Social Causes of Depression": "More people were seeing psychiatrists for help in ways of living that pertained to social and economic relations and were not merely removed from society based on debilitating madness. Psychiatry had become one way to understand the social world." (Neitzke 61). Psychiatry was thus no longer used exclusively for people with severe mental issues. Instead, it became a tool and a place to seek help for everyday struggles.

Neitzke also states that depression should be understood not only from a biological perspective but also from a societal one (Neitzke 67). He further argues that mental illness in women could result from a larger societal disadvantage rooted in patriarchy. In the medical field, individuals are often blamed for having a mental illness instead of examining how social systems work against them. This perception stems from the negative stigma and connotations associated with mental illness. In the article titled "Gender, Age, and Diagnosis: The Rise and Fall of Involuntary Melancholia in American Psychiatry, 1900–1980" by Laura D. Hirschbein, she discusses the term 'involuntary melancholia', which was once regarded as a mental diagnosis and described as an illness characterised

by severe depression occurring in middle to late life. This term first appeared in German psychiatry in the late 1800s, and patients with this condition were frequently institutionalised for lengthy periods. By the 1980s, the diagnosis was discontinued, merging with major depressive disorder. “The demise of involuntary melancholia as a separate entity reflected the broader shift in psychiatry toward symptom-based classification.” (Hirschbein 713). This can also be linked to both *The Faces* and *The Bell Jar*, as the article suggests involuntary melancholia was closely associated with “...assumptions about women’s hormones, menopause, and vulnerability to mental illness.” (Hirschbein 710-713). Esther Greenwood exemplifies how psychiatry continued to adapt its treatment to align with cultural ideals for women, such as marriage, purity, and ambition.

### *Societal context in 1900s Denmark and the US*

#### *Denmark*

In Denmark during the 1900s, notable progress was made in women’s rights, exemplified by the expansion of public daycares and the creation of institutions to support mothers. At the end of the 1800s, the introduction of state-funded old-age pensions provided a social safety net for the elderly (Christiansen & Petersen 178). Denmark also navigated between the German and British social models. In the article titled “The Dynamics of Social Solidarity: The Danish Welfare State, 1900–2000” by Niels Finn Christiansen and Klaus Petersen, it is stated that in 1933, a social reform bill abolished labels such as ‘worthy/unworthy’ when categorising individuals: “The reform liberate the needy from the discretion of the local authorities.” (Christiansen & Petersen 182).

When Ditlevsen was growing up, there was an increase in social democratic reformism centred on the rights of the people. In the 1920s, Karl Kristian Vilhelm Steincke, a Danish politician from the Social Democratic Party, was among the first to propose a new social system focused on the welfare of the average Dane. This was also known as Kanslergadeforliget (Kanslergade Agreement). (Kanslergadeforliget 1933).

In 1939, Denmark’s social safety net was expanded for women, providing them a place to seek assistance regarding motherhood (Christiansen & Petersen 183), and about thirty years later, more public spaces were created to care for children, which also increased the workforce, as women and mothers then had the time to start working and contribute financially to the otherwise patriarchal household. In 1974, the ‘Social Assistance Act’ was enacted as part of the Third Social Reform,

meaning that “If a person...lost his or her income, the public support system should...replace the exact income.” (Christiansen & Petersen 191). The social safety net provided a significant number of Danish people with a basic standard of living, thus making Denmark a country of social welfare.

### *The US*

By the turn of the century, American society had become prosperous and was recognised as a world power. By the 1900s, Native Americans were forced to live on designated reservations. The rise of oil was also a key factor in the wealth of American society at the beginning of the 1900s. Additionally, with the founding of the Ford Motor Company in 1903, the US solidified its position as a significant global power and a nation of mass consumption. By 1910, the average American woman’s role in society had expanded, as she was allowed to study and participate in the workforce. Female college students comprised nearly 40% of the total college students (Solomon 76). By the 1920s, the US was influenced by rapid consumerism and urban growth, which also created a divide between people with traditional world views and those with a modern outlook. However, the rise of consumerism and industrialisation was quickly impacted when the Great Depression (1929-1939) hit America, leading to high unemployment and a political crisis.

Sylvia Plath grew up during unstable and transformative times, especially concerning women’s rights. Nancy F. Cott noted that the women of the 1920s symbolised modernity (159). Her early childhood was affected by World War II, as her father died in 1940, which compelled her mother to become a working single parent. Plath’s life in the 1940s and until her death was characterised by suburban expansion and Cold War conformity.

### *Examples of female rage portrayals in pop culture*

Miriam Balanescu discusses female rage and insanity in film and TV in her article titled “Female rage: The brutal new icons of film and TV”. She provides examples of both older and newer portrayals of female rage. She notes that: “Since the birth of cinema, male violence has provoked less gendered controversy.” This highlights how women have had to navigate societal judgment for expressing emotions, always maintaining a confident composure and ensuring they conform to feminine

standards, which also effectively limited the expression of ‘negative’ or ‘manly’ emotions. This included emotions like rage or anger. One example that Balanescu gives of female rage in popular culture is Mia Goth's horror film *Pearl*, where the main (anti)heroine, Pearl, uses violence as a means of achieving female empowerment. Balanescu argues that the lack of female rage or a diverse range of emotions in films and television relates to the fact that “Violence at the hands of men rather than women is often given the most screen time...”, indicating that violence committed by men, whether on or off-screen, is more accepted than the rage or violence women display. Another example of female rage in television is the series *Killing Eve*, starring Jodie Comer as a ruthless Russian assassin working for the mysterious organisation called The Twelve. Balanescu also notes that “This influx of complex, identifiable female anti-heroes is partly about remedying the lack of such roles in screen history – when the lack of female directors has meant that few female characters have been created with honesty and relatability.” In conclusion, women need to create their own space, bring their chair to the table, to be recognised as dynamic and versatile beings who demonstrate that it is perfectly acceptable for a woman to be angry, or to feel ‘melancholy’.

*Works Introduced: The Faces (1968) and The Bell Jar (1963)*

*The Faces* (Ansigterne) by Tove Ditlevsen was published in 1968 by Gyldendal. It tells the story of the Danish writer Lise Mundus, who was admitted to a psychiatric hospital in a closed ward. It explores themes of heartache, longing for another life, and unfaithfulness. The novel questions what it truly means to be mentally ill or healthy. *The Faces* is the first part of Lise Mundus's story, which concludes in her last published novel seven years later, called *Vilhelms Værelse*.

*The Bell Jar*, by Sylvia Plath, tells the story of a young woman named Esther Greenwood. On the outside, Esther appears to have everything under control, and her future seems promising. She is highly talented and very successful, but there is a crack beneath the surface. We follow Esther as she gradually descends into a mental breakdown and tries to navigate her way out of the insanity while being admitted into a psychiatric institute.

*Introduction to Esther Greenwood*

Esther Greenwood is a character based on Sylvia Plath herself. She is also the protagonist and narrator of *The Bell Jar*. *The Bell Jar* tells a not-so-ordinary coming-of-age story. Instead of experiencing a positive transformation in her views of the world, Esther learns from madness, and instead of graduating from school, she ends up graduating from a mental institution. Esther comes from a middle-class family, with an absent father and a mother who works at the local university as a shorthand typing teacher (Plath 111). Esther is not your typical woman; she is highly reactive, responding to her society. She is a strong-willed young woman with a deep, melancholic nature, and she does not aim to be constantly preppy or cheerful. Due to her mental struggles and illness, she might seem very selfish because she's deeply immersed in her own frightening thoughts. However, she is not only melancholic and selfish but also possesses observant and kind qualities.

*Introduction to Lise Mundus*

Lise Mundus is a successful but anxious Danish author of children's books. She is mostly confined to her room as she tries to write a new book. She has a husband named Gert and two children. They also live with Gitte, their housekeeper, and Lise is convinced that Gert and Gitte are plotting to murder her. One evening, she takes a handful of sleeping pills and calls the doctor. She did not intend to end her life, but she wanted to be admitted somewhere where Gert and Gitte could not reach her. While reading the novel, the reader can easily become confused about what is real and what is a hallucination. We share Lise's doubts and fears, and through this, we gain insight into what it is like to struggle with mental health issues, as well as what it might look like on the other side.

*Autofiction and Semi-Autobiography: Role of Autobiographical Elements in both Novels*

Both *Ansigterne* by Tove Ditlevsen (1968) and *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath feature elements of deeply personal experiences woven with fiction. They are both examples of semi-autobiographical literature, offering readers an intimate glimpse into the authors' inner worlds. Ditlevsen and Plath transform their intense lived experiences into literary works. They expose the impossible societal expectations imposed on women, sharing their trauma and struggles with identity. This is conveyed through their protagonists, Lise Mundus and Esther Greenwood, respectively, who function as literary alter egos.

To understand how madness and the fractured self are depicted in both books, it is important to briefly distinguish between autofiction and semi-autobiography. The French author Julien Serge Doubrovsky coined the term autofiction in 1977 to describe his novel *Fils*. However, it undoubtedly existed before he introduced the term: “fiction, made of events and facts strictly real...written in a language that is not obedient to the rules of the classical autobiography.” It is defined as a genre that combines elements of autobiography and fiction. This genre weaves together the author's personal experiences, often narrated through a first-person perspective of their real life. Semi-autobiography frequently overlaps with autofiction, as this mode straddles personal writing—like a memoir—and novelistic invention.

In *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, she writes the following: “For if a man chooses to be promiscuous, he may still aesthetically turn up his nose at promiscuity. He may still demand a woman to be faithful to him, to save him from his own lust. But women have lust too. Why should they be relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of the soul, body and pride of man. Being born a woman is my awful tragedy.” (Plath 77) This part of the journal reveals her jealousy of the freedom and power men possess in society, which is also reflected in *The Bell Jar* when the main character, Esther, stands at the crossroads of her life. On page 212, Esther states, “What I hate here 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.’ This particular statement can be argued to be a direct reflection of Plath’s opinion on the role of women in a patriarchal society. Like her character, Plath feels limited in her freedom to act as she pleases. She is aware of the injustices against women and the unfairness they cause. On page 208 of *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, she states more explicitly, the direct correlation between the life of the fictive character versus her own real life: “The dialogue between my Writing and my Life is always in danger of becoming a slithering shifting of responsibility, of evasive rationalizing: in other words: I justified the mess I made of life by saying I’d give it order, form, beauty, writing about it; I justified my writing by saying it would be published, give me life (and prestige to life.)”. This quote from one of Sylvia’s letters resonates with Doubrovsky’s conceptualisation of autofiction. He states that autofiction is interwoven in a performative loop of writing. In chapter 2, called “Of Strange Loops and Real Effects: Five Theses on Autofiction/the Autofictional,” the author, Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, states that Doubrovsky theorised autobiographical projects “...has a real effect on their life.” Paul de Man also shares this conviction:

“We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences.” (De Man, 920)

Plath also struggled with the complicated relationship and loss of her dad, which is reflected in much of her literature and also in her letters. She writes the following: “I read his letter and walked the wet pine-dark path tonight, with the warm rain dripping and shiny black leaves in the humid blurred starlight, crying and crying with this terrible pain; it hurts, father, it hurts, oh father I have never known; a father, even, they took from me.” (Plath 223). This part of her letter depicts the immense grief and melancholia Plath has been carrying with her for so long. The absence of the father remains a tragic yearning in the inner life of Plath. Connecting this to Dubrovsky and his notion of autofiction, this letter reflects a self that is lived on the page in real time. Plath and Esther have a porous relationship: the mental breakdown of Esther, and her complicated mourning of her father, is reflective of Plath’s unresolved grief, but also her mental instability following the father’s death. However, in *The Bell Jar*, there is no mention of losing a father or mourning a father figure. There is only an absence of one, which is apparent on page 111 when Esther says that “My mother was teaching shorthand and typing to a lot of city college girls and wouldn’t be home till the middle of the afternoon.”. The fact that the mother has to work for a living suggests that there is no man in the house to take care of the mother.

Much like *The Bell Jar* is to Sylvia Plath, *The Faces* serves as an intense and raw reflection of Tove Ditlevsen’s exploration of mental illness, motherhood, and internal struggles. Recognised as an autofiction, the novel blurs the line between fiction and lived experience, blending Ditlevsen’s personal history into its narrative. Centred on Lise Mundus, a successful children’s author, the story traces her descent into a mental health crisis, highlighting her hallucinations, paranoia, and distorted perceptions. These episodes mirror Ditlevsen’s own battles with addiction and her complex experience of womanhood. Why is *The Faces* considered auto-fiction? Because it draws directly from Ditlevsen's life and presents her experiences without portraying a unified self. Instead, it dramatizes the fragmentation of identity and the unreliability of perception, reflecting her inner life and psyche.

As Dubrovsky has argued, the traditional autobiography assumes a sort of mastery over one’s life, meaning that the writer’s past is supposed to stand apart and is to be narrated through a retrospective method. What autofiction also does is reconstruct life as it is. In *The Faces*, Ditlevsen presents this reconstruction and captures the sense of failure through the protagonist Lise. Lise struggles with a

distorted perception of reality and experiences contradictory images, as when she hallucinates that the nurse at the psychiatric institute has poisoned her drink. (Ditlevsen 59). This particular scene is representative of a woman whose mind is unravelling under the weight of social expectation, combined with an internalised trauma. This scene, therefore, is not a representative of the empirical truth, but rather the truth of perception and interpretation of the immediate surroundings. When examining Ditlevsen's broader body of work, autofiction is particularly significant in this context. *The Copenhagen Trilogy*, a set of three memoirs (*Childhood, Youth, and Dependency*), each depicts her life in an exceptionally vivid way, with a confessional tone of voice. These works are openly perceived as autobiographical, yet they also resist traditional narrative coherence. The Copenhagen Trilogy offers, according to the critic Merve Emre, "...not a chronology of development but an anatomy of collapse." (The New Yorker 2021). This trilogy reveals more directly her abusive relationships, her opioid addiction, and her numerous hospitalisations. While this trilogy more explicitly reveals Ditlevsen's hardships, it can also be argued to be a sort of extension of *The Faces*. The Copenhagen trilogy offers an almost diaristic insight into her life with a retrospective voice, while in *The Faces*, the reader gets a real-time insight into her mental instability and breakdown. Sherilyn Nicolette Hellberg points out in her article called "A Chaos of Faces: Expressions of Despair in Tove Ditlevsen's Ansigterne" that "...the novel's faces become a symbolic system through which Ditlevsen explores the instability of female subjectivity under psychiatric surveillance and maternal expectation." (Hellberg 98). The faces that Lise hallucinates are not just 'normal' hallucinations. The faces could represent different and fragmented identities that reflect the various aspects of normative womanhood, as exemplified on page 15 of *The Faces*: "She noticed the smell of warm milk and wet rubber boots from her childhood." The reader gains insight into the character's childhood, as well as a reflection of Ditlevsen's real-life childhood. It is almost as if there is a blending of memories and present experience, which also helps enforce the auto-fictional quality of the novel. *The Faces* represent not one singular voice, but many voices that represent the different and fractured aspects of her inner world. Ditlevsen was a very open person and often shared her personal life with the public in interviews. In one of her last interviews with the Danish newspaper, Berlingske, she expressed how writing for her is an outlet and an extension of what she could not express otherwise. She said the following: "Jeg har kendt så mange akademikere, men alligevel piner det mig, at jeg ikke har nogen eksamen og er uvidende om så meget." ("I have known so many academics, yet it pains me that I have no degree and am ignorant of so much."). This sentence is short, yet powerful, revealing the paradox of Ditlevsen's life and writership – she was an intellectual individual, yet structurally

excluded; emotionally transparent, yet psychologically fragmented. It can be argued that Ditlevsen has used *The Faces* as a way of coping with her trauma in a transformative manner, which is also what Doubrovsky envisioned with his version of autofiction. *The Faces* then become an outlet for Ditlevsen, a way for her to cope, and ultimately, a means of survival. It could be argued that this is a way for Ditlevsen to make meaning out of things that seem hopeless and meaningless, and to assert a fragmented self in the face of dissolution. In sum, *the Faces* exemplifies autofiction not only because it draws on lived experiences, but also because of the narrative nature of the novel. Through various literary tools, Ditlevsen is able to convey an array of emotions and her inner being without compromising her integrity.

*Distinguishing society and literary world (autofiction) in The Bell Jar and The Faces*

It is important to distinguish between the literary world and the real world when discussing *The Bell Jar* and *The Faces*. In the essay by Jarad Zimble, titled “Literary Worlds and Literary Fields,” he expands on the subject of Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory and how similar or different a literary world can be compared to the real world. Bourdieu argues with this theory that a literary meaning arises from the literary work’s relation to a specific cultural and aesthetic context. To properly analyse a literary work, one must be able to reconstruct the work in terms of the positions that authors adopt. This theory moves away from a global framework, allowing for a full immersion into the world of a particular piece of literature. It can be applied to both *The Bell Jar* and *The Faces*, illustrating how they make their aesthetic decisions and how they narrate, through local cultural and literary dynamics.

The Bordieuan theory also influenced Alison James, as evidenced in chapter three titled ‘The Fictional in Autofiction’ of the book *The Fictional - Approaches, Affordances, Forms*. Here, her main argument is that the fictional elements of storytelling are intertwined with its auto-fictional aspects. However, it also questions notions of truthfulness and selfhood. When comparing the real world to the fictional worlds depicted in *The Bell Jar* and *The Faces*, many social notions and norms seem to correspond. James further argues that fiction is supposed to support the autobiographical and not to negate its existence. The two terms are highly intertwined when looking at the creative performance of a literary piece of work. (James 56). In another chapter, “A Cognitive Perspective on Autofictional Writing, Texts, and Reading,” the authors Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons argue that the identity of a main character in a work of autofiction can be described as a textual construct, meaning that the character possesses a certain level of self-awareness (77). This can be linked to Esther, the protagonist

of *The Bell Jar*. Purposefully, Plath centres and shapes Esther after her, creating a paradox – Plath is both herself and Esther, blending memory and creation. There also appears to be another layer of autofiction, when Esther plans to write a story and thus creates herself as the character Elaine, which is arguably an echo of autofiction’s self-consciousness. This also blurs the line between the real world and the fictional world, as the characters and the writer almost become one, and the novel therefore “lays bare its artifice.” As James would characterise it. It seems as though the literary world and society are indistinguishable in *The Faces*, since Lise’s hallucinations may represent her trapped inner world. Lise's experiences illustrate how “fiction does not betray the autobiographical; rather, it stages the self as a creative performance.” Her hallucinations symbolise her distorted view of the fictional world she inhabits. Ditlevsen has consistently noted throughout her career how closely she feels to the characters she has created.

In the article “A Chaos of Faces: Expressions of Despair in Tove Ditlevsen's *Ansigterne*,” the author, Sherilyn Nicolette Hellberg, reflects on and explores the meaning of the different faces Lise Mundus sees at the hospital. The article argues that Lise uses faces as a coping mechanism and as a kind of psychological fragmentation that reflects the unattainable expectations and pressure society has on young women (98). Lise points out that the face of the nurse is a “childish sketch,” which could be interpreted as the identity being drawn by an exterior force – namely, one of the patriarchy. Like the nurse, Lise finds it challenging to fit into one face. There is a performative anxiety embedded in a way that makes it difficult to match the gendered script imposed upon her. In “A Chaos of Faces,” Hellberg states that “In *Ansigterne* (...) faces function topologically. They work to signify a feeling or mood, at the same time as they develop the contours of a given text's mimetic universe concerning other literary and cultural productions.” (Hellberg 116). What Hellberg means by the faces functioning tropologically is that they represent different meanings. They can represent metaphors, symbols, and signs, which do not provide Lise with a stable meaning or significance of her inner workings and, thus, her identity. The faces that Lise sees are unstable like her, and they can be highly unreliable. The faces being unreliable point to the psychological collapse in Lise. This can be connected to the argument of Hélène Cixous that women have to write outside of normative femininity and write to disrupt the logocentric structures that have been put up: “Write yourself. Your body must be heard.” (Cixous 880). Ditlevsen appears to do is simply this. In her literature, she never sugarcoats or pretends to conform to societal feminine standards. She writes with honesty and truthfulness, and is never afraid to portray the full range of emotions that women experience. She points this out in one of her poems from her poetry collection called *De Voksne* “Jeg kan ikke:/lave

mad/gå med hat/hygge om folk/bære smykker/ordne blomster/husk aftaler/takke for gaver/give rigtige drikkepenge/holde på en mand/vise interesse/ved forældremøder.” (“I cannot/cook dinner/wear a hat/take care of people/wear jewellery/arrange flowers/remember appointments/say thank you for presents/give the right amount of tips/keep a man/show interest/at parent-teacher meetings.”) (Ditlevsen, 17) Cixous’s insistence on women writing themselves in literature is not an invitation to an autobiographical confession, but it is a radical way of disrupting masculine-dominated linguistic and cultural codes that historically have excluded female voices and female subjectivity. What Ditlevsen subconsciously manages to do with her list-poem is to dismantle the domestic ideal where each “I cannot” turns into an assertion of an alternative identity beyond prescribed roles.

“The door opened, and Gitte came in wearing her neat uniform. The stiff white cap on her head looked like a halo. She had a glass of red liquid in her hand, and she put it on the stool beside her bed. Lise stared at the glass and felt her thirst slide through her guts. The liquid had dark particles on the bottom, and all at once she knew there was poison in it.” (Ditlevsen 59) This passage highlights the contrast between the character and illustrates the challenge of distinguishing what is considered truth from hallucinations. Ditlevsen employs symbolic imagery to suggest that what appears pure and safe externally may, in fact, be entirely the opposite. This is the first encounter the protagonist, Lise, has with the house caretaker, Gitte. Lise does not see the hospital nurse; she only sees Gitte, both as the angel wearing a halo and as the devil regarding the poison. This is a representation of how ambivalent Lise feels towards the very structures that are installed to help and heal her. On page 88, she expresses the following: “There was order and routine to everything now, and she was afraid of any changes, to such a degree that she felt her whole world shudder and collapse whenever they promised her that she could come out into the ward as soon as she stopped being so reckless.” Here, the ambivalence is evident as Lise appears to like routine, maybe even too much, that if she then starts acting ‘normal’ so to speak, she will have to change her routine in the hospital. This passage of the book also shows the psychological tension of being admitted into institutionalised care, and how constraining it can be both for the mind and the soul.

Alex B. Neitzke's “An Illness of Power: Gender and the Social Causes of Depression” will be used as a tool for analysing and clarifying this passage from the book. In this article, Neitzke argues that one of the causes of depression in women can be blamed on structural inequalities and persistent disempowerment: “Women disproportionately experience forms of powerlessness that are relational, embedded in systems of care and dependence” (Neitzke 34). When connecting this to Lise's

experience in the clinic, one could argue that not only is Lise living through a personal psychotic breakdown, but it can also be perceived as a dramatization of fear and uneasiness in the form of outside intimidation.

Lise can be interpreted in different ways regarding the specific mode of writing Ditlevsen employs regarding Lise's experience of staying in the mental hospital. One interpretation is as a literal, genuine psychotic breakdown, a mental health crisis, so to speak. This would be a surface-level understanding of her admission to the hospital, as Ditlevsen's writing is typically allegorical, rich in symbolism and so-called dramatization, yet conveyed with a clever form of directness. A Danish journalist says the following about Ditlevsen's writing: "Jeg har aldrig forstået, hvorfor der skulle være noget galt i at udtrykke sig på en måde, så alle kan forstå." ("I never understood why there is something wrong with expressing in a certain way, so everyone understands.") (null).

Arguably, it is likely the second type of writing Ditlevsen employs, as Lise's feeling could possibly represent something even bigger – her emotions of fear and paranoia, possibly reflect the society of that time. It is also worth noting, that the portrayal style of the novel, one could argue that Ditlevsen writes through a lense of psychological modernism, as the narrative is unstable and untrustworthy.

When we look at the character of Gitte, she is depicted as an almost angelic-looking woman. She is adorned in white while delivering medicine, but this character serves as a complex figure. On the one hand, she serves as a sympathetic caretaker; on the other hand, she also represents the medical institution and, therefore, embodies medical autonomy. As Lise is suspicious that her drink may have been poisoned, she reacts in a way that may appear exaggerated. One could argue that she is not severely delusional – she has lost all self-governance. She finds it difficult to fully trust the nurses because they are part of a system that overlooks her rather than acknowledging her independence and subjectivity. Neitzke further argues that the reason why depression is more visible in women is because of the roles that have been assigned to women by specific societal structures and "caring for others while having little say in their care" (Neitzke 37). The duality of Lise, who was once a successful writer and a mother, forces her to give up her independence and trust a system that has failed her. Considering the red liquid, Lise's behaviour may then be justifiable and not so irrational – it symbolises the erasure of her identity, voice, and agency. The liquid can be interpreted as a representation of Lise being reduced to a problem to be managed rather than a person whom the nurses listen to and take seriously. When observing one of the nurses, Lises thinks, "Her face was

like a childish sketch absentmindedly scribbled in the margin of a composition book. The girl tried to fill it out from within, the way you stick your fingers into a glove to see whether it might fit. She was trying to live up to the world's expectations of how young girls ought to look, and her round eyes were full of goodwill and the fear of doing something wrong." (50). These thoughts capture a feminist existential crisis in *The Faces*, aligning with the notion of immanence that de Beauvoir discusses in her book *The Second Sex*. (De Beauvoir 17). What De Beauvoir means by immanence is the limitation of freedom and repression of all kinds. Immanence is also a missing of existence, which Lise exemplifies in this particular part of the novel. Even though Lise appears delirious, in this particular moment, she is highly aware of the patriarchal prison that the nurse subconsciously is a part of. Lise sees right through the nurse's attempt to fit into a premade role.

De Beauvoir states that: "Men always held women's lot in their hand; and they did not decide on it based on her interest; it is their own projects, fears and needs that counted." (De Beauvoir 151)

### *Introduction to Female Insanity*

"It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters." (Gubar 53). Sandra Gubar states in "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship." The Madwoman in the Attic suggests that women not following patriarchal protocol are to be punished. Female insanity is not just women negating the unwritten societal rules, but it is also a way for them to carve the way for other 'insane' women. Gubar again points out that the traditional male literature has "inferiorised female descendants, it is in many ways the germ of a disease or, at any rate, a disaffection, a disturbance, a distrust, that spreads like a stain throughout the style and structure of much literature by women..." (Gubar 51).

What both Ditlevsen and Plath appear to do is, in their way, reestablish and give a voice back to 'insane' women. In the following section, it is demonstrated how this insanity is present in *The Faces* and how it can be explained through theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Julia Kristeva.

*Psychological Fragmentation and Delusion - Lise's Hallucinations and Shifting Perception of Reality*

*Kristeva*

Lise's hallucinations and her shifting perspective of reality are the main themes in *The Faces*. She has conversations with people who are not present, and she does not perceive the nurses as individuals with their faces but rather as faces of people in her immediate surroundings. In the novel, Lise crafts her narrative of the psychological fragmentation she experiences under the epistemic violence enacted upon women under patriarchal structures. What I mean by this is that Lise's lived experience as a woman lies outside the dominant patriarchal narrative, as she cannot be assimilated into the patriarchal discourse. This can be connected to Julia Kristeva's theory, as she explores what disturbs the border between the self and the other. She states that: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that creates abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, or rules? The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Kristeva 4)

The fragmentation of Lise's psyche can also be linked to the concept of the abject, as coined by the French philosopher Julia Kristeva in her work "*Powers of Horror*" (1982). Here, she defines abject as something that disrupts the identity, system, and order. It is "what disturbs the border, the place where meaning collapses (Kristeva 4). Connecting the notion of abjection with the psychosis of Lise, one might suggest that she embraces and embodies this notion – she rejects and is somewhat repelled and disgusted by her role as a mother and as a caregiver in general. This rejection of motherhood can be interpreted as a result of Lise's upbringing and her mother's treatment of her. When Lise perceives her mother's face amongst the others, the reader sees a glimpse of Lise's childhood in the way Lise's childhood trauma echoes in the way her mother talks to her: "That won't make the vase whole again,' said her mother drily. We had it in my childhood home, and it was the only memento of my mother that I had. You've always been cold-hearted. 'I didn't want to repeat your lives,' she defended herself. 'I wanted to have my own.'" (Ditlevsen 99). Her rejection of traditional family values and roles can also be an example of this lived abjection, as she is actively refusing the prescribed identity forced upon her. The fragmentation of Lise can be interpreted as "a vortex of summons and repulsion." (Kristeva 1).

*Spivak*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of epistemic violence can also be linked to Lise's experience of gradually being muted systematically. This occurs through an exclusion from the sphere of legitimate knowledge (Spivak 280), connecting this to De Beauvoir's term 'the Other', meaning that the woman is denied epistemic authority concerning the masculine norm. This is exemplified throughout the entirety of *The Faces*, particularly in Lise's experience at the mental institution.

A particularly interesting scene exemplifying this is on page 83 of *The Faces*, where Lise is warned by another patient called Mrs. Kristensen, about not telling the staff about the voice she hears, otherwise they will label her as insane: "We have a great time, as long as we watch out for the nurses. When they hear what we're saying, they write it down in the report." In this particular context, the institution has a predetermined and defined understanding of what is considered credible, in a sense. If Lise speaks loudly of her experience, it is immediately negated and pathologised, instead of being understood. Her statement is already disqualified – this could be argued to be an example of epistemic violence, as the patriarchal forces and the power of the psychiatric apparatus decide what women can say and what their words possibly will mean. Later on in the novel, Lise becomes self-aware of the system she is a part of. She recognizes that "And in one clear, observant spot in her mind, she knew that now they had won. She had gone insane." (Ditlevsen 107) The institutional forces take over her self-awareness, which can also be described as another layer of epistemic harm, in a way where the powerful and dominant frame slowly replaces her own.

*Cixous*

Not only can Lise's experience in the mental facility be viewed through a clinical lens, but also through feminist theory, especially the theories of the French authors Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. All three explore the themes of female repression and navigating a world constrained by masculine societal ideals. Hélène Cixous writes of the concept of 'écriture féminine' in her work called *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Cixous advocates that female writers should write with their whole body and reject the masculine writing standard: "Write yourself. Your body must be heard." (Cixous 880). The severe hallucinations that Lise experiences, the visions of bizarre faces, and the several voices accusing her of trying to poison her children, could be interpreted as examples of suppressed bodily writing – Lise, as a children's writer, has earlier not been able to express herself in her writing fully, and thus her getting admitted into a mental institute allows for her to express a self that is fractured,

but was previously denied a language. This is exemplified on page 36, when Lise hears the voices saying the following: “She never shows herself outside the apartment. You don’t have to believe me, but they’re trying to drive her crazy. I’ve heard the husband and the girl talking about it.”. One might argue that the voices in the pipes are examples of literal *écriture féminine* – it is a bodily text, so to speak, that interrupts and breaks the domestic repression. This moment could also be argued to be a pivotal moment in the novel, as it marks the transition towards getting institutionalised. Here, one might argue, language becomes freer, thus aligning with Cixous’ idea that women have to write with their whole body in order to be heard. Another way we can see *écriture féminine* in this particular scene is in the way Lise’s body experiences the voices – it is a full-body experience, but at the same time, chaotic, as the voices appear to come from the apartment structure itself. This scene corresponds to another scene later in the novel where a nurse asks Lise about the voices she hears. Lise is convinced that the hospital staff also hear the voices. The nurse then replies that “all the voices come from inside yourself.” (Ditlevsen 68). Lise is so convinced that the hospital staff are in on the plot. This corresponds to the previously mentioned scene, as it stages Lise’s experience as linguistic power that breaks through the masculine frame. What the nurse is saying is that Lise’s hallucinations are to be negated, instead of listening to what Lise is saying about the voices. One might argue that the voices embody the *écriture féminine* and speak for her when conventional language fails to do so. The voices Lise hears in the pillow speaker and through the pipes represent Lise’s inner truth demanding to be heard, when other forms of communication and linguistic expression have failed. Another pivotal moment in the story is when Lise realises that the voice she hears is a hallucination, and thus not reality. The voices stem from within herself, not from external forces.

Additionally, towards the end, one might notice the increased self-awareness stemming from Lise – she starts to question what is real, and whether sanity is an illness in itself: “What was real in this world, and what was not real? Wasn’t it a kind of sickness that people could walk around holding onto their own ego?” (Ditlevsen 130). In the theories of Cixous, madness is seen as linked to a repression of the woman. Madness is thus a site where the bodies of women are ‘speaking’ when no other language is allowed. This is parallel to Lise’s so-called madness – it should not only be read as a clinical act of expression, but also as a feminist one. It is a smaller part of the feminine discourse that otherwise represses the female voice.

Regarding the silencing of the female body, the French philosopher Luce Irigaray critiques this very silencing. On page 76 of *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she writes that: “Woman’s desire has doubtless

been submerged by the logic that has governed the West since the time of the Greeks: a logic of the same, of identity, of the proper.” Lise is unable to follow the logic of the West, so to speak – she is trapped in roles that negate her multiplicity and complexity; it is to be expected of her to fit the mould as a wife, mother, and decent woman. One could then argue that her mental breakdown is an unconscious rebellion against this impossible monologic demand. The faces she sees when she is hallucinating could each be a representation of ‘failed’ womanhood – each face is a mask, reflecting the imposed identity. According to Irigaray, the female sex has been denied the right to self-representation, which is exemplified in one of the pivotal moments in *The Faces*. Lise starts to hallucinate the faces around her. The narration in this scene portrays the faces in an almost grotesque yet benevolent manner. This scene resonates with the previously mentioned quote by Irigaray. Irigaray’s phallogocentric logic highlights how the faces represent and confront Lise in her choices about what she is supposed to do with her life. One might argue that each face is representative of a so-called failed womanhood. She is confronted with all the identities she could have assumed but never had the opportunity – a fitting analogy, perhaps, to *The Bell Jar*, likening it to the fig tree. This pivotal moment also exemplifies how the female body is ‘mucous’, meaning that the body is dynamic. It is not solid or liquid, and it is neither inside nor outside. It resists any law regarding the identity of the body (Irigaray 229). The faces that Lise sees when she hallucinates are examples of being mucous-like; they are an active part in blurring the boundary between the self and the other, and between Lise’s sanity and madness. They are constantly there, clinging to Lise. Lise is subconsciously refusing to hold on to an identity that fits within the patriarchal standards and norms. Because of this, Lise destabilises the entire phallic framework, in which it is expected of her to function. Thus, this particular scene in *The Faces* demonstrates Irigaray’s claim that women are actively being denied the right to self-representation. Lise’s hallucinations exemplify how her inner self and her psyche produce a sort of demonstration of plurality. What this particular scene also reveals is how Lise refuses to assimilate within the phallic structure of society, and also within the mental hospital. Her hallucinations are not merely representative of her madness, but they are also representative of a protest. Her body and mind are actively fighting for her, her way of fighting goes against a structure that actively works against her.

*Esther's Depressive Episodes, Dissociation, and Suicide attempt*

Plath's *The Bell Jar* offers a piercingly intricate, intimate, and psychologically rich portrait of mental illness, structured around protagonist Esther Greenwood and her slow descent into severe depression and suicidal ideation. The narration of *The Bell Jar* closely mirrors the life experiences of Plath herself. *The Bell Jar* also functions as a socio-political critique of the mental load placed on women in the 1950s.

Esther's psychological descent slowly begins. At the outset of the novel, she says, "I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to." Furthermore, again, on page 3: "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." This reflects the personal despair Esther feels throughout the whole novel. This mental entrapment symbolises the suffocation Esther feels from living, and she is existentially confined through the metaphor of the bell jar. In *The Madness of Women*, Jane Ussher states that "women's depression is not an individual pathology but a response to gendered oppression, a state where women are silenced and devalued by cultural narratives" (Ussher 78). The intense experience of Esther echoes this interpretation: She is highly overwhelmed by the often restrictive and conflicting, narrow experiences and expectations of womanhood, as well as her intellectual ambitions and sense of purity. Another example of Esther's depressive episodes can be found in chapter 8, where Esther is out skiing: "I felt like a fool standing there in my skis, watching all the other skiers swoop down the hill, and I couldn't move." (Plath 106). Here, we can see a hesitation of Esther, and also a sort of paralysis.

Plath employs a first-person narration throughout the novel, which features deep introspection. An article published by BJPsych Advances (2024) discusses how Plath's narrative style provides a more intimate and profound insight into Esther's inner world, offering the reader a sense of immediacy to her psychological distress. This scene highlights and focalises how hopeless Esther feels. This focalization emphasises the feeling of not being good enough and the feeling of failure when she has to ski. Who is the addressee in this particular scene? It is not explicitly directed at a particular person; however, the narrative style of Plath allows the reader to hear her inner dialogue, which is filled with self-doubt and isolation. Ussher states that "Women are more likely to be positioned or diagnosed as mad than men...madness is a construction, a gendered label." (Ussher 1) The paralysis that Esther experiences on the ski slope can be argued to be representative of a societal imposition. This paralysis can be viewed as a sort of response to a society that offers restrictive roles to women. These moments

of apparent distress and hesitation indicate and reflect on a broader cultural narrative in which the experiences of women are being marginalised and silenced. This paralysis could also be argued to be a mirroring of her struggles, which the analogy of the fig tree is also a great example of – the social expectation and her personal goals for what she wants to achieve in life clash, leaving her feeling inadequate, static, and overwhelmed with making a choice.

This is also evident from the scenes where Esther feels most dissociative and disconnected from her body and identity, which are mirrored in the fragmented life of Sylvia Plath and the way she associates herself with madness. In *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, she writes in one of the letters that “I want so obviously, so desperately to be loved, and to be capable of love. I am still so naïve; I know pretty much what I like and dislike; but please, don’t ask me who I am. “a passionate, fragmentary girl,” maybe?” (Plath 165) Plath does not appear as though she is asking for too much, but some may interpret this as madness. Madness, in this case, could be argued to be that Plath knows what she desires, at least when it comes to finding love. In other areas of life, it may appear as if she is lost, which the reader can see reflected in the character of Esther. In one scene, in particular, it is articulated vividly: “I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life” (Plath 17). The fact that she feels like a ‘negative’ only shows how depersonalisation is central to Esther's mental condition; I want to argue that it is a sort of psychological erasure of identity and selfhood. Kristeva's notion of abjection can be linked to this personal breakdown: “...the breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object.” (Kristeva 4). The word ‘sadness’ is then not sufficient to describe the complex situation of Esther’s mental breakdown – she has lost her boundaries, and she appears as though she is dissolving under cultural and psychological pressure. In this sense, Esther’s suicide attempt can be interpreted as a culmination of her depressive state and also as a critique of the lack of medical help when Esther first turns to her doctor regarding her insomnia issues. She narrates: “The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my mind... then the breeze fell slack, and the black shadow dropped, and I was locked in a suffocating bell jar.” (Plath 133). The medical professionals in the novel are often cold and dismissive, as exemplified by Dr. Gordon. He appears highly shallow and disregards Esther's mental problems. This results in Plath’s critique of the medical industry aligning with feminist scholar Alex Neitzke’s assertion in “An Illness of Power” He states the following:” ...Depression is not solely a chemical imbalance, or an isolated disorder but is inextricably linked to social experiences of powerlessness.” (Neitzke 115). The powerlessness that Neitzke mentions is evident in the treatment of Esther performed by the medical

staff. She is treated with highly traumatic electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), which is described in a way that further emphasises the dehumanising aspects of psychiatric treatments: “With each flash, a great jolt... blasted the thought from my mind” (Plath 115). This is also an example of agency and identity erasure, which Lisa Appignanesi also notes in “Mad, Bad and Sad” – that psychiatry has historically pathologized women's refusal of social roles, thus treating non-conformity as an illness (Appignanesi 189).

“I couldn't sleep. I couldn't read. I couldn't eat. All I could do was lie on the bed and stare at the ceiling.” (Plath 123). De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* can also explain the sense of entrapment Esther feels: “Immanence... encloses her in the sphere of the relative (de Beauvoir 27). Esther's inability to fall asleep can not only be explained as merely a symptom of depression, but it is a part of something bigger – her breakdown is a subconscious political act of refusal because her situation is right at the intersection of the personal and the structural. One can also connect this to the theory of Irigaray from the book called *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Here, she notes that “woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men.” (Irigaray 84). This could be interpreted as medical issues of women. Thus their identities are decided and mediated through male authority, which we see in the slightly narcissistic character of Dr. Gordon. Instead of trying to diagnose her, he belittles and undermines her, making her question her selfhood. He defines her mental state, when he is supposed to listen to her actively, and what her struggles are, “when I had finished, Doctor Gordon lifted his head. ‘Where did you say you went to college?’ ‘Baffled, I told him. I didn't see where college fitted in. ‘Ah!’ Doctor Gordon leaned back. In his chair, staring into the air over my shoulder with a reminiscent smile.” (Plath 125). Esther's first impression of this doctor is that he seemed relatively shallow and acted as a show-off. Doctor Gordon negates the feelings of unrest and uneasiness that Esther feels and chooses to focus on where she went to college, to turn the conversation to him.

#### *Discussion of Inner versus Outer Identity and Reality Distortion*

Both Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Tove Ditlevsen's *The Faces* explore the fragmentation and disintegration of the balance between the inner self and outward identity through protagonists who experience a decentralisation of the self. What these novels thus have in common is the dramatization of a destabilised reality through the lens of female madness. In other words, the idea is that female madness is on the verge of collapsing due to the strict, socially scripted roles. The act, if one can call

it that, of losing one's sense of reality paradoxically becomes a means of exposing the very artifice of these predetermined roles. In this sense, both of the novels resonate with Kristeva's idea of the 'abject' as a force that disturbs and interrupts the boundaries between the self and the other. As I argue, in both cases, the distortion of reality functions not as a mere symptom but as an existential protest, revealing the instability of identity under oppressive structures.

This self-loathing is exemplified in one of the most critical scenes in understanding her disoriented view of herself, her personality, and her identity as a whole. Esther's identity crisis is symbolised when she looks in the mirror and is unable to recognise herself. As Christina Britzolakis notes, Plath "subverts the mirror trope to dramatize the fragmentation of the female self under patriarchal surveillance." (Britzolakis 58). The mirror becomes a site of distortion and disjunction, both between the self as perceived internally and the self as a result of social construction. This can be connected to the concept of abjection by Kristeva, as the self of Esther is destabilised by what cannot be assimilated into its image: "The abject...draws me toward the place where meaning collapses." (Kristeva 2). Within Esther's inner world, there is substantial self-loathing and confusion stemming from the collapsing boundary between her social identity and the chaotic yet authentic emotions and bodily sensations she endures. Esther is unable to recognise herself in her reflection in the mirror, which, in psychoanalysis, can be tied to the Lacanian idea of the mirror stage.

There is no stable 'I' present in front of the mirror. The mirror itself is an active part of the fragmentation in the present scene – the 'I' can be interpreted as a distortion and thus refuses to fuse and become one unity. Connecting to what Kristeva stated in *Powers of Horror*: "it is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled." (Kristeva 3) When Esther is observing herself in the mirror, one might argue that she is forced to confront her abject self. She sees an image of herself, but it is not her. It reflects a lack of subjectivity. Kristeva also states that the mirror is acting as "a vortex of summons and repulsion" (Kristeva 1). This can be interpreted as the mirror draws Esther closer to a form of subjective recognition, but Esther fails to do so. Esther is repelled by the result of the fragmentation of herself – she has arguably subconsciously repelled herself with the mirror's strange and alien distortion of her. The abject, as Kristeva also argues, "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). The mirror is an active part of Esther's fragmented identity.

Similarly, in *The Faces*, the protagonist, Lise, also undergoes a fragmentation of herself and identity. She often experiences hallucinations that distort the boundaries between reality and delusion. These

hallucinations are also representations and an expression of her trying to reject the self she has been forced to perform as a wife, mother, and writer. “She no longer belonged to herself...people had unashamedly formed an image of her over which she had no control.” (Ditlevsen 76). Lise's identity is decided and shaped by external expectations, which eventually leads to a form of psychosis, so to speak. Irigaray might describe this as a woman being denied her full potential and subjectivity within a system that works against her, reducing her to a mere object of male desire (Irigaray 76). These external expectations are also reflected in Lise's hallucinations, including the speaker in her pillow – it is a symbol of how seemingly intimate and safe spaces are weaponised against her. Alex Neitzke argues: “Depression is not simply a medical issue, but a lived, gendered experience in which women's identities are fractured by the pressure to conform” (Neitzke 81). The speaker in the pillow thus represents how the world manipulates and distorts Lise's inner truth, creating uncertainty and suspicion of her surroundings – she feels as though she is constantly being judged. Her life is then transformed into a site of surveillance and betrayal. This feeling of being judged and watched is mainly illustrated through the hallucinations involving the faces Lise sees and the voices she hears. It can seem quite difficult for her to get some rest. In this particular scene, we observe how Lise is afraid to go home, in case the voices will follow her there. “she no longer heeded Mrs. Kristensen’s warning, for it was no longer her goal to go home. The faces were waiting for her there, and her eyes would strike them like sulfuric acid.” (Ditlevsen 106). Neitzke points out how medical issues of women do not get taken seriously, which this scene in particular is an example of – sending Lise home before she is ready, can be interpreted as a sort of betrayal. It may also be a risk to send Lise home, as she still is not entirely ‘recovered’, so to speak. It is a signal of the doctor trying to reduce and fit Lise into the societal pressure to conform. Continuing with Neitzke, he emphasises that “diagnosis of depression there can act to silence those who suffer from social oppression by focusing attention on individuals, brains, and neuropathways instead of social causal pathways.” (Neitzke 64).

One might argue that this represents Lise’s situation – the doctors insisting on sending her home, despite her instability and fragility, they are actively participating in what Neitzke also describes as a “symbolic violence of stigmatization and disqualification” Neitzke 63, thus actively negating Lise’s lived truth. Neitzke also argues that medicalization have a way to “undermine [women’s] social credibility” (Neitzke 66). What the doctor appears to do in this particular scene is enhance and uphold the patriarchal influence in the medical field. He does not appear to address the oppressive structure in which they live (Neitzke 66). This mirrors how Lise’s hallucinations are being dismissed as merely something she made up in her head. The hallucinations are a part of a broader problem – her fears of

surveillance are a direct reflection of how the patriarchal system continuously monitors and disciplines women for their behaviour. When situating Lise's hallucinations and psychosis within the framework of Nietzsche, we can see how her mental spiralling is not merely an individual tragedy, but also a result of a systematic gendered oppression.

In both of the novels, the psychological breakdown is deeply gendered in the sense that the conflict that exists between the inner and outer workings and identities of the main characters reflects not only an individual pathology but also the structural oppression. Jane Ussher argues that how madness is apparent in women is often "a rational response to unbearable circumstances, framed as illness" (Ussher 93). In their work, Ditlevsen and Plath both critique the high demand for a submissive, coherent female subjectivity; instead, both authors present protagonists with a desperate need and effort to assert bodily autonomy. Cixous's 'écriture féminine' means that women should write themselves, their bodies, and their unconscious lives in language. Both of their disorientation becomes a form of writing the self against an imposed coherence." The woman who writes cuts herself out a place in language," Cixous states – both Esther and Lise, in their different ways, are doing just that.

### *Societal Expectations and Alienation*

#### *Pressures of Conformity, Silence, and Control Imposed on Women in The Bell Jar and The Faces*

As stated earlier, both novels present a stark portrayal of how a psychological unravelling happens in the face of social expectations. Both of the main protagonists, Lise Mundus and Esther Greenwood, are subjected to structures of power that discipline their bodies, voices, and minds. This feeling of alienation is a result of a lack of genuine care and treatment provided by the institutional workers. In this section, the focus is on Michel Foucault's notions of power, discipline, and normalisation.

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault discusses the 'medical gaze', which objectifies the patient and transforms it into a case to be studied, observed, and controlled (Foucault 89). This gaze is what Esther experiences from time to time when the psychiatrists observe her every move and action. These psychiatrists do not see her as an individual with her independence and agency, but as an object who needs to be normalised. Esther recalls that "The doctor said that my condition was serious and that shock treatment would help. I didn't say anything. I just nodded." (Plath 161). Her silence is not

exactly consent, but rather a symptom of minimisation. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes the following: “Power is exercised rather than possessed...it is a machinery. That no one owns.” (Foucault 26). What he means by this is that the doctors and the psychiatrists are a part of a larger disciplinary system that masks coercion as care. We can also see an example of this in *The Faces*, where Lise’s experience at the psychiatric hospital is defined by surveillance and enforced passivity. The speakers in her pillow, where Lise hears the voices, could be a sign of something more than just paranoia – it could also be interpreted as being a metaphor for panopticism that Foucault describes as “A state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 201). Lise recognises the somewhat invasive structure that surrounds her when she says: “The voice was coming from her pillow...She had to have proof. She wanted to show it to Dr. Jørgensen.” (Ditlevsen 89). This paranoia that Lise appears to be experiencing throughout the novel may reveal the truth about institutionalisation – that she is under constant scrutiny, both literal and ideological.

Continuing with Foucault, he theorises how institutions, like hospitals and schools, produce so-called ‘docile bodies’. ‘Docile bodies’ are bodies that are trained through discipline to conform to norms. Esther and Lise are both examples of ‘docile bodies’, because the psychiatrists try to normalise them to get them back into society. They are both damaged and shaped by these external forces, which we can see when Esther states the following: “The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick.”, which can also be interpreted as a metaphor for how society tries to ‘reset’ non-compliant women (Plath 133). Connecting this to Foucault’s theory regarding disciplinary power, and how it ‘infiltrates the body’ and makes individuals ‘subjected and practised’ (*Discipline and Punish* 138). The metaphor of the fig tree we see on page 77 is Esther refusing to become a ‘docile body’. She explains: “I wanted each and every one of them but choosing one meant losing all the rest.” The multiplicity of women is limited to a system that only offers mutually exclusive and institutionally sanctioned roles.

This is also evident in Lise, as well as her experience of being institutionalised. Lise feels suffocated in her day-to-day life as a housewife and mother, and it is not only emotionally taxing for her, but also ontologically dissolving. She expresses through the novel how trapped she feels as being labelled as ‘only’ a mother and housewife. This makes her question her identity: “She moved her fingers over her face, as if to assure herself that they hadn’t taken it away from me.” (Ditlevsen 113). This strange alienation Lise feels is an example of Foucault’s notion of the production of ‘truth’ – meaning that

power is not just a repressive force, but also a productive force. Here, the truth is constructed through the psychiatric and familial institutions (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 94).

Going back to Foucault's notion of surveillance, Esther and Lise have both internalised the gaze of society in general, as well as the medical authority within the psychiatric hospital. Esther feels pressured and paralysed by the expectations of others, especially when it comes to sexual purity and her intellectual ambition: "I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel." (Plath 3). This is an example of how Esther is trapped, regardless of her location, by multiple surveillance regimes: the male gaze, her mother's expectations, and the medical system. An example of the male gaze as a form of surveillance is Esther's constant need to negotiate her identity through the eyes of men, who end up imposing narrow expectations on her appearance, sexuality, and ambition. This is something she is aware of: "What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb." (*The Bell Jar* 196). This quote follows her distressing encounter with the mathematics professor, Irwin, whom Esther met on the steps of the Harvard library. Another example of the male surveillance gaze is her relationship with Buddy Willard, a handsome and athletic man who can be characterised as the ideal 1950s American male. On page 82 of *The Bell Jar*, we see an example of Buddy dismissing Esther's desires and positioning her life as a woman centred around domestic roles: "Buddy Willard said in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children, I would feel differently. He said this after I told him I hated the idea of being married and having children." His condescension epitomises the notion of the male gaze: women who are being seen and defined from a male perspective, existing only as objects of desire or care.

The second type of surveillance is the expectations of Esther's mother – she also shows more subtly, but still so much that Esther feels the pressure of this. One could argue that represents the internalised social norms about femininity, education, and also concerning social control, as we can see on page 138 of *The Bell Jar*: "I had told her I would not come home. I would never come home. I hated her. I hated her rosy cheeks and her blue eyes and her lisping about the house, saying how nice it was to have me back and how well I looked." The mother insists on normalcy, even though it is clear that Esther may be suffering from depression and is feeling unwell. Instead of trying to understand the psychological distress of Esther, the mother attempts to conform her into normalcy and conformity. The line "I hate her" can be argued to represent not only Esther's resentment towards her mother but also a rejection of the standardised womanhood that the mother represents. The mother has a job as a typist, which Esther mocks: "She seemed to think I might make a career out of it, the way other girls

made careers out of shorthand typing.” (The Bell Jar 105). This section represents the limited possibilities available to women in the 1950s: they could only resort to certain types of jobs, such as secretarial work, marriage, and motherhood. One might argue that the desperation and sadness Esther feels grow from the lack of expansive and authentic choices.

The third is the psychiatric and medical systems, which do not act as a space of healing but also of alienation, which we see in the care of Esther. She is treated like an object, like a part of the system, in a cold, mechanical, and disciplinary way: “The nurse came in with a thermometer and put it in my mouth. She looked at me as if I were a strange insect, a cockroach perhaps.” (The Bell Jar 142) this is a moment of dehumanization. The psychiatric hospital reduces her to merely a body, an object to be measured, and not a sentient being with her thoughts and feelings. Both protagonists’ mental collapse is a rebellion against patriarchal norms. The balance between Foucault’s notion of surveillance and conformity merely accentuates how both Lise’s and Esther’s crises are intertwined with and a part of a bigger and broader machinery of power, which often frames women and their lives as problems that need to be managed and solved. The framework of Foucault also reveals the problems of psychiatric intervention – that even though it appears therapeutic on the outside, it often operates as an extension of societal discipline, with the goal of ‘restoring,’ so to speak, individuals so that they fall within normative standards again. When this happened, the investigation into why it happened was not being addressed. In Esther’s case, the countless treatments, whether it be electroconvulsive therapy or condescending moral advice, have the goal of erasing her resistance to the already decided gender norms. Then she will be on the spectrum of so-called acceptable femininity.

In Lise’s case, the constant monitoring and the persistent presence of the invasive voices she hears, along with the different faces she hallucinates, are not only examples of her fragile and deceptive state of mind but also serve as a representation and metaphor of the panoptic scrutiny of society that refuses to perceive a woman as a subject outside her marital and domestic role. For both Lise and Esther, silence then becomes a coerced condition: Esther’s quiet compliance at the doctor’s office mirrors Lise’s inability to explain her paranoia in an acceptable way so that the doctors will validate her words. It can be argued that both of them feel a sense of alienation, but with a double meaning – both are estranged from themselves and their surroundings, and also from a social order that actively denies their lived realities. Madness, in both cases, becomes a symbol of a refusal to conform forcibly.

*The Bell Jar: Esther's Aversion to Traditional Female Roles—Motherhood, Marriage, and Passivity*

Like Lise in *The Faces*, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, experiences a psychological and existential crisis when she is admitted to a psychiatric institute. This crisis is intertwined with her active rejection of the standard or traditional perception of what a woman is supposed to do in society. Her ambivalence towards motherhood and marriage is evident at the beginning of the novel. She also admits that a future marked by childbirth and marriage could smother her: "I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to." (Plath 123). At a certain point in the novel, she actively rejects the idea of whether children would be a part of her future: "When they told me I would have children someday, I would say I never wanted any." (Plath 85). This resistance to having children stems from a more profound and intricate psychological conflict: her academic ambition and intellectual goals, and the limiting roles of women in the 20th century. In the article "This Is Not Death, It is Something Safer," the author, Benigna Gerisch, interprets the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, as a victim of external forces and patriarchal societal expectations. She also interprets the breakdown of Greenwood as a purge or death of the socially constructed feminine self. Continuing with this reading, Esther Greenwood does indeed have a desire to die combined with a wish for rebirth, with no societal expectations attached to her new self. Esther also expresses that "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not." (Plath 81) Here, in particular, we can see Esther's awareness of her situation as a so-called modern woman in 20th-century society. The woman is punished for the same behaviour that a man gets celebrated for. She is also not 'allowed' to steer away from the societal norms and expectations of what a woman is supposed to achieve in life. Esther does not express any wishes to have a child, and her opinion and attitude towards motherhood and parenting in general are ones of horror, disgust, and strong resistance. On page 86, she says, "Children made me sick." Later on in the novel, "The thought of being locked in a house with a baby and a husband I hated... sent a shiver down my spine." (112) For other women, it might seem like motherhood being a site of fulfilment and happiness, but to Esther, it is an imprisonment of her independent self. De Beauvoir also touches upon this in particular on page 4 of *The Second Sex*: "The woman who is shut up in immanence endeavours to hold man in that prison also...mother, wife, sweetheart are the jailers." Esther is knowledgeable and cognizant of her role in this restrictive society. She desperately wishes for a different life, free of patriarchal judgment.

How she subtly rebels against this judgment is through her encounter with Buddy Willard, as he, in Esther's perception, embodies this patriarchal judgment: "He thought I should be interested in babies. And I was supposed to cook and clean and let him think he was making all the decisions." (Plath 83). There is nothing romantic about this relationship between the two; it appears to be a business deal and a performance of subordination. In the book *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience*, Jane M. Ussher makes clear the subject of women being scrutinised and put under a microscope when it comes to treating a mental illness. On page 67, she states that "Madness has operated as a form of social control – a way of disciplining women who fail to live up to the feminine ideal." Moreover, she continues that "The diagnostic category of depression has become a way of explaining women's distress as personal weakness or pathology, rather than a rational response to oppression." (Ussher 90). Taking this into account, Esther Greenwood is a prime example of a woman who did not live up to societal standards. In *The Bell Jar*, she is struggling and battling depression, but no one seems to take her seriously. Her depression can be interpreted as a response to the immense pressure and the unreachable and impossible standards that women face.

While being admitted into the psychiatric hospital, Esther expresses her melancholic sadness of never being able to do what she wants because she feels restricted and held back. She embodies a profound drive to achieve her dreams. Still, she quickly realises that her dreams are just dreams: "There were no ripe fruit on the fig tree, her symbol for a wonderful future, in a happy home as a famous poet or brilliant professor. "I saw myself sitting in the crotch of the fig tree, starving to death, just because I could not make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meaning losing all the rest, and as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet." (Plath 55). This section, in my opinion, references the fig tree dream, which serves as a metaphor for unrealised life paths, including career, love, motherhood, and independence. Esther feels paralysed, knowing she is only allowed to make one choice, as societal insistence and limitation dictate her fate. She must choose a path that aligns with traditional femininity. In the novel, The Fig Tree is a manifestation and metaphor of the female role in a patriarchal society. The existential grievance Esther goes through stems from the violence of forced choice, where every fig represents a possible alternative, a great life, that compromises the others. There is an ideal feminine wish of 'having it all,' which is here presented and exposed as a brutal myth. This brutal myth is intertwined with Esther's reactions, thoughts and ideals, and is visible early on, on page 24, when Esther states the following: "The joke was that at my wedding my grandfather would see I had all the caviar I could eat. It was a joke because I never

intended to get married,..." Here, she already understands that she will never possess everything that society imposes on her, and she does not aspire to have everything if it requires her to abandon her morals and standards. She does, however, dream of marriage, as evident on page 80, when she says, "I tried to imagine what it would be like if Constantin were my husband." On the following page, the reader sees more clearly Esther's perception of domestic life: "So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about as numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state." The fact that Esther compares a domestic life to a totalitarian state is telling of her overall sense of imprisonment, both within a patriarchal society and also within her own thoughts. Ussher is of the opinion that "Women's narratives of resistance are crucial in understanding and addressing the sources of their distress." (Ussher 185). When connecting this to Esther, her resistance to both the mental institute and also to the patriarchal standards set can be interpreted both as a form of rebellion, as she is not conforming to the set norms, while at the same time, it is a cry against the limitations and socially permitted womanhood. The treatment of Esther at the private asylum showcases how female resistance is medicalised with electroconvulsive therapy and psychiatric intervention. In *The Bell Jar*, this is not depicted as a treatment to heal her, but rather as a way of 'correcting' her illness so that she can be restored to acceptability.

### *The Faces: Lise's Diversion and Traditional Female Roles*

This part of the thesis focuses on the close reading of key aspects of the novel where Lise feels trapped in her role as a caregiver and her fragmented identity. Reading Lise's mental spiralling through *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert & Gubar) and Antje Petersen's *Tove Ditlevsen and the Aesthetics of Madness* will help situate the novel within a feminist context, focusing on madness and female subjectivity. Petersen states in her article that Ditlevsen's work depicts "a life suspended between extreme opposites: on the one hand a bourgeois existence with husband and children and on the other, a writer suffering from depression, psychoses, and addiction" (Petersen 246) Throughout the novel it is clear that Lise is balancing between having an observable public persona, versus her private persona, and thus private despair. She makes that evident when she says that "people will discover that she was ugly in person, that she had failed them, that she was worthless." (Ditlevsen 5). The national fame does not protect her from alienation from herself – it also adds to her already seemingly severe anxiety. In the beginning of the novel, she is interviewed and asked about her opinion of

miniskirts and whether they are “destroying marriage”. She is visibly angry and disgusted by the question and lashes out, saying, “I didn’t win it in a national election.” (Ditlevsen 9)

The traditional role at home is already slowly falling apart, as her husband, Gert, is unfaithful to her time and time again. Lise’s children also appear to distance themselves from her, and Lise’s mother denies supporting and taking care of her daughter. Gilbert and Gubar argue that an integrated part of patriarchal culture is the start of perceptions and binaries when defining a woman. They argue that women are to be perceived as either “angel or monster, sweet dumb Snow White and fierce mad Queen” (Gilbert & Gubar 46). Lise fails to live out the role as the angelic image of a devoted wife and mother. Instead, she is perceived as a monster acting out of bounds, who had to be institutionalized as she is not participating in the normative perception of what femininity is. Lise is breaking out from the traditional role expected from her, which is exemplified through Lise’s distancing from her family. Another way that this is present in the novel is when Lise expresses the following: “I only wanted to describe the world I saw, not to participate in it.” (Ditlevsen 61). Lise actively wants to take a step back and become an observer of life, recording it. This corresponds to a statement made by Ditlevsen herself, quoted in the Petersen text: “Even if nobody else were to be interested in my poems, I would have to write them, because it soothes my sorrows and the longing in my heart. (Petersen 246). Both Lise and Tove clearly express writing as a therapeutic aspect of their lives, a subtle and fragile way of resisting despair in life. Gilbert and Gubar state in their article that women who “gave themselves wholly to reading and writing” would be considered mad, because they steer away from “such things as belong to women.” (Gilbert and Gubar 55)

In conclusion, *The Faces* represent Lise’s madness and two opposing aspects: on the one hand, madness is depicted as a profound and personal tragedy, and on the other hand, it is portrayed as a subtle, perhaps even subconscious, resistance and rebellion against societal norms for women. Lise’s diversion to escape from the traditional female role is not only an escape – it is also a critique of these roles. One might argue, then, that Lise’s insanity and madness are a coping mechanism and a fragile tactic for her, trying to survive and navigate a new environment.

*Thinking the Künstler-roman in connection to the narrative model of Mieke Bal in The Bell Jar*

A Künstler-roman is characterised by following an artist's spiritual development and coming of age, which both protagonists, Lise Mundus and Esther Greenwood, exemplify. The protagonist of a Künstlerroman tends to self-dramatise (Deppman 533), as evident in both characters' stream of consciousness. The process of analysing the Künstler-roman involves considering the development and progress of the artist, the narrative structure of the novel, the specific and essential themes and motifs, the further characterisation and description of the protagonist, and examining the cultural and historical context in which the Künstler-roman is set (Bal 7). A Künstler-roman depicts the artist's journey, and how her skills and identity change throughout the narrative. Here, one can reflect on the struggles and obstacles the protagonist faces during their stay at the mental institute. What is also important to consider is the themes and motifs – the themes are often related to a sort of spiritual awakening. The narrative structure of the Künstler-roman varies depending on the literary work. Sometimes, there is a chronological string of events, and sometimes the author employs an unconventional tool of time, such as flashbacks. One way to analyse the chain of events in a Künstlerroman is through the use of the narrative model created by the Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal.

Bal highlights the importance of interpreting why certain events are included or excluded in a textual narrative (Bal 7). Connecting this to the Künstler-roman, this model involves depicting key moments in the main character's life that contribute to their personal development. One of Bal's main focal points in her narrational work is the emphasis on characters being shaped through distinct traits that create their identities in a literary work (Bal 8). This section of the thesis will delve into two scenes from *The Bell Jar* and *The Faces* to thoroughly engage with the novels and their characters.

Esther is a first-person narrator, which means she does not have access to the inner thoughts, feelings, hopes, or dreams of other characters. This allows both the writer and the reader to engage more personally with the main character, enabling us to explore and delve deeper into the story of the protagonist. Bal states that there are two types of speakers in a narrative text. The first actively participates in the fabula, while the second does not (Bal 9). Plath has withdrawn herself from the narrative and “Calls upon a fictitious spokesman” (Bal 8). One of the key moments in *The Bell Jar* occurs on page 73, through Esther's stream of consciousness and her pursuit of both intellectual and marital fulfilment. She states: “From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future

beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet, and another fig was a brilliant professor (...) and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out." What is significant to the Künstlerroman is the soul-searching, and this part of the novel exemplifies just this: Esther has a bright future ahead of her, but she needs to figure out what her aspirations are in life. This soul-searching was also reflected in the real life of Plath. In *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, she asks, "Why is it that I find it so difficult to accept the present moment, whole as an apple, without cutting and hacking at it to find a purpose (...) Perhaps when we find ourselves wanting everything it is because we are dangerously near wanting nothing." (Plath 193). The emotional baggage and struggles Esther faces can also be argued to be reflective of the life of Sylvia Plath herself. This is conveyed in the novel through the whole structure of the novel and the temporal function of Bal's narration model.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, it is clear that psychological collapse, female resistance to societal constraints, and identity fragmentation are evident in Tove Ditlevsen's *The Faces* and Sylvia Plath's iconic *The Bell Jar*. The analysis examined how both Esther Greenwood and Lise Mundus resist traditional female roles, and how these notions of a patriarchal view of womanhood do not come naturally to either of them. The analysis also focused on the tension between inner and outer identity, as well as the distortion of reality, primarily exemplified in *The Faces*. For a thorough analysis, the stream of consciousness of both characters has been considered, allowing insight into their thoughts and behaviour. It has also been explored how both novels depict the influence of patriarchy within the power structures of mental institutions. The analysis examined how patriarchy actively influenced the struggles of both main characters, shaping their decisions and actions. A part of the research question also involved a broader examination of female individual identity within these literary worlds. The concept of autobiography has also been defined and utilised as a tool to analyse both novels, in order to distinguish the society depicted in the texts from the societal context in which Plath and Ditlevsen lived. It has also been demonstrated how closely Tove Ditlevsen and Sylvia Plath were aligned with their characters Lise Mundus and Esther Greenwood, which made objective analysis of these

characters and their actions more challenging. It appeared almost impossible to separate the characters from their authors, and therefore, much of the analysis is influenced by what I already know about both writers.

Both novels can be read as semi-autobiographical literary pieces of work. Both novels blur the line between what is a fictional experience and the actual lived experience.

The narrative style of both authors reveals how women's identities are being undermined and put under pressure in a patriarchal society. It has also been shown that patriarchal powers within a mental institution appear to negate the experiences and feelings of both of the main characters, even though these very institutions are supposed to provide care for them. Both *The Faces* and *The Bell Jar* remain respectfully literary works that reveal the intertwinement of personal struggles and their relation to a broader cultural context. They are both testimonies of the still-negation and neglect of female-related issues within the medical industry and how being mad and insane can be small acts of protest to a repressive system. The madness which Jane Ussher describes as a rational response to impossible circumstances, which has been exemplified in the way Esther and Lise and their fractured identities, still are able to testify to a system that subsumes all aspects of what it means to be a modern woman. The term of *écriture féminine* was also argued to resonate with both of the novels as Ditlevsen and Plath subtly but surely, and in exactly their own way, resist the powerful and, at times, silence patriarchy.

Taken together, these works present the unsettling truth that women's pursuit of subjectivity within patriarchal systems is often experienced as fragmentation, breakdown, or madness. However, by highlighting this instability, Plath and Ditlevsen introduce a counter-narrative - one in which women's refusal to conform is understood not as a deficiency but as a form of resistance. Both authors show that the act of narrating, of creating a space in language, is itself a radical gesture. To write madness is to reclaim it, transforming what has been stigmatised into a testimony to the impossibility of silence. Therefore, the psychological breakdowns of Esther and Lise should not be viewed simply as tragedies, but as profoundly gendered critiques that challenge cultural notions of femininity and affirm the importance of women's voices in articulating their own fragmented, embodied truths.

Both Sylvia Plath and Tove Ditlevsen have left a lasting imprint on the literary world and will arguably stand the test of time. Both of their works open up numerous discussions, and in this way,

their works will continually be subjected to contemporary analysis and critique. Both of them might be dead, but their incredible minds still live on, reflected in their iconic and unforgettable literary repertoire.

*Bibliography*

Anonym. "Tove Ditlevsen 100 År." *AarhusBibliotekerne*, 27 Sept.

2023, [old.aakb.dk/nyheder/inspiration/tove-ditlevsen-100-aar?](http://old.aakb.dk/nyheder/inspiration/tove-ditlevsen-100-aar?)

Christiansen, Niels Finn, and Klaus Petersen. "The Dynamics of Social Solidarity: The Danish

Welfare State, 1900-2000." *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 26, no. 3, Sept. 2001, pp.

177–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/034687501750303846>.

Cixous, Hélène, et al. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, July 1976, pp. 875–

93. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493306>.

Cott, Nancy F. *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. Yale University Press, 1987. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bvgt>.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Arrow, 2015.

De Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-facement." *MLN*, vol. 94, Dec. 1979, pp. 919–

30. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2906560](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2906560).

Ditlevsen, Tove. *De Voksne*. 1st ed., Gyldendal, 1969.

---. *The Faces*. National Geographic Books, 2021.

Gay, Roxane. "Theses on the Feminist Novel - Dissent Magazine." *Dissent Magazine*, 4 May

2018, [www.dissentmagazine.org/article/theses-on-the-feminist-novel](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/theses-on-the-feminist-novel).

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. "2. Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship." *Yale University Press eBooks*, 2020, pp. 45–92. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300252972-004>.

#### Bibliography

---. *The Madwoman in the Attic*. 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxkn74x>.

Hellberg, Sherilyn Nicolette. "A Chaos of Faces: Expressions of Despair in Tove Ditlevsen's Ansigterne." *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 93, Feb. 2021, pp. 96–113.

Hertler, Steven, et al. "An Evolutionary Explanation of the Madonna-Whore Complex." *Evolutionary Psychological Science*, vol. 9, no. 3, May 2023, pp. 372–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40806-023-00364-1>.

Hirshbein, Laura D. "Gender, Age, and Diagnosis: The Rise and Fall of Involutional Melancholia in American Psychiatry, 1900–1980." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 83, no. 4, Dec. 2009, pp. 710–45. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.0.0290>.

"Hysterical Victorian Women - Historic UK." *Historic UK*, 1 Dec. 2023, [www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Hysterical-Victorian-Women](http://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Hysterical-Victorian-Women).

"Kanslergadeforliget 1933." *Danmarkshistorien | Lex*, 25 Mar. 2025, [danmarkshistorien.lex.dk/Kanslergadeforliget\\_1933](http://danmarkshistorien.lex.dk/Kanslergadeforliget_1933).

May, Elaine. *Homeward Bound*. Basic Books, 1988.

Neitzke, Alex B. "An Illness of Power: Gender and the Social Causes of Depression." *Culture Medicine and Psychiatry*, vol. 40, no. 1, July 2015, pp. 59–73. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-015-9466-3>.

Petersen, Antje C. "Tove Ditlevsen and the Aesthetics of Madness." *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 64, 1992, pp. 243–62. [www.jstor.org/stable/40919418](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40919418).

Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel: Faber Modern Classics*. Red Shed, 2015.

---. *The Bell Jar*. Faber and Faber, 2008.

---. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Vintage, 2000.

Rasmussen, Birgit. "Tove Ditlevsens Sidste Interview: »Jeg Holder Skam Kæft Med Meget." *Berlingske.dk*, 14 Dec. 2017, [www.berlingske.dk/kultur/tove-ditlevsens-sidste-interview-jeg-holder-skam-kaeft-med-meget](http://www.berlingske.dk/kultur/tove-ditlevsens-sidste-interview-jeg-holder-skam-kaeft-med-meget).

Showalter, Elaine. "Victorian Women and Insanity." *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen.* *Indiana UP*, vol. 23, 1980, pp. 157–81.

Solomon, Barbara Miller. *In the Company of Educated Women : A History of Women and Higher Education in America*. Yale University Press, 1985.

"This Sex Which Is Not One : Irigaray, Luce : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive." *Internet Archive*, 1985, [archive.org/details/thissexwhichisno0000irig](http://archive.org/details/thissexwhichisno0000irig).

“Tove Ditlevsen: ”Jeg Er Et Usselt Menneske. Et Elendigt Menneske. Et Helt Igennem Fordærvet Menneske” - Eurowoman - ALT.dk.” Alt, 24 Mar. 2025, [www.alt.dk/artikler/tove-ditlevsen-jeg-er-et-usselt-menneske-et-elendigt-menneske-et-helt-igennem-fordarvet-menneske/3073483](http://www.alt.dk/artikler/tove-ditlevsen-jeg-er-et-usselt-menneske-et-elendigt-menneske-et-helt-igennem-fordarvet-menneske/3073483).

Ussher, Jane M. “Labelling Women as Mad: Regulating and Oppressing Women.” *The Madness of Women*, Psychology Press, 2011, pp. 64–109.

Vindum, Anne. “Tove Ditlevsen.” *Forfatterweb.dk*, Nov. 2022.

Wagner-Egelhaaf, Martina. “Of Strange Loops and Real Effects: Five Theses on Autofiction/the Autofictional.” *Palgrave studies in life writing*, 2022, pp. 21–39. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78440-9\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78440-9_2).