

Narratives of Female Development in the 20th Century

Inadequacy, Rebellion, and the Feminist Bildungsroman in Woolf,

Plath & Kraus

Minthe Woudstra

4231708

BA Thesis

26 June 2018

Supervisor: Anna Poletti

Second Reader: Cathelein Aaftink

British English

6953 words



PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

Fraud and Plagiarism

Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:


- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
- cutting and pasting text from the Internet without quotation marks and footnotes;
- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial institution, such as an Internet site with summaries or papers, that were written by another person, whether or not that other person received payment for the work.

The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in



the course handbook or the thesis regulations. The Education and Examination Regulations (Article 5.15) describe the formal procedure in case of suspicion of fraud and/or plagiarism, and the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour. Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism entail. For its part, Utrecht University works to ensure that students are informed of the principles of scientific practice, which are taught as early as possible in the curriculum, and that students are informed of the institution's criteria for fraud and plagiarism, so that every student knows which norms they must abide by.

I hereby declare that I have read and understood the above	
Name:	Minthe Woudstra
Student number:	4231708
Date and signature:	26 June 2018 

Submit this form to your supervisor when you begin writing your Bachelor's final paper or your Master's thesis.

Failure to submit or sign this form does not mean that no sanctions can be imposed if it appears that plagiarism has been committed in the paper.

Abstract

In this thesis, the phenomenon of the Feminist Bildungsroman is proposed, with the use of three 20th-century novels that depict the lives and development of women and which are written by female authors. It examines the way female development is portrayed and how this can be compared to the genre of the Bildungsroman, and the notion of the female Bildungsroman which are “Bildungsromane by and about women” (McWilliams 2). Within this context, it examines if the phenomenon of the Feminist Bildungsroman is in fact a genre on its own.

This thesis analyses Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick* (1998), which are situated within the genre of the Bildungsroman. These novels are analysed through a close-reading of the primary texts, looking at, for example, literary devices used in the novels. The characteristics which were found were the feeling of inadequacy within these women regarding the expectations created by the status quo regarding gender as well as the finalisation of their development through rebellion against the status quo established by this patriarchy. It concludes with the notion that these characteristics deviate from the conventional Bildungsroman and can be regarded as characteristic of a new genre: The Feminist Bildungsroman.

Contents

1. Introduction	p. 1
2. Inadequacy and Self-Deprecation	p. 5
3. Development Through Rebellion	p. 13
4. Conclusion	p. 20
5. Works Cited	p. 23

1. Introduction

The original Bildungsroman can be traced back to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* written in 1796. Many authors, among the likes of Charlotte Brontë, Oscar Wilde and Margaret Atwood, have adapted this structure to create narratives of self-development. These narratives and this genre have been debated over the years and many critics have assessed it.

A Bildungsroman's elements, according to Buckley, "are 'a growing up and gradual self-discovery'" (qtd. in Wagner 55). When looking at the genre and gender, McWilliams states the genre to be "a male, indeed distinctly masculine, genre" (18), as the majority of the narratives surrounding the Bildungsroman follow the development of male protagonists. One phenomenon which has been linked to the Bildungsroman is the notion of the female Bildungsroman, a subgenre within the Bildungsroman which are "Bildungsromane by and about women" (McWilliams 2), following a female protagonist.

The female Bildungsroman, however, has been topic of debate over the years as some critics deny the existence of it. Lazzaro-Weis¹ argues that the female Bildungsroman does not exist, since the genre harbours characteristics which women's writers could not assimilate (34). For example, that the "male" Bildungsroman deals with a struggle which can be applied to an entire society or group, whereas women's writing would only be applicable to women (18). According to her, the issue is "the positing of categories of experience that men cannot understand [which] leads to a kind of political defeatism, for men have no reason to be listening [to female experiences] in the first place" (Lazzaro-Weis 18). However, this

¹ Lazzaro-Weis's arguments are based on a juxtaposition of the original "male" Bildungsroman with the female Bildungsroman. However, I argue that this is in itself a flaw as Lazzaro-Weis holds on too strongly to strict rules and guidelines of a genre, whereas it is only natural for a genre originating in the 18th century to grow and expand

argument is counterproductive when aiming for social change, as social change is most likely established through mutual awareness.

A similar argument is offered by Gjurgjan who states that the female Bildungsroman does not exist as it is not compatible with the genre of the Bildungsroman (1). Furthermore, she debates that “the genre of Bildungsroman [...] is inaccessible to women’s writing” (109), as the “self definition” of the female protagonist “is of a different kind, and is codified within cultural signifying practices that subordinate her to the dominant figure, a man” (110).

Gjurgjan states that although women’s writing tried to depict agency and self-development, the narratives of their lives have always turned out to be post-Freudian – the eternal female lack to be satisfied only through the mediation of the big Other. This fact has thwarted any attempt to present a teleological female narrative (a Bildungsroman) of becoming a woman in the world. (117)

However, the argument that the female character is continually linked to a dominant male is not always proven. Even though Gjurgjan uses similar novels as used in this research, I contend that failed autonomy within women’s writing is not the case.

On the other hand, Baruch has defended the female Bildungsroman stating that:

If the central theme of the bildungsroman is the education of the hero who is brought to a high level of consciousness through a series of experiences that lead to his development, then many of the great novels that deal with women treat similar themes. (335)

By analysing the Bildungsroman genre without conforming to a set characteristics, and by accepting development following different paths, the genre of a female Bildungsroman cannot be denied. Ellis suggests that “critics have over-emphasized the subversive aspects of the female Bildungsroman and have thereby separated it from the male tradition” and in this “have had to ignore or evade the conservative aspects of the Bildungsroman” (4). Ellis argues

that a negative consequence of this is that critics look past the fact that the female Bildungsroman has an “ability to portray positive female development within society while simultaneously pointing out the oppressive nature of that society for women” (40). This paper argues that separating this genre from the male tradition is not necessarily harmful, as the portrayal of women does not need to be compared to the male tradition to be deemed worthy.

Labovitz discusses the female Bildungsroman without comparison to the male tradition, as it considers the history of women’s rights within the context of the Bildungsroman genre. She notes that women’s writing began to fit to the genre of the female Bildungsroman when individual development became a social and political option for women. Labovitz argues that “[w]hen cultural and social structures appeared to support women’s struggle for independence, to go out in the world, engage in careers, in self-discovery and fulfilment, the heroine in fiction began to reflect these changes” (7). Kornfeld and Jackson agree with this, specifying that “[t]he nature of this utopia was in part derived from the things denied to women in the real world” (74), in which “this utopia” embodies a place wherein women were able to achieve what they desired. This is crucial, as the context of the lives of women’s writers might reflect and explain the course of the lives of their female protagonists, as these protagonists were able to achieve what the writers, in their own lives, could not. Labovitz concludes that “a ‘muted’; or submerged culture finds and raises a discourse that blends the dominant with the muted heritage” (255). In other words, the women’s writers succeed in making the genre their own, but simultaneously engage with the “older structure” (255) of the Bildungsroman. Even though this claim compares the conventional male and the female Bildungsroman once more, this claim supports my argument, positing the female Bildungsroman as distinctly different from the conventional Bildungsroman.

These critics demonstrate that the existence of the genre of the female Bildungsroman is still debated. They have focused on the gender differences, comparing the male and female

Bildungsroman narratives and thus juxtaposing the male and female Bildungsroman.

However, this research will focus on the female narrative alone. Former research has also focused on placing the female Bildungsroman in direct connection to the Bildungsroman genre and held these characteristics as a guideline to establish whether its female counterpart exists (Lazzaro-Weis 34). This paper will argue that it is important to move away from this discourse and to look at novels without comparison to the 'male norm'. These novels will be analysed through a close-reading of the primary texts, looking at, for example, literary devices used in the novels.

This research will establish the existence of the Feminist Bildungsroman by proving that in the Bildungsromans Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* (1998), the female protagonists characterise themselves as inadequate and incomplete as they do not adhere to the status quo. In the development of the female protagonists, breaking away from this status quo, as opposed to assimilating into it, is what eventually finalises their development. With this, these novels oppose the conventional Bildungsroman, creating a new genre: The Feminist Bildungsroman.

2. Inadequacy and Self-Deprecation

The female protagonists in the novels *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf), *The Bell Jar* (Plath), and *I Love Dick* (Kraus) self-deprecate and have a sense of inadequacy. This chapter will analyse how this is illustrated and connected to the existence of a new variety Bildungsroman; the Feminist Bildungsroman.

As the narrative in *To the Lighthouse* is written as a stream of consciousness, the female protagonist in the first half of the novel is hard to determine. However, the life of Lily Briscoe is portrayed the most throughout the novel, therefore this research will focus on Lily as the main protagonist.

Lily portrays many self-deprecating characteristics. According to Munca, “Lily is presented as a young inexperienced painter struggling to overcome her own insecurities” (277). In the beginning of the novel, Lily is portrayed when she is painting, and her lack of confidence immediately becomes apparent. She feels anxious as she notices others inspect her work. This realisation causes her confidence regarding her abilities to decrease: “[s]he could have wept. It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad!” (54). Her apprehensions regarding her work derive from the voice of those who judge her. Lily perceives her work as something which “would never be seen” and “never been hung even”, and she justifies these reflections because “there was Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, ‘Women can’t paint, women can’t write...’” (54). The way in which Mr. Tansley speaks to Lily depicts the external confirmation of the negative thoughts she has of herself, proving her that her own insecurities are in fact valid. That this criticism is voiced by a male character, Mr. Tansley, adds to the notion that Lily has to conform to the expectation of the patriarchy, and thus, the status quo regarding gender.

Lily’s insecurities are illustrated through her painting, however, these insecurities derive from a deeper sense of inadequacy: “Lily does not only belittle her painting but also

her importance as a person” (Vikman 17). Lily compares herself to Mrs. Ramsay, as she thinks to herself that she is “much younger, an insignificant person, living off the Brompton Road” (Woolf 55). Lily regards herself as insignificant as she does not reside on Brompton Road, one of the wealthiest streets of London, whereas Mrs. Ramsay is depicted as affluent and of high class. Later, the notion that she is unlike Mrs. Ramsay is portrayed once more in the second part of the novel. Mr. Ramsay calls upon a maternal and caring nature in Lily by inexplicitly demanding her sympathy (165). When she does not respond to this she perceives herself to be less of a woman: “all except myself, thought Lily, girding at herself bitterly, who am not a woman, but a peevish, ill tempered, dried-up old maid” (165). At this point, Lily believes that women *should* be maternal and readily available for the needs of a man, and she believes that she fails to meet this expectation. In turn, her failing induces more insecurities and self-doubt as she does not conform to society’s norm of being a maternal woman.

Moreover, the negative portrayal of Lily is depicted regarding her appearance as well. Mrs. Ramsay states “[w]ith her Chinese little eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously” (Woolf 21). The emphasis here is put on the fact that no man would marry Lily because of her appearance. This notion is presented through the point of view of Mrs. Ramsay, which emphasises the juxtaposition of her and Lily. Mrs. Ramsay is depicted as the epitome of the perfect housewife and the example of what is expected from Lily: “They came to her, naturally, since she was a woman, all day long with this and that” (37). Lily is regarded by Mrs. Ramsay as unsuitable for marriage: Lily’s appearance is not sufficient (21), and there was “a flare of something” in her character which “no man would [like]” (113). Mrs. Ramsay’s opinion of Lily can also be noticed when she compares Lily to Minta, another house guest. Minta recently got engaged and, simultaneously, is in everyone’s good graces: “With Lily it was different. She faded, under Minta’s glow; became more inconspicuous than ever, on her little grey dress with her little

puckered face and her little Chinese eyes. Everything about her was so small” (113). The description of Lily as small can be interpreted as a metaphor for her perceived insignificance. The notion that Lily’s entire character is regarded as being “small” demonstrates the negative portrayal and contrasts the larger status quo, which is embodied by Minta in this passage, to Lily, the deviating individual.

Additionally, in *The Bell Jar*, inferiority is depicted as a key characteristic of the female protagonist, Esther Greenwood. In the beginning of the novel, the reader gets an impression of the condition of Esther’s self-esteem as she recalls her summer: “I knew something was wrong with me”, because of “how stupid [I]’d been to buy all those [...] clothes”, but most importantly “how all the little successes I’d totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue” (Plath 2). In this passage, a visual metaphor regarding her abilities is used, as Esther starts working as an intern in New York, her self-worth deteriorates with everything she does. This fizzling of her successes illustrates that despite a promising start she believes her abilities start to fail her. The “slick marble”, which is perceived as strong, contrasts the weakening of her confidence, as “Esther is portrayed as a depressed and anxious young woman with little self-confidence” (Vikman 8). Within her internship, she works with other women who are a significant component in Esther’s feeling of inadequacy. Esther constantly questions herself as she compares herself to others, perceiving them as superior, as they have no difficulty with the social, or work related activities Esther struggles with. An example of this comparison by Esther, is in her friendship with Doreen:

I wondered why I couldn’t go the whole way doing what I should any more.

Then I wondered why I couldn’t go the whole way doing what I shouldn’t, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired. (Plath 33)

Esther's active comparisons amplify her feeling of inadequacy. The state of this active comparison causes her to separate herself from others, juxtaposing herself with them, as she feels she has no place amongst them, and subsequently no place in society, failing to fit in.

A turning point in the novel is when Esther is reprimanded by her boss, as this confirms her insecurities. She is criticised on her behaviour as she is not behaving or performing like the other women. Through internal focalisation, Esther's feelings are made apparent: "I felt now that all the uncomfortable suspicions I had about myself were coming true, and I couldn't hide the truth much longer" (Plath 31). This passage depicts that criticism worsens Esther's feeling of inadequacy and her reaction exemplifies that the external pressure influences her self-worth.

Later, when sitting in the waiting room of a gynaecologist, Esther compares herself to the other women sitting there, for example her neighbour, who is portrayed as a perfect housewife: "Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puling baby like Dodo Conway?" (248). She perceives herself as inadequate as she does not conform to the ideal or status quo of the other women in society. This characteristic of feeling inadequate due to non-conformism seems to be a characteristic within the Bildungsroman regarding the portrayal of women. The female protagonists of these novels are forced to conform to the expectation of women to be accepted in their society, as they are viewed as unequal and are denied autonomy. This idea of inequality and lack of autonomy connects to the idea of a Feminist Bildungsroman as it finds a place within feminist discourse.

Further in the novel, when she is committed to a mental hospital, she describes herself as "disgusting and ugly. 'That's me,' [...] I thought. 'That's what I am'" (193), as she is too late to cover herself, a minor situation which has great impact on her self-image as she is unable to hide and her inability to conform is exposed. This depiction that Esther is now committed as a patient, exemplify that she is now physically moved away from the society

which she was unable to conform to, and subsequently has grown even more distant to the other women in her life.

In *I Love Dick*, the female protagonist, Chris Kraus, is portrayed differently to Lily and Esther as the narrative begins in a marriage. After a dinner with her husband, Chris falls frantically in love with the host, Dick (Kraus 9). Unsure of what to do with her emotions, she starts writing letters addressed to him. Within these letters and within the narrative, Chris is depicted as often expressing thoughts of her own inadequacy. The narration of *I Love Dick* switches between first person narration and third person omniscient narration, which establishes multiple points of view that indicate different perspectives. Most importantly, the perspective of the omniscient narrator creates a distance to inform the reader of characters and to aid in the character's development, whereas the first-person narrator, Chris, provides the subjective and internal interpretation of her development.

Chris' thoughts of inadequacy are depicted in first person narrative and are illustrated through how her feelings for Dick express themselves. Her "jumpy bundle of emotions" (Kraus 9) are emotions which she enjoys, yet simultaneously condemns as she is careful to not be too emotional as it makes her feel "both omnipotent and powerless" (45). The reason for this being that as a female artist, her emotions jeopardise the legitimacy with which her work will be perceived:

No matter how dispassionate or large a vision of the world a woman formulates, whenever it includes her own experience and emotions, the telescope's turned back on her. Because emotion's just so terrifying the world refuses to believe that it can be pursued as discipline, as form. (180)

The feeling of inadequacy can most distinctly be seen in the part of the novel where Chris and Sylveré have an argument. The following passage is narrated through a third person omniscient narrator and causes for the "telescope" as mentioned above to be turned on Chris.

It is depicted that “[s]he is no one! She’s Sylveré Lotringers wife! She’s his ‘Plus-One!’” (100). This depiction progresses from Chris being “no one” to her being Sylveré’s wife, implying that these two are interchangeable. Furthermore, it evokes the idea that she is *his* plus-one, which depicts ownership, causing Chris to lack having an identity of her own.

The passage continues by giving examples of the times Chris had put her husband’s life before hers. Recalling, for example, how “her name had been omitted” when they worked together and that “[i]n ten years she’d erased herself” (101). Her self-effacement depicts how in the years before this revelation she had not thought herself to be important enough to regain autonomy regarding these situations and conformed to Sylveré’s needs. After this passage, the narration shifts to first-person for the remainder of the novel, which depicts the development Chris undergoes, and the beginning of her regaining her own voice.

Later, when she visits an art show, it is presented through first person narration how Chris believes others perceive her, even though the tone of this could be perceived as rather sarcastic, people’s opinions of her in the past influence how she views herself in the present: “It’s not like I’ve been invited, paid to speak. There isn’t much that I take seriously and since I’m frivolous and female most people think I’m pretty dumb” (175). The sarcasm in this statement emphasises how Chris assumes others perceive her, and how this affects her self-image. It is in this description of rejections and setting herself aside where the strength of this narrative lies. Fisher explains this stating:

Kraus graphically recounts her humiliations, not only to Dick’s refusal to get romantically involved with her but also to the “insults, slights, and condescension” that she endured as the wife of a successful public figure who is well remunerated and tenured. He gets top billing; she is on the guest list as his “plus one”. (226)

These instances of humiliation show how the female character in the novel endures these humiliations as a result of their feeling of inadequacy. Within the analyses of these novels, it is apparent that the inadequacy is depicted in the female protagonists and can be regarded as characteristic for a Feminist Bildungsroman. This inadequacy within these female protagonists can be interpreted within the feminist discourse, as their inadequacy derives from not being able to conform to the pressures and expectations placed on them by the patriarchy.

In an interview with the author Chris Kraus, she states the motivation for her to write the novel was “trying to figure out why there was no position in the culture for female outsiders. You know, singular men are geniuses. Singular women are just ‘quirky’” (Intra and Kraus 2). This exemplifies her reason for writing this narrative as she wanted to depict how women are regarded within the academic culture. The portrayal of a woman not fitting in and not being accepted can be perceived in the development of Chris and a characteristic of this variety Bildungsroman as the notion of how to fit in derives from the expectations of the patriarchy and the status quo, which connects to feminist discourse, as Chris is unwilling to conform this.

Lastly, in *I Love Dick*, a negative connotation towards Chris’s appearance is depicted. One of the first times Chris is presented negatively is when she writes Dick asking what his type is with the use of first person narration: “I’m not pretty or maternal, I never *am* the type for Cowboy Guys” (11), in which Dick is described as a cowboy. Another example is when she refers to herself as “gaunt and middle-aged” (129). Her body is described in the third person omniscient narrator as a body that “didn’t offer any pleasure. It wasn’t blonde or opulent; dark, voluptuous – it was thin and nervous, bony” (93), which presents the external view of Chris. The emphasis on her body not comparing to those of other women attests to Chris not *being* like other women. She does not fit into the mould regarding the expectation of women in society, which generates her self-deprecating manners. These portrayals of negative

thoughts on her appearance portray that even though Chris is older and already married, the same insecurities and thoughts which were seen in the other novels are depicted as the expectations of the status quo and the patriarchy still influence how she perceives herself.

Within the theme of inadequacy, the three female protagonists are illustrated to experience inadequacy to a certain extent. Whether it is because of others, comparison, or through self-effacement, lack of confidence and self-deprecation is perceived in several aspects of their lives. This can be seen in Lily's painting, Esther's work as a writer, and Chris's intellectual art work and her personal life. They often feel inadequate as they are trying to conform to the status quo and what is expected from them as women, as they are generally not conforming to expectation, they feel their self-deprecation is justified. This recurring theme of inadequacy is a perceived characteristic of a genre within women's writing, as pressure from the patriarchy, and thus the status quo, led them to believe they should adhere to these expectations, which contributes to the deterioration of their self-worth. Therefore, these characteristics advances the notion of a possible Feminist Bildungsroman.

3. Development Through Rebellion

The previous chapter focused on how the status quo, which is defined through external expectations of the social order regarding gender, influenced the negative self-image the female protagonists had. This chapter will argue that by challenging the status quo, the protagonists finalise their development and subsequently shift away from the characteristics of the conventional Bildungsroman; they disregard the assimilation to an already established status quo.

When examining the finalisation of development in the protagonist of a Bildungsroman, the characters come to terms with themselves by assimilating to the larger societal group and thus conforming to the established status quo of their society. Mickelsen argues that “the goal remains the same: preserving the coherence of the group, maintaining the status quo” (419), which indicates that throughout all narratives within the Bildungsroman genre, the protagonist must conform to the established societal ways to finalise their development.

In the Bildungsroman narratives, Weir notes “it is the men who embark on voyages of self-discovery. The women [...] stay safely on the shore, content to accept society's definition of themselves” (427). The women “maintain the status quo, preserving class distinctions, transmitting the accepted morality” (427).

This chapter, however, will set out to examine how the female protagonists of the novels *To the Lighthouse*, *The Bell Jar* and *I Love Dick* do the opposite of conforming to the status quo and thus break away from the conventional Bildungsroman. It will examine how the finalisation of their development is portrayed and how this disrupts the pattern established by the conventional Bildungsroman. This deviation from the status quo can be connected to feminist discourse as the protagonists choose agency, over what is expected from them as women.

In *To The Lighthouse*, rebellion against the status quo, which decides that women must marry and that “women can’t write, women can’t paint” (Woolf 54), is depicted in several aspects of Lily’s life. Daugherty argues that “Woolf portrays Lily Briscoe as a critic of the patriarchal society from the beginning” (296). This criticism can best be seen in Lily’s opinion on marriage and her devotion to painting.

In the beginning of the novel, the idea that women should marry is presented by Lily herself when she considers Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts on marriage: “they all must marry, since the whole world, whatever laurels might be tossed to her [...], or triumphs won by her [...] there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman had missed the best of her life” (56). In the novel, Mrs. Ramsay acts as a representative of society and the status quo that women should marry and have a maternal and serving personality. Mrs. Ramsay insists on marriage throughout the novel and her character is depicted as a perfect housewife (37).

Lily, however, has her own opinion on marriage, which contrasts that which society, and Mrs. Ramsay, has planned for her: “gathering a desperate courage she would urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it; she liked to be alone; she likes to be herself; she was not made for that” (56). Marriage is compared to a universal law, proving that marriage is not optional, but compulsory. This obligatory portrayal of marriage depicts the how the status quo is forced upon Lily, and the pressure she experiences from having to conform to it.

Lily’s nonconformity to this status quo and the finalisation of Lily’s development can most evidently be seen in her painting. Painting is important to Lily as it facilitates her autonomy and creativity, and this development autonomy can be seen throughout the novel. Whilst painting, she considers the idea of marriage again: “she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle” (111). This passage exemplifies her true opinion on the matter,

as she compares marriage to a form of degradation and uses the word “dilution”, which is interesting as dilution is also a common term for watering down paint. As paint can be interpreted as a symbol for her life, she thus states she will not have the colours of her painting nor those of her life be watered down by marriage. The depiction of this, and the need for her to move the tree (161), exemplify the nature of her painting to maintain autonomy.

In the final section of the novel, Lily has, ultimately, never married. Ten years later, Lily returns to the same house, now that Mrs. Ramsay has died. Upon her arrival, Lily has the urge to finish the painting she started years ago. However, she hesitates to do this as “[o]ne line placed on the canvas committed her to innumerable risks, to frequent and irrevocable decisions. ... Still the risk must be run; the mark made” (172). She moves with caution, as her painting is a metaphor for the autonomy of her life.

Now that Mrs. Ramsay has died, Lily is exempt from the pressures of society and those of Mrs. Ramsay, and can be regarded as autonomous:

[s]he had only escaped by the skin of her teeth though, she thought. She had been looking at the table-cloth, and it had flashed upon her that she would move the tree to the middle, and never marry anybody, and she felt an enormous exultation. She had felt, now she could stand up to Mrs. Ramsay.
(191)

Through her escape of Mrs. Ramsay and subsequently of society and its status quo, her development progresses as she presents the ability to make her own decisions by rebelling against what is expected from her as she continues her painting. The use of escape within this passage implies the control and ownership Mrs Ramsay had over Lily. Now Lily is free to do as she desires, as she is no longer being under the possession by Mrs. Ramsay anymore. She finally finishes her painting “[w]ith a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she

drew a line there in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (226). She regains her autonomy by finishing her painting and subsequently liberating herself from the control of Mrs. Ramsay. As with this, Lily proves Mrs. Ramsay wrong as Mrs. Ramsay stated “one could not take her painting very seriously” (21). Consequently, Lily does not conform to the status quo regarding her place in society and moves away from the conventional Bildungsroman structure of finalisation. This moving away from what is expected from her as a woman to choose her own autonomy can be regarded as a characteristic of the Feminist Bildungsroman as it depicts the development to agency rather than dependence and inability.

Similarly, in *The Bell Jar*, Esther’s independence is important to her as she does not want to compromise her successes or ambitions: “The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters” (Plath 84). One of Esther’s reasons for not getting married is that she does not want to halt her own ambitions for her partner: “[t]he last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place the arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself” (92). In this fragment, it is depicted that Esther desires to be the arrow instead of the bow, implying that she does not want to be passive and static, but active and dynamic. Esther strives to be in control of all options and directions in which she can move, and thus in possession of her own autonomy.

For Esther, virginity and sex become intrinsically linked with marriage. Esther reads an article stating that men wanted their wives to be pure for them (89). However, they “would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later”, yet when she did “they would lose all respect for her [...] and they would end up by making her life miserable” (89). Esther remains a virgin, to avoid making a wrong decision, and conforms to the restrictive

guidelines given to her by the status quo of her society: “her true role is to be virginal and accepting of his direction” (Wagner 57).

A turning point regarding Esther’s autonomy occurs when she meets Dr. Nolan (Plath 208). Esther’s denial of her sexuality, and her conforming to the societal standards, ends when doctor Nolan sends her to a gynaecologist to get fitted with birth control (249). This passage is an important turning point in her stance on sexuality and her feeling of freedom and is described as follows: “I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: “I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex”(249). The use of the imagery of climbing affirms the notion that she is actively pursuing progress in her own development and autonomy and that it is something which she must climb towards, requiring effort to reach. This connects to the notion that agency is not directly available for women, exemplifying the inequality and the link to the feminist concepts of this genre. The climb towards autonomy can be placed within feminist discourse as the objective is the climb towards equality. Her success in this is depicted when she leaves the doctor’s office: “I was my own woman [now]” (249).

Her lack of fear leads to reassessment of her virginity, she “was sick of [defending] it” (255). She loses her virginity in a manner she desires, instead of what society desires of her, to a stranger she meets on the street (255). “She rejects the concept of purity or virginity prescribed by the male world” (Mozumder 138). The way she loses her virginity, to a stranger and not to a prospective husband, attests to the fact that she decides to place her own autonomy above conforming to what is expected from her. The fact that she does this portrays the development of her autonomy and sense of self, accepting her own independence in which she disregards these norms: “For a woman of the 1950’s, finding an identity other than that of sweetheart, girlfriend, and wife and mother was a major achievement” (Wagner 57). This achievement comes to a climax when Esther is released from the mental hospital (Plath 267).

As Esther has improved her mental wellbeing and has regained her autonomy, she is able to defend herself to be released. Esther looks out of her window and describes her view: “The sun, emerged from its gray shrouds of clouds. [...] as if the usual order of the world had shifted slightly, and entered a new phase” (267). Esther emerges from these grey clouds similar to the sun, victoriously, regaining her life and her sense of self. Next to the depiction of the sun, this “new phase” is illustrated as a shift in order. Indicating that Esther is, moving away from any order in which she should place herself, and disregards the status quo of her society. This is exemplified through her agency regarding her sexuality and desires, as she disrupts the expected order. This is also presented when Esther departs from the mental hospital, as she ponders on “Something old, something new. . .” (273), which alludes to an old expression for marriage. The ellipses imply that this expression, and this scene, need to be completed. Her departure from the mental hospital is how she completes this marriage expression, again portraying a disruption in the expected order.

The aspect of breaking away from the status quo in finalising development is seen in *I Love Dick* as well. Chris challenges the status quo by establishing her own voice. In the novel, she explains how she “feels ashamed of this whole episode, how it must look to you or anyone outside” (Kraus 65). Here, Chris portrays how important other’s perception of her are, and what they might think of her actions. However, later she contrasts the internal and the external as she starts to disregard the feelings of others and starts thinking of herself: “I’m giving myself the freedom of seeing from the inside out” (65), this juxtaposing of the inside and outside portrays how they contrast, and thus that the external differs and contrasts to that what Chris, the internal, wants. She continues stating “I’m not driven anymore by other people’s voices. From now on it’s the world according to me” (65). By claiming this freedom from the inside out, she examines what she desires, and denies further external influence, placing her own perception above that of others.

An aspect in which this is illustrated is that she is writing again. It is depicted that Chris first started writing in the third person, as she was unable to find the courage or the confidence in her writing to do this in the first person: “Because I couldn’t ever believe in the integrity/supremacy of the 1st Person (my own)” (122). Now, however “[she] can’t stop writing in the 1st Person, it feels like it’s the last chance [she’ll] ever have to figure some of this stuff out” (122). Interesting to note, is the narration within the novel itself has changed to an exclusively first person narration, emphasising the notion that Chris regains her identity. Through first person writing she can discover herself and analyse her own thoughts and problems. She starts writing for herself again without taking note of the opinion of others. She breaks away from conformity and says: “I can’t stop writing even for a day—I’m doing it to save my life. These letters are the first time I’ve ever tried to talk about ideas because I need to, not just to amuse or entertain” (176). Chris states how the writing is necessary for *her*, and regards this, and herself, as more important than the opinion of others. Chris shifts away from the notion that she is not able or allowed to have her own voice through her own writing. She (re)discovers herself, depicting her own thoughts, regaining freedom through disregarding the opinion of others, and disregarding the expectation of the status quo.

Through the finalisation of their development, it is seen that the female protagonists of these novels deviate from what is expected from them and disregard the status quo. This, in turn, contradicts the perceived characteristics of the conventional Bildungsroman, as well as create a characteristic for the Feminist Bildungsroman. It portrays a development towards autonomy rather than dependence, and exemplifies that autonomy can be achieved within a restrictive society.

4. Conclusion

This thesis analysed three 20th century novels by women's writers. It examined *To the Lighthouse* by Woolf, *The Bell Jar* by Plath and *I Love Dick* by Kraus, which are characterised as Bildungsromans. Within the Bildungsroman genre, the existence of the female Bildungsroman has been contested. However, there was no clear consensus on its existence or on its characteristics, and it has often been denied as it did not fit the characteristics of a conventional Bildungsroman. This research contested that using the characteristic of a Bildungsroman as a guideline for the female Bildungsroman is restrictive, and that the development of female protagonists could be regarded as a Bildungsroman of a different kind, deviating from the guidelines of the conventional Bildungsroman.

This research examined three different novels published in 1927, 1963 and 1997 to ensure a dispersed portrayal. Within the analysis there were several recurring themes, which could be the characteristic of a new variety: The Feminist Bildungsroman.

The first of these themes concerns the female protagonists being faced with a sense of inadequacy and self-deprecation as they failed to meet their societies' expectation regarding gender. In *To the Lighthouse*, it was depicted that Lily Briscoe felt inadequate as she could not live up to the expectation of Mrs. Ramsay. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood was self-deprecating of her own intelligence and of her abilities in comparison to the behaviour of other women. In *I Love Dick*, inadequacy in Chris Kraus was seen in her professional life as well as her personal life, as she was withheld from recognition in her marriage as well as in the earnestness of her work.

Within the Bildungsroman, it is seen that development of the protagonist leads to conforming to the larger societal group and thus the status quo. Within these analysed novels, however, the female protagonists deviate from the status quo in the finalisation of their development and chose their autonomy instead. In *To the Lighthouse*, it can be observed that

Lily finalised her development through her painting and through the fact that Lily never married. In *The Bell Jar*, it is seen that Esther embraces her own autonomy by deviating from what is expected from her, not marrying Buddy Willard and embracing her sexuality. In *I Love Dick*, it is also perceived that Chris Kraus diverts to a state of autonomy by rediscovering her own identity. Chris starts writing for herself again, and she is not trying to conform to what the other artists or society expects from her.

A question which arises from these findings is what the underlying reason of this rebellion is. It is seen that these women are in conflict with what they desire and what is expected from them, and the only way for them to deviate from these expectations is to rebel against them. This rebellion signifies that the conflict in which they find themselves is of such a pressing nature that the only way to escape it is to go against the society they live in. Therefore, they must rebel against the status quo to regain their autonomy. Furthermore, the sense of inadequacy within these female protagonists has originated from their inability to conform to the expectations from their society. The portrayal of these self-deprecating manners throughout these novels attests to the impact of not fitting in. They find fault in themselves before examining the external influence. Lastly, a reason for these women writers to adapt this structure could be that this writing is a criticism of the society and their treatment of women, and subsequently to escape their own society.

Further research on this topic could examine how sexuality is portrayed within these or similar novels. In my close reading, sexuality proved to be a theme which could be further analysed as it was an important factor in all the novels. Next to this, further research could also be done on contemporary novels and narratives of male development which might adapt to the same characteristic themes mentioned in this thesis.

Ultimately, these analyses have depicted that the characteristics which were found deviate from those of the conventional Bildungsroman. The inadequacy seen in these female

protagonists derived from their feeling of inadequacy as they were unable and unwilling to conform to the expectations of the patriarchy, and thus the status quo. Rather, they disregarded these expectations and choose their own agency. Rather than using the term Female Bildungsroman to point to narratives of female development, these themes can be regarded as the characteristics of a new genre Bildungsroman: The Feminist Bildungsroman.

Works Cited

- Baruch, Elaine Hoffman. "The Feminine Bildungsroman': Education Through Marriage." *The Massachusetts Review* 22.2 (1981): 335-357.
- Daugherty, Beth Rigel. "There She Sat': The Power of the Feminist Imagination in *To the Lighthouse*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 37.3 (1991): 289-308.
- Ellis, Lorna. *Appearing to Diminish: Female Development and the British Bildungsroman 1750-1850*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1999.
- Fisher, Anna Watkins. "Manic Impositions: The Parasitical Art of Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40.1 (2012): 223-235.
- Gjurgjan, Ljiljana Ina. "The (Im)possibility of the Women's Bildungsroman." *Studia Romanica et Anglica Zagrabienis* 56 (2012): 107-121.
- Kornfeld, Eve, and Jackson, Susan. "The Female Bildungsroman in Nineteenth-Century America: Parameters of a Vision." *The Journal of American Culture* 10.4 (1987): 69-75.
- Kraus, Chris. *A Fusion of Gossip and Theory*. with Giovanni Intra. ArtNet. 13 November 1997.
- Kraus, Chris. *I Love Dick*. London: Serpents Tail, 1998.
- Labovitz, Esther Kleinbord. *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1986.
- Lazzaro-Weis, Carol. "The Female Bildungsroman': Calling It Into Question." *NWSA Journal* 2.1 (1990): 16-34.
- McWilliams, Ellen. *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman*. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Mickelsen, David J. "The Bildungsroman in Africa: The Case of Mission Terminée." *The French Review* 59.3 (1986): 418-427.

- Mozumder, Subrata Chandra. "Love, Sex and the Body in *The Bell Jar* and *My Story*: A Feminist Reading." *Crossings: ULAB Journal of English Studies* 8 (2017): 136-143.
- Munca, Daniela. "Virginia Woolf's answer to 'women can't paint, women can't write' in *To the Lighthouse*." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 10.4 (2009): 276-289.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers Inc., 1963.
- Vikman, Jonna. "Breaking *the Bell Jar*? Femininity in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." (2010): 1-39.
- Wagner, Linda W. "Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female Bildungsroman." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12.1 (1986): 55-68.
- Weir, Sybil. "The Morgesons: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman." *The New England Quarterly* 49.3 (1976): 427-439.
- Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. London: Penguin, 1927.