

Summary

In this thesis two novels are analysed: Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* first published in 1973 and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* first published more than a century earlier, in 1859. Through the analysis it is shown how a similar ideal of femininity can be found in the two novels, and how hysteria and madness occur and function in them.

The ideal of femininity is my term for the set of culturally created expectations of women, which are rooted in the Victorian view on women, but which prevailed and developed far into the 20th century. In the 1960'es, -70'es and -80'es, the second wave feminists, among them Betty Friedan and Colette Dowling, pointed to the fact that many of the systems of repression of women inherent in the ideal of femininity still existed to a very large degree, despite the many changes in women's conditions since the Victorian period. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Colette Dowling's *The Cinderella Complex* therefore predominantly form the theoretical basis of this thesis.

In both of the novels analysed, women are struggling to come to terms with their femininity, or rather with the femininity they are expected to embody. Kate Brown of *The Summer before the Dark* and Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe of *The Woman in White* are all subjects to the notions about femininity and gender roles of their (respective) times. Society's expectations of how they are to act and live collide with their own wants and needs, which leads to similar frustrations and reactions of the women of both novels.

Inherent in the traditional view on women is a close connection between femininity and hysteria and/or madness. The hysteria and madness can be actual or perceived by society, and it can work on the one hand to free the woman from the expectations of society, or on the other hand to further reinforce her confinement within

them. Hysteria and madness occur in several forms in both of the novels, with both of these functions.

Similarities in the representation of the ideal of femininity are found on many levels. The fact that hysteria and madness occur with several functions in both novels, and that women are frustrated and ill at ease with their confinement within the ideal of femininity, suggest that basic assumptions about women have not changed during the century which separates the two novels. Furthermore, both novels present a narrow representation of men, working to enhance the gulf between the sexes, and thus to confine men to the role of the opposites of women; a confinement equally repressive as the confinement of women within the ideal of femininity.

Thus, it is concluded, the two novels represent a similar ideal of femininity, and even to some extent work to maintain and reproduce it. And they do this in spite of *The Summer before the Dark* having a critical approach, and in spite of the two novels having been written by a male and a female author respectively, more than a century apart in time.