Cette dissertation anonymisée est de niveau Master 2 Recherche LLCE, et a obtenu la note de 17/20. Bien évidemment, à votre niveau, il n’est pas nécessaire d’aspirer à reproduire parfaitement cette dissertation.

De plus, il s’agit d’une dissertation de recherche (d’où les nombreuses citations, et les notes de bas de page), donc cela ne reflète pas ce que l’on vous demande en L1 LEA.

Cependant, au niveau de la méthodologie rédactionnelle, elle peut vous aider à visualiser ce que l’on attend en termes de problématisation, de logique, de raisonnement et de fluidité.

Je vous demanderai donc de faire preuve de recul en étudiant cette dissertation : vous pouvez vous en servir pour mieux comprendre les attendus méthodologiques, la fluidité entre les arguments, la construction d’un raisonnement, et le fameux “PEEL”. Mais gardez à l’esprit qu’il s’agit d’une dissertation de niveau master, de recherche, et de filière LLCE. Ce n’est pas non plus un modèle de perfection absolue. Ne la prenez donc pas pour argent comptant.

Dans ce document, vous trouverez le brainstorming du sujet, ainsi que la rédaction. Les connecteurs logiques seront surlignés en cyan, les transitions dans les tons orange pour mettre en avant la fluidité et la logique des propos tenus. Des annotations dans la marge vous permettront d’identifier les éléments attendus (de l’introduction, et du “PEEL”).

Sujet :

To what extent may Adrienne Rich’s view of the 1950s as “the decade of the feminine mistake” be extended to Britain?
Brainstorming

To what extent may Adrienne Rich's view of the 1950s as “the decade of the feminine mistake” be extended to Britain?

Idées en vrac :

- Depending on the date, could be a reference to Friedan's Feminine Mystique. Would be the other side of the coin, the dark side.
- Women in the 50s had gained independence thanks to the war: more women worked. They were progressively leaving the domestic sphere to go to the so-called "men's sphere." They became an important part of the workforce.

- However, were still dominated by their husbands and trapped into a set of Victorian rules.
- Mistake from the women's part? Or does it mean that society did something wrong about them? Mistake maybe = men gave them a glimpse of what they could have, and women wouldn't let go afterward.
- Men wanted a return to normalcy, ie women at home and men at work, keeping the spheres separate. Continuation of Victorian values.
- Delimitation of the 1950s: 50-63?
- Career novels
- Need for change in society (Crowther Report)

Vers le plan (catégorisation des idées) :

- 50s: more women worked in more diverse jobs, more demand for female workers
- little feminist progress
- centrality of the family
- Education: more women in colleges and unis, with greater aspirations
- WOC, immigration: unmarried motherhood, employed in the NHS
- Equal pay: progress but some jobs still considered women's jobs so no equal pay.
- gender-segregated jobs
- two spheres
- increase in marriage
- Women writers, feminists
• the cult of domesticity
• women's magazines
• career novels
• wives and mothers
• Nostalgia and celebration
  o Nostalgia: longing for older days
  o Celebration: male-aggressive narratives
• Decade uncertain about class and gender
• Paradoxical decade: idealization of stereotypes while newer types of womanhood (Brooke, 776-77). Advances undermined by desire for return to normal.
“The images of the 1950s women show them always smiling, posing in flattering frocks and high heels in front of a batch of freshly baked fairy cakes.” As Virginia Nicholson noticed, the Fifties seem surrounded by an aura of smiles and colorful dresses, and women from the Fifties are usually seen as happy housewives, all smiles as they bake for their children. Nevertheless, one should never forget that smiles can be very deceiving, especially when it comes to the Fifties.

The decade is often represented as an era full of vivid colors and new gadgets for housewives. Nestled between the People’s War and the Swinging Sixties, the Fifties are said to begin in 1950 and end in 1963, “when Philip Larkin enjoyed his Annus Mirabilis and Betty Friedan published the Feminine Mystique.” The period could be seen as a turning point, for it was deeply influenced by the Second World War and its consequences while looking into the future: tradition and modernity collided and clashed, bringing in their wake women who had walked out of their sphere and stepped into a forbidden world. Even though the period often evokes the United States and its Beat Generation, the Cold War or the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, the impact of the Fifties on British society should not be downplayed. The American influence cannot be avoided, and, to some extent, some American trends could be applied to the British case: in the Fact of a Doorframe, Adrienne Rich, an American poet, referred to the Fifties as “the decade of the feminine mistake.” The quote is quite ambiguous: one could wonder whether women made a mistake, or if the decade itself was guilty. This essay will argue that Rich’s view can be extended to Britain insofar as the Fifties’ mistake was to grant women a certain liberty during the second World War and then try to take it back. The British Fifties appear to be a very paradoxical period based on both tradition and modernity, trapping women into their indecisiveness.
This paper will first analyze the way women were asked to come back home and the strategies used to do so, despite the advances in the areas of work and education and the effects of the People's War on women's growing independence. Indeed, the decade was characterized by a will to turn back time and a strong nostalgia rich in gender stereotypes. The second and last part will argue that this nostalgia was useless, for it was too late to send women back home. The “mistake” was complete and despite the powerful paradoxes of the era, such as the blurring of established gender boundaries and the will to go forward working hand in hand with the longing for prewar days, women were ready to start looking for the best of both worlds.

The second World War had mobilized women aged 18 to 65, allowing married and single women to leave home and work. However, women's newly-gained liberty was short-lived: for many, the war had only been a parenthesis, and now it was over, there was no need for women to work anymore. “The cult of domesticity” replaced the war effort and aimed at sending women back home.

Stephen Brooke, in his article entitled “Gender and Working Class Identity in Britain during the 1950s,” evokes a dichotomy which shaped the decade: according to him, the Fifties hinged around “nostalgia and celebration.” In other words, postwar society longed for the prewar days, and women could not escape this sense of loss, for they were not where they were supposed to be. Celebration, on the other hand, was a way to assert men's masculinity, and it allowed them to counterbalance the shift in women's place in society. As Gerry Holloway states in *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, “[...] there was a desire amongst many people to 'get back to normal' as soon as possible after the war, implying that 'normal' for women meant marriage and domesticity.” Nostalgia was thus at work in the Fifties, despite all the changes that occurred during the decade. The increase in marriage-rate, the diminution of births, the growing amount of women working led to a will to send women back home and reestablish the prewar days. According to Brooke, this
strong sense of nostalgia was caused by the progressive disappearance of reassuring stereotypes and a change in gender identities:

At a moment when such stereotypes might have had less resonance in lived experience, nostalgia for traditional, more certain and more fixed stereotypes of femininity (such as the working class mother) became more intense. Such nostalgia not only evoked the loss of particular gender identities, but also represented an elegy to an older class identity, the foundation of which comprised established ideas of masculine and feminine roles.

The shift in women’s role, or at least the role that had been imposed on her, shook men’s idea of what society should be and, above all, how it should function. The Fifties were indeed still very much influenced by Victorian standards, and the theory of the two spheres still prevailed: women were expected to remain at home to take care of the house and the children while men were supposed to evolve in the public sphere, at work. Women working outside of home meant that they stepped into a man’s world and broke away from their gender-role. As a result, nostalgia was a desire, a will to go back to the days when gender-roles were clearly defined. Celebration, the second element of this dichotomy, was part of the solution to this new issue. It was, “particularly in fictional treatments of working class life, of an aggressive masculinity, one which stressed misogyny.” In his article, Brooke takes the example of Jimmy Porter, the main character of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956). According to him, Jimmy always puts the blame on his wife, Alison, and lashes out at her: “For Jimmy, misogyny becomes a substitute for class struggle; an abusive and aggressive masculinity becomes a replacement for a lost class identity.” As a matter of fact, the Fifties were an era of full-employment and prosperity, and, at the time, some seemed to think that these elements blurred the lines between the classes as the social ladder was easier to climb, even though Richard Hoggart argued against it in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). Gender was thus the next step, the replacement for class-struggle: the decade was one of loss and distress. Society had to invent new landmarks and stereotypes to bear all the changes that were occurring, and when examining some texts from the “Angry Young Men,” “[w]hat becomes clear [...] is a confusion and anger at the loss of both traditional gender identities (in particular, traditional femininities) and class identity [...]” In brief, the Fifties’
nostalgia could be seen as a means to reach out to a lost past while celebration of masculinity could be interpreted as “a backlash against the present with all its uncertainties about both class and gender.” Women were trapped in this dichotomy because they were trying to break free from the status quo and erase gender stereotypes, even though it was not intentional: working was enough to turn British society upside down.

Indeed, women were expected to be wives and mothers as the Beveridge Report had implied almost a decade ago, in 1942. The aftermath of the second World War was marked by a desire to go on as if the war had never happened: “The period was characterized by the centrality of the family, the notion of the companionate marriage and the reinforcement of the notion of the male breadwinner.” Women had worked but the male remained the pillar of the family. The “cult of domesticity” mentioned by Jane Pilcher was a way to remind women of their role, and it reached out to them through many forms, such as magazines and advertising. According to Pilcher's reading of Janice Winship's Inside Women's Magazines (1987), “[i]n Britain in the 1950s, sales of women's magazines were higher than in any subsequent period and the magazines were apparently read by well over 60 per cent of all women.” British magazines like Woman and Home and Woman's Own, which still exists today, perpetrated the model of the housewife by giving tips about housekeeping, cooking or relationships, or, in other words, all the areas that had to be of interest for women in the Fifties. By way of example, this 1958 Woman and Home cover [image] depicts a woman serving tea while the bottom right corner shows a woman and two children to illustrate the knitting pages: women's roles as a housewife are thus represented on a same cover. Pilcher sees these magazines as a real “trade press,” women's industry being home. Paradoxically, the Fifties seemed to resist this vision of women as wives and mothers: if there was a drastic increase in marriage, the size of the family diminished. According to Brooke, “[b]etween 1900 and 1950, the birth-rate in Britain dropped from 28.2 births per thousand to 16.2.” Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the divorce-rate also increased “from 1.6 per cent in 1937 to 7.1 in 1950,” but it was still framed by certain conditions such as drunkenness, adultery or desertion, which all had to be proved. As a consequence,
being a British wife and mother in the Fifties was the norm, and “[t]he dominant ideology of femininity had elevated being a housewife and mother to activities of great importance, comparable to men’s involvement in paid work.” Nevertheless, women did not want to remain only wives and mothers, for the People’s War had changed their prospects forever.

The cult of domesticity, like Brooke’s nostalgia and celebration, was an answer to the changes occurring in gender-roles, but society itself had provided for those changes. Indeed, after the war, women workers were more and more needed:

This occurred not only in the areas into which the government wanted to channel women in order to support the recovery effort, but also in the new areas of employment stimulated by the development of the Welfare State and the burgeoning consumer market.

The beginning of the post-war era was indeed characterized by a labor shortage and the government had to “persuade women to work.” Married women were among those workers, and according to the 1959 Crowther Report, 23 per cent of them “were gainfully occupied” in 1951 and 35 per cent of women worked. New areas attracted women and some jobs like clerks and typists saw a growth in women workers and they soon were almost as numerous as men:

In 1901 four of every five women employed were either in domestic service occupations (including laundry work), or in the manufacture and sale either of textile fabrics and dresses or of food, drink and tobacco. [...] The greatest single increase, both proportionately (122 per cent) and absolutely (700,000), was among clerks and typists. The increase in the professional and technical occupations (which include nursing and all the medical services, as well as teaching and social work) was 35 per cent; but even so the ratio of women to men in this whole group was lower in 1951 than in 1931.

The areas were more diverse than at the beginning of the century and the new National Health Service (NHS) attracted many women, especially those from the Commonwealth. Women thus continued to work after the second World War, and others areas like education saw an increase in women attendance. As a matter of fact, the school-leaving age increased and more girls attended secondary level schools, colleges and universities. Nevertheless, even though the 1944 Education Act had made primary and secondary school free for everyone, all pupils had to pass the
“11 plus exam” in order to be admitted in a grammar school. **What is more**, according to Jenni Murray, in 1954, the local newspaper “The Hunts Post” published an article entitled “Girls Brainier Than Boys.” This article stated that “too many girls had been passing the exam and education authorities had decided to limit numbers.” Still in Murray’s words, “two thirds of all the classes would have been occupied by girls” without these quotas, and the High Court only ruled them discriminatory at the end of the eighties. Girls growing up in the Fifties were thus given more opportunities in work and education, but these opportunities were often tempered. **However**, society was on the move, and according to Gerry Holloway, these girls “were looking for more fulfilling jobs than their mothers had engaged in.” It was too late to send women back home, it was too late for “normal.”

According to Bell, in their study of post-war Britain, Becky Conekin et al. “use the term a ‘return to the future’ to characterize a nation that was both shaped by the weight of tradition and heritage whilst seeking to construct a new, meritocratic and modern society.” **Indeed**, the Fifties seem built upon a paradox opposing tradition and modernity, and British women found themselves trapped into this paradox. **Notwithstanding**, when it comes to women, it seems that modernity had outgrown tradition, for their “return to the future” was too far gone and it was too late to come back home.

**As the Fifties went by, the decade increasingly blurred the lines between the genders.** As a matter of fact, more and more women started to occupy male positions: in 1955, Dame Evelyn Sharp became the first woman Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and Barbara Mandell was the first woman to read the news on ITN (Independent Television Network). Plus, in 1958, Hilda Harding became the first female bank manager at Barclays, and the same year, Barbara Wootton, Stella Isaacs and Katharine Elliot took their seats in the House of Lords thanks to the 1958 Life Peerages Act. Four years later, Elizabeth Lane became
the first woman county court judge. After working in factories or in offices, women started to occupy important positions that had been gender-segregated forever. Furthermore, the Fifties also blurred the boundaries between femininity and its expectations. According to Brooke, lines were blurred in the public and private spheres alike:

If, in the public sphere, the separation between femininity and work was becoming blurred, in the private sphere, the declining birth-rate suggested that the practice of contraception was separating sexuality from fertility, thus blurring, though not eliminating the connection between femininity and maternity.\footnote{25}

Women were becoming more than “wives and mothers” and the new contraceptive methods started to deconstruct yet another so-called woman’s role. Women could be mothers later, they could choose when to be pregnant: they began to have some control over their bodies and families. However, they were freer, but not equal, for these advances helped feed the old stereotypes. For instance, contraceptives were given away to married women or “brides-to-be,”\footnote{26} the idea of having sex before marriage still repressed. Working women were gradually accepted, but they had to stay within the boundaries assigned to their gender.\footnote{27} The fight for equal pay carries further the paradoxical side of the Fifties: the 1952 Equal Pay Act only applied to women teachers, so “[c]ooks, cleaners and canteen workers were still deemed to be doing women’s work even if the work could be seen to be of equal value.”\footnote{28} Gender-segregated jobs were still the norm and employed 86% of women in 1951.\footnote{29} As a result, the term “return to the future” applied to women seems to encapsulate the paradoxical dimension of the Fifties. However, it also emphasizes the existence of a future for them.

In 1956, Viola Klein and Alva Myrdal published *Women’s Two Roles: Home and Work*. The book became a landmark in sociology and gender studies, for it advocated the reunification of these two roles by stating that women no longer had to choose: “The Gordian knot of a seemingly insoluble feminine dilemma has been cut. The technical developments of the last few decades have given women the opportunity to combine and to integrate their two interests in Home and Work.”\footnote{30} It was time to
shatter down the already damaged spheres, and step into both of them. Klein and Myrdal encouraged women to take what was theirs: “No longer need women forgo the pleasures of one sphere in order to enjoy the satisfactions of the other. The best of both worlds has come within their grasp, if only they reach out for it.” Women were on the verge of getting the best of both worlds as new models of femininity began to emerge. For example, women of color, coming from the new Commonwealth immigration allowed by the 1948 British Nationality Act, brought along with them a new kind of motherhood, they “led the trend towards unmarried motherhood, so their daughters are not rejecting their mothers’ behaviour, but following in their footsteps.” Victorian standards were still very strong, but they weakened as the Fifties went on and women started to grasp “the best of both worlds.” Sexuality, for instance, was becoming freer for women. The Fifties are often seen as a decade of sexual ignorance on the part of women, and it mostly was, but the decade helped pave the way for the sexual revolution of the Sixties. The publication of the American Alfred Kinsey, namely Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (1953) “caused a stir by suggesting that same-sex relations and masturbation might be more sexually fulfilling for women than heterosexual penetrative intercourse.” Old stereotypes started to be damaged and women began to seek sexual pleasure. Sex was becoming more than a reproductive or marital duty, and birth-control participated in this new vision of sexual intercourse as availability increased throughout Britain: “Through the fifties, birth control was increasing in availability. By the mid-fifties, there were over 200 Family Planning Associations clinics, more than two-thirds of which were on local authority premises.” The Church of England accepted birth-control in 1958, though only “within the context of Christian marriage.” Pre-marital sex, even, increased: in 1956, Eustace Chesser, a Scottish psychiatrist, published The Sexual, Marital and Family Relationships of the English Woman, giving importance to female sexuality and acknowledging it. According to Brooke’s reading of Chesser, “[o]f women born before 1904, 18.5% had experienced sexual intercourse before marriage. For women born between 1924 and 1934 […], this had risen to 43% of married women and 30% of single women.” Nevertheless, as the trial for D.H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover shows, marriage was still the norm:
[...] the line of defence, for eminent literary figures and respectable left clerics alike lay in the claim that the book was both a work of art and an expression of the wonderful sacrament of marriage, with sex religiously viewed as an act of communion.

Despite the conservative views of the Fifties, women were reaching out for the worlds of home and work, sexuality and pleasure: they were beginning to assert themselves, and some areas in culture like literature highlight the strong presence of women outside of home.

Even though the Fifties are often seen as the “'nadir' of the feminist movement when little progress was made and when any advances could be attributed to forces outside of women's agency,” women were not as passive as it looked and the literature of the time turns out to be a very telling area. As a matter of fact, the literature of the Fifties often revolves around the “Angry Young Men,” a group of male writers who revolted against the establishment and intellectualism. However, many women wrote during the period: Penelope Mortimer (1918-1999), Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), Elizabeth Jane Howard (1923-2014), Rose Macaulay (1881-1958), Sybille Bedford (1911-2006), and Muriel Spark (1918-2006) are among the most prolific figures of the Fifties, but many of them are overshadowed by Kingsley Amis or John Osborne. Furthermore, the Fifties saw the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex in 1953, four years after it was published in France. Women of the Fifties were thus very creative, and their novels dealt with marriage and housewives craving liberty like Mortimer’s Daddy’s Gone A-Hunting (1958) or metaphysical matters like Spark’s The Comforters (1957). Many books began to be written for them as well, like career-novels which were quite progressive:

The career novel for girls has been an undervalued genre; the books should be regarded as signifiers of the growing independence of women during the 1950s and 1960s. [...] While romantic endings usually prevailed, all the protagonists nevertheless opted to continue in their careers after marriage.

As a consequence, young girls could read Anne in Electronics (1960), Eve at the Driving Wheel (1957), Margaret Becomes a Doctor (1957) as shown below [image]. The cover shows Margaret in the operating room and focuses on her. Such a cover was far from a typical fairy-tale book and aimed at showing young girls that they had now more
choice than ever before. As the Fifties went by, women could gradually reach out for “the best of both worlds,” and even beyond.

The Fifties in Britain created a “return to the future” for women, despite their paradoxical nature. Once the boundaries between the genders were blurred, there was no turning back. Many more advances had to be carried out, but it seems the decade laid the foundations for the Swinging Sixties as a stronger wind of change started to blow for all women.

To conclude, the Fifties in Britain were definitely feminine: whether women were wanted inside or outside the house, they did not leave men indifferent. At the time, most men seemed to think that women stepping out of their sphere was a threat to their own masculinity, but the greatest mistake of the decade was to think they could take back the liberty the People's War had granted women. The Fifties were indeed “the decade of the feminine mistake” insofar as its conservatism was not strong enough to stop what the war had started. It was a period of paradoxes, when advertisement and magazines worshiped the cult of domesticity and tried to keep women within their homes, when nostalgia and celebration of masculinity tried to work hand in hand to impulse a return to normalcy. However, history was on the move and women were engaged in a “return to the future,” despite the paradoxical treatments they received. Freer but still not equal, they began to do the groundwork for the Swinging Sixties which would see the birth of second wave feminism. Indeed, despite the images we are quick to visualize, the Fifties, precisely by making the “feminine mistake,” were a period of transition which held a key role in the progressive liberation of women in Britain.

3Jane Pilcher, Women in Contemporary Britain (New York: Routledge, 1999), 117.


6 Brooke, op. cit., 775.

7 Brooke, op. cit., 775.

8 Ibid., 788.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 775.

11 Holloway, op. cit., 194.

12 Pilcher, op. cit., 116.

13 Pilcher, op. cit., 117.

14 Brooke, op. cit., 777.


16 Pilcher, op. cit., 117.

17 Holloway, op. cit., 194.

18 Brooke, op. cit., 777.

19 Crowther report, part one, chapter 3, paragraph 45.

20 Ibid.

21 Ina Zweigiger-Bargielowska, *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain: Social, Cultural and Political Change* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 90: “At the end of the century it was still the case that a higher proportion of NHS employees were women than men, and of the female employees a high proportion were ethnic minority women.”

22 Jenni Murray, "20th Century Britain: The Woman's Hour." *BBC News*.

23 Holloway, op. cit.

24 Bell, op. cit., 9.

25 Brooke, op. cit., 777.


27 Brooke, op. cit., 777.
28Holloway, op. cit., 197.

29Ibid., 196.


31Ibid., xiii.

32Ina Zweigiger-Bargielowska, op. cit., 90.

33Bell, op. cit., 8.

34Birmingham Feminist History Group, op. cit., 16.

35Brooke, op. cit., 782.

36Ibid., 783.

37Birmingham Feminist History Group, op. cit., 18.

38Holloway, op. cit., 194.