As of March 30, 2017, a survey conducted by the Harris Poll for the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) cited that about 12% percent of American adults identified as LGBTQ. Although gender and sexual binaries are blurring more into a spectrum because of the growing number of people who identity as LGBTQ, gender-nonconforming, or transgender, stigma still exists and discourages certain individuals from expressing their identities. Because gender continues to influence everything from access to school sports to salary, it is relevant to examine the gender binary and the consequences of binding individuals to these social constructs. Alexander Chee’s 2015 essay “Girl” and Tom Hooper’s 2015 movie adaptation of the novel The Danish Girl test the limits of what people see versus what they want others to see, and how their physical appearance drives them forward, but also backward. Living in a culture that both romanticizes the thought of finding a true identity but that also fails to support people in their gender and identity “limbos,” Chee and Lili face doubt and oppression, dealt out by “nature.” While they both deal with finding their own identities in a country that shames them for expressing themselves, it is important to distinguish between Chee and Lili’s conflicts. While Chee is concerned with actually discovering who he was, Lili was desperate to physically represent their personal feminine identity. Why does the gender binary, which is supposed to dictate and clarify who people are based on the two “rigid” categories, actually create more confusion and doubt that actually constrict people’s identities? Why are superficial appearances and anatomy the deciding factors in who a person is and should be? At what point does the femininity of a man or the masculinity of a woman begin to test the limits of the gender binary?

On a Halloween night in 1990, Alexander Chee painstakingly paints over his face and accentuates his body, using makeup to create a feminine mask over his original one and wearing tight clothes to emulate the natural curves of a woman's body. He wants to press against the rigid boundaries of sexuality in order to experiment with who he is. Despite his initial trepidation toward stepping into the shoes of the woman his mother told him he was never meant to be, he begins
to get drunk off the attention that the unknowing men on the streets give him. At the end of the night, Chee finds himself at an impasse. Were the makeup and drag-act true extensions of himself? After feeling isolated and confused, he finally took the plunge to explore the forbidden fruit. Chee’s initial steps into drag signified not only a sexual freedom, but also a conflict between how he wanted to view himself, who he actually was, and how outsiders saw him. Chee recognized that people weren’t actually seeing him, but what they wanted to see. He asks himself, “Is it just the dark, the night, people seeing what they want to see?” He begins to see through the cracks in his costume; he did not “[appear] for the first time that night. I am the one only I saw, the one I had rejected until then, the one I needed to see, and didn’t see until I had taken nearly everything about him away. His face is not half this or half that, it is all something else” (9-10). Chee alludes here to the fact that people wanted to see and believe that the drag-wearing man was actually a pretty woman with lots of makeup on. Despite his efforts spent on his hair and makeup to bend his appearance against the structures of conventional gender, Chee felt that the drag was actually hiding his identity, instead of displaying or enhancing it. Ultimately, he decided to forgo the makeup and wig in favor a more “organic” and revealing appearance, which would highlight his inner personality and identity, rather than masking it. Though he was playing with his outward appearance, it was his inner identity that he was, unknowingly, trying to repair after years of repressing it.

Posing as a female model for a painting by his wife Gerda in The Danish Girl, Einar Wegener connects with a long-suppressed female identity: Lili. After sliding on pantyhose and putting on a silk brocade gown traditionally made for a woman, Einar becomes Lili, tapping into a deep sense of longing and curiosity that had been locked inside since childhood. Lili begins to step into the high-heeled shoes—she wears dresses, grooms her hair into an auburn wig, and wears deep red rouge on her lips and cheeks. Despite her ability to express herself as Lili in appearance, she finds a disconnection with the body she was born into. Lili explains to her wife that, from a very young age, she felt like a girl but had to hide that female identity, out of fear of deviating from social conventions. She felt trapped within the male body, and she desperately searched for a way to liberate Lili. She attempts a risky sex-reassignment surgery, begging her doctor, “This is not my body, Professor. Please take it away.” Lili tries to destroy the partition between her inner femininity and outer masculinity. Gender dysphoria, involving
conflict between an individual’s expressed gender and their assigned one, can result in massive distress. If Lili hadn’t attempted to access her true female identity, she would have been forced to live without ever feeling actual happiness or being able to live to her fullest potential, however costly that may prove to be.

Both Chee and Lili recognized the gap between their physical appearances and their emotional identities. They both felt incomplete, using makeup and clothing as a means of accessing the femininity and beauty that they felt drawn to but were unable to access. But Chee distanced himself, over time, from the mask of drag, though he valued the freedom it gave him, while Lili chose to remove the masculine mask that covered the woman she was underneath. Today, while many still use cross-dressing and drag to explore their identities, there are many more gender-fluid people who know that physical femininity does not translate into gender identity. This is an important distinction. The perceptions of gender-fluid people, especially men, expose the narrow-minded social thinking that automatically assumes a vision of how gender-fluid identity is achieved.

Lili and Chee, while struggling with situating their femininity, found their identities in different places. Chee was insecure and doubtful in his emotional, personal identity. He wasn’t secure as a man or as a woman. In other words, Chee was unsure if he felt the most “real” as a woman or man. He worried about “either [not] being enough of a girl or for being too much, not enough of a boy.” He hadn’t reached a firm inner-identity, which was his main conflict from the beginning. Dressed as a woman, Chee felt an adrenaline rush as he strutted his way through men’s lustful gazes and catcalls. Yet he felt uncomfortable that in order to reach this confidence and emotional high, he had to pretend to be an “overly made-up” woman. He sensed a deep contradiction in the fact that, although people saw his beauty, that beauty was completely fabricated. He remained unsure if the solution to his woes was to prance in a false identity until he embodied it, or to find a way to accept himself, not just as a man or a woman, but as an unapologetic, make-up-loving, feminine man. His deep-seated shame from his mother reprimanding him, in childhood, for playing with her lipsticks, coupled with his inability to find a safe haven to explore himself, made for a shaky person with an even shakier idea of who he was. On the other hand, though she had to suppress his thoughts, Lili was always confident that she was a woman—it was just that she was trapped in a man’s body. Her inner turmoil and confusion over being born physically male forced her to bury Lili. However, as soon as she dressed as a woman for the first
time, she flourished into the beautiful woman that she always saw herself to be. In posing for paintings, Lili assumed utterly feminine poses, her back arched and face hidden just the perfect amount to show her playful and sparkling eyes. Lili says, “No, God made me a woman. But the doctor . . . He . . . The doctor is curing me of the sickness that is my disguise.” Clearly, Lili was born a woman in her heart and mind; while dresses may have hidden her distress, her prominent male features still haunted her every time she looked in the mirror.

Because of such a rigid gender binary, Chee and Lili struggled through adulthood to finally feel that they found themselves. Even though gender is a social construct, it overwhelmingly influenced the way people thought and enforced those boundaries. For example, when Chee eagerly tried on a reddish-orange lipstick to surprise his mother, he found that “there was a line, and I had thought I could go back and forth across it, but it seemed I could not” (7). She angrily pulled him out of the store and furiously rubbed the makeup off his face. Gerda, originally trying to cure Lili of her “illness,” forced her to go under “restorative” radiation treatment. The radiation was positioned over her genitalia, in efforts to dispel any “female” cells from his reproductive system. After waking up pale and physically sick from the radiation, Lili announces that she is still present, indicating a defeat for those who were trying to expel the femininity from her body.

Only through the unification of mind and body can someone achieve one’s fullest and truest potential, as well as a sense of authenticity and happiness. We might argue that the terms “man” and “woman” should be gentle guidelines, which leave room for people to explore them, as outrageously or conservatively as they want to. Likewise, femininity and masculinity should be attainable to all. Being too much of one and too little of the other shouldn’t condemn a person. We should allow people to find their own identities, however they desire to discover them. That is the only way we can eradicate the harsh constructs that were established so long ago.

WORKS CITED

Hooper, Tom, Dir. *The Danish Girl.* Focus Features LLC, 2015.