

## Candidate 3 evidence

A study of Margaret Atwood's exploration of identity in *The Edible Woman* (1969).



**T**he *Edible Woman*<sup>1</sup>, whilst dealing with themes which would be considered part of the second wave feminist movement, was not written by Atwood to be a feminist text. This was despite Atwood being undoubtedly known for exploring feminist themes and questioning society within her work. Atwood herself has said that she views “the book as proto-feminist rather than feminist”<sup>2</sup>. *The Edible Woman* follows Marian McAlpine, a consumer marketing researcher, as she gets engaged to be married and then slowly loses touch with her identity. Marian begins to disassociate from her body and becomes incapable of eating as she feels like her relationship is consuming her. The novel is split into three parts, with the middle (and biggest) section written in third person. This narrative structure is used to show the loss and regeneration of Marian's sense of self. Marian is never quite sure of her identity throughout the novel and many external forces attempt to impose their idea of a woman upon her.

Marian is subject to many social pressures and expectations which all attempt to dictate to her who she, as a character, should be. We are first introduced to these pressures early in the novel, when Marian encounters “the lady down below”<sup>3</sup> who enforces strict moral rules on Marian and her flat mate Ainsley. Marian's neighbour cares for a young girl, whose “innocence must not be corrupted”<sup>4</sup>, immediately informing us that a girl in this society is expected to be kept pure and not exposed to certain practices like alcohol consumption or sex. Due to these pressures, Marian attempts to hide hers and Ainsley's activities. Not only does this imply that Marian and Ainsley are being held to society's expectations in regard to who they should be, but so is the young girl who lives downstairs. All three are under pressure

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Atwood. (2009). *The Edible Woman*. London: Virago.

<sup>2</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p.x

<sup>3</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p5

<sup>4</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p7

to be 'lady-like' and to adhere to what their society deems appropriate for a woman. Each are influenced by those around them and the standards to which those people hold them. So, we are presented with a subdued and passive female protagonist whose identity is moulded by her social surroundings.

Marian's malleable identity is shown further through her need to be seen as normal. She begins to ask those around her, "do you think I'm normal?"<sup>5</sup> she is temporarily reassured after Clara deems her "almost abnormally normal."<sup>6</sup> Marian begins to obsess with the idea and tests herself against Peter with a slice of cake, "If he couldn't eat his either then she was normal."<sup>7</sup> Through her clinging to the idea of normality, we see that Marian bases her identity around social conventions and those around her. She has begun to lose her grasp on normality and therefore on part of her identity and sense of self. Furthermore, she is surrounded by and adheres to stereotypical gender roles which were the norm of the time in which the novel is set. For example; when Marian is helping Peter set up a party, he enlists her help in the kitchen because "Women are so much better at arranging things on plates."<sup>8</sup> Despite her refusal to eat (or handle) certain foods, Marian assumes her role in the kitchen and of giving out food at the party. She adheres to the identity set out for her due to her desire to be normal and regain her own lost identity. It may be that Atwood is trying to send the message that our cultural and societal roles are detrimentally ingrained into our identity, and that they are something that need to be broken or changed. Atwood may be trying to raise the point that a woman cannot be determined by the pressures around her and that she, herself, must decide what a woman is. Atwood may have been influenced by Virginia Woolf's "*Professions for Women*"<sup>9</sup>, in which she says:

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<sup>5</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p254

<sup>6</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p256

<sup>7</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p258

<sup>8</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p286

<sup>9</sup> Woolf, V. (1942). *The Death of the Moth, and other essays*. Available from: <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91d/index.html>

I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill.<sup>10</sup>

Both Woolf and Atwood could be saying that there are no one set of qualities which define a woman – a woman is an individual and must find out who she is as such. No other pressures, real or imagined, should determine who an individual should be.

Marian's relationships also play a key role in determining her identity in that she adopts different identities when she is with her two different love interests: Peter, her fiancé who she believes is "trying to destroy"<sup>11</sup> and "assimilate"<sup>12</sup> her; and Duncan, an English student who is rather strange and confesses to living "in a world full of fantasies."<sup>13</sup> When she is with Peter, Marian assumes the identity of the doting housewife and abides by the social expectations which Peter lives by – the man playing the role of the hard worker and the woman keeping the home and taking care of him and any future children. We see just how much Marian conforms to Peter when he meets Marian's old friends Clara and Joe, a married couple with three children, but does not like them. Marian dismisses her friends as "from her past, and Peter shouldn't be expected to adjust to her past."<sup>14</sup> She does what is expected of her by both Peter and her society when she is in his company, including disregarding her close friends. This is contrasted by her attitude when she is with Duncan; she disregards the social pressures of normality that she usually clings to and is more carefree. She even lets a hotel concierge believe she is a prostitute, she thinks that "if I'm dressed like one and acting like one, why on earth shouldn't he think I really am one?"<sup>15</sup> We see moments of Marian's true identity when she is with Duncan – whereas when she is with Peter we only see the identity forced upon her by those around her. She feels pressured into this stereotypical relationship which does not make her happy.

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<sup>10</sup> Woolf, V. (1942). *The Death of the Moth, and other essays*.

<sup>11</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p344

<sup>12</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p344

<sup>13</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p332

<sup>14</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p222

<sup>15</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p316

The pressure on Marian to conform is further explored when, despite maintaining her engagement with Peter throughout her identity crisis, she does not seem to enjoy her time with him. She thinks about her time with Peter and says “she had to exert herself”<sup>16</sup> which implies that being with Peter – and therefore adopting the identity she has with him – is physically exhausting for her. She also finds the lack of commitment that Duncan asks from her refreshing, he wants only “her time and attention”<sup>17</sup>, and she feels like there is no need to put on a mask or to use up all of her energy. He does not demand that she fit his nor society’s expectations of her. Thus, she is more true to her own identity when she is with Duncan and feels more comfortable with herself. Peter and Duncan could be devices to symbolise a conservative and liberal lifestyle respectively – Marian must decide between observing old fashioned social norms and fitting in (Peter) or choosing to be a more radical and frowned upon character (Duncan). By having Peter and his symbolically conservative lifestyle devour Marian and Marian consequently choosing Duncan, Atwood could be suggesting that a liberal lifestyle is the way forward.

Conversely, Marian’s relationship with Ainsley may cause her to explore her own identity further. Ainsley is a direct contrast to Marian in that she disregards social norms and is unapologetic about her identity. Ainsley rejects the idea of marriage and domesticity and forms a plan to have a child and raise it on her own. Ainsley justifies her outrageous plan by saying “How is society ever going to change ... if some individuals don’t lead the way?”<sup>18</sup> Her character is controversial for the time setting of the novel and may have influenced Marian to choose to rebel against her societal norms too. The argument that the world won’t change without someone breaking the mould could have contributed to Marian’s new-found unorthodox identity but could also point toward the wider theme of the novel: rejecting social standards to make way for a more accepting society. Ainsley’s carefree character is in juxtaposition to Marian’s, which could be used as a device to show the two extreme ends of the spectrum in which we live: extreme disregard or extreme value of societal norms. Atwood

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<sup>16</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p227

<sup>17</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p227

<sup>18</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p44

may be using these characters to advocate for a middle ground between these two extremes in which we accept beneficial societal roles only.

The theme of parenthood also contributes towards Marian's rejection of identity. The issue of maternity seems to follow Marian around, starting with her interaction with Clara who is heavily pregnant with her third child and seems to be drowning in her children. Clara's child, Arthur, is described as a "little demon"<sup>19</sup> and could be part of the reason for Marian's hesitancy to enter domestic life and have children of her own. Marian is scared that she will end up surrounded by mess and children, as has happened to Clara, but it may also be explained as matrophobia.<sup>20</sup> It is easy to see why Marian does not want a life in which she has to adopt the identity of a mother when it is something that she has witnessed consume her old friend. Parenthood is further explored when Duncan refers to his two flatmates – Fischer "Fish" Smythe and Trevor – as his 'parents'. While Marian is at dinner in Duncan's flat, we see that Trevor adopts the identity of the stereotypical mother figure in the household as he does all of the cooking and owns all of the china. Fischer, however, sits back and does a lot of work in his chair therefore adopting the identity of the paternal figure within the flat.<sup>21</sup> By having these two predominant parental characters living with him, it could suggest that the reason why Duncan has such an obscure and complex personality is that he has been treated as a child for most of his adult life. It could be argued that he has started to assimilate into the identity styled for him. Atwood could be inferring that by sheltering people and moulding them into stereotypical roles, we are hindering them in the long run and they may end up detached from reality as Duncan is.

One of the main dilemmas that Marian faces is the transition between identifying as a girl to identifying as a mature woman. It is implied throughout the novel that married women are viewed as higher up on the food chain and more mature than younger, unmarried girls. This is seen especially in Marian's workplace, where she "would be expected to leave her job whether she wanted to or not"<sup>22</sup> once the news of her engagement is announced as

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<sup>19</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p34

<sup>20</sup> Whisker, G. (2012): *Margaret Atwood: An introduction to critical views of her fiction*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. Page 38.

<sup>21</sup> This is interesting because later on in the novel he agrees to be the paternal figure to Ainsley's child.

<sup>22</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p207

“Newlyweds ... were inclined to be unstable.”<sup>23</sup> There is a lack of room for the transition between being a bachelorette and a woman who is well practiced in domestic life so Marian – who is neither single nor married – struggles to find which identity to adopt and is therefore somewhat of an outcast. She lacks common ground with the other women that she works with and is losing her position among her friends, referred to by Ainsley as “the office virgins”<sup>24</sup>:

they knew that she was on the fringe of matrimony and therefore regarded her as no longer genuinely single, no longer able to empathize with their problems.<sup>25</sup>

This situation forces Marian to choose which of the two ends of the spectrum she identifies with, which is arguably a decision that she is not ready to make. Marian is being forced to pick a box in which to live as there is not much tolerance for transitioning or settling in between. This could be read as illustrating the lack of acceptance society has for people out with the norms or the issues that some people have – especially during the time in which the novel is set – with the idea of change or reform.

The idea of maintaining her girl-like innocence seems to be pressed upon Marian throughout the novel with her noticing advertisements such as: “a little girl with pigtailed on a beach, clutching a spaniel, ‘Treasure It Forever,’ the caption read.”<sup>26</sup> This makes it very clear that the society in which Marian lives values the image of innocence and purity and may explain why Marian is hesitant to move on to become a married woman and therefore be perceived as more mature. She does not want people’s opinions of her to change; she would rather maintain this standard of childlike innocence. In addition to this, the assimilation into domestic life is described by Joe as a loss of a woman’s “core ... the centre of her personality, the thing she’s built up; her image of herself.”<sup>27</sup> He discusses the issue with Marian and raises the idea that a woman’s identity contradicts what society expects of her – “her feminine role

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<sup>23</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p207

<sup>24</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p16

<sup>25</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p201

<sup>26</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p290

<sup>27</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p296

demands passivity from her"<sup>28</sup> – and can lead to an identity crisis similar to what Marian is experiencing. This is ironic as Joe summarises exactly what Marian is going through but is unaware of her breakdown in identity. Joe points out what is wrong with their society in that in order for a woman to have a family and live a domestic life if she wishes to, she will most likely have to sacrifice her own identity. The difficulty of change that Joe has outlined could be applied to young girls going through puberty. The female's loss of identity may be parallel to the crisis adolescent girls feel when presented with puberty and the changes it causes in their lives. Women transitioning into matrimony may feel outcast and unsure of what their role is or who they are as a person which is similar to the way adolescent girls feel when going through puberty. Atwood may be trying to suggest that as a society we need to become more accepting and supportive of people who are either not sure of who they are or who are going through significant development within their lives.

Marian's identity crisis reaches a climax when she disassociates from her body entirely. The narrative of the novel completely changes to third person and she views her conscious mind as unattached from her physical self. She treats her body almost as if it is its own entity with its own thoughts - especially in regard to food:

She was becoming more and more irritated by her body's decision to reject certain foods. She had tried to reason with it ... had coaxed it and tempted it, but it was but it was adamant; and if she used force it rebelled.<sup>29</sup>

She sees her body as a sentient force with greater power than her own, it is ironic in that she is the one manipulating her body throughout the novel but is unaware of it. She continues to remove herself from her physical body and reality. She is therefore removing the blame for her current state from herself and making herself the victim of her own body. She is disassociating from her body so as to avoid responsibility for herself and could be trying to avoid facing the questions regarding her identity and how she wants to spend her life. This could be down to her unhappiness within her life and the dilemma she is facing; she may not want to believe that it is in fact her own doing that has led to the degradation of her mental and physical health. It could also be down to the objectification of women's bodies that

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<sup>28</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p296

<sup>29</sup> *The Edible Woman*, p219

Marian faces regularly. It is mentioned by Marian early in the novel that she enjoys looking at the adverts on the bus while she is travelling. One is described later in the novel, “a colourful one of a young woman ... skipping about in her girdle.”<sup>30</sup> Being exposed to advertisements which use the female body as a product such as this on a daily basis could have subconsciously influenced Marian to viewing her body as an object and not a human part of her. This would affect Marian’s identity and image of herself especially as she is a consumer market researcher and so is more exposed to, and will possibly pay more attention to, advertisements than most other people. Atwood may well be sending a message about the objectification of women’s bodies in today’s advertisements as well as yesterdays. She could be advocating for the detrimental effect of such advertisements on young women during the formation of their identity.

Throughout *The Edible Woman*, Atwood navigates a route on how a person’s identity is shaped and woven by the society in which they live and how they traverse their way through their life within that society. The pressures which Marian faces can be read as similar to those faced by many women today, a half century after the publication of *The Edible Woman*. Atwood’s novel, ground-breaking for its own time, has a powerful message regarding the rigid expectations and unquestioned conventions that are forced on women from a young age. Atwood may be inscribing the message that these toxic societal traits must end if women are to be able to grow and develop their own identity and shape their own lives.

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### **Bibliography**

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<sup>30</sup> *The Edible Woman*, pp111-112