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FEMINISTIC IDENTITY IN THE EDIBLE WOMAN BY MARGARET ATWOOD

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ABSTRACT

Atwood's identity as a Canadian author has always been very important to her, and she achieved tremendous success in spite of the serious handicap presented by her desire to be known as a Canadian writer. The Edible Woman is the story of a woman who begins identifies the reality. Marian is not consciously a rebel, nor does she think of herself as abnormal in her hopes and expectations. She fights herself in order to her inner self. This paper deals with the struggle between the role that society has imposed upon her and her personal definition of self.

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer born on November 18, 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. The internationally-known author has written award-winning poetry, short-stories and novels, including The Circle Game (1966), The Handmaid's Tale (1985), The Blind Assassin (2000), Oryx and Crake (2003) and The Tent (2006). Atwood's identity as a Canadian author has always been very important to her, and she achieved tremendous success in spite of the serious handicap presented by her desire to be known as a Canadian writer. One of the leading Canadian writers of her generation, Atwood has garnered international acclaim as a poet, novelist, short story writer, critic, and author of children's books. She has now published over 30 books of verse and prose and translations of her works have appeared in over 20 languages. A favourite among academics and the general reading public alike, Atwood has been honoured with numerous literary awards and nominations. She has won the Governor General's Award twice (for the book of poems The Circle Game in 1966 and for her novel The Handmaid's Tale in 1986) and has been short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize three times. The last time was in 1996 for her novel Alias Grace.

The Edible Woman, as in her most famous novel Surfacing (1972) and in The Handmaid's Tale (1986), is the problem of the woman who is unable to accept the roles provided for her by a male-dominated society. Marian is not consciously a rebel, nor does she think of herself as abnormal in her hopes and expectations. Her job, her way of living, and her friends are all ordinary. She has no conscious belief that her experiences and her college education had prepared her for something more in life, and she does not find Peter in any way objectionable. If he can be demanding, he is also reliable, potentially successful, everything which she thinks she ought to want. Marian is, however, unable to take the next logical step in the life for which society has prepared her. Her inability to eat is the result of her inability, literally, to stomach the kind of life her family and friends expect her to live. The food symbolism is also important because it displays the distancing that Marian does with her.

Atwood does not provide alternative possibilities. At the end of the novel, there is no suggestion of what Marian will do next or what kind of life she may begin to lead. The important question for Atwood is always whether her

protagonists can assert their individuality and begin the process of discovering who they are. Through Marian MacAlpin's rather pathetic attempt at becoming an independent woman, the author illustrates the prevalent feminist view of a male-dominated world in which woman is relegated to the role of victim. Although Marian is certainly no archetypal hero in the strictest sense of the term, she nevertheless manages to break away from the constraints of her prudish background and attains an element of optimistic freedom.

Another important theme in the novel is gender equality. The way Atwood displays this is through Marian's relationship with Peter. She goes from having an equal position in the relationship, to giving up everything to him. It was displayed that Peter should make all the decisions, and that Peter was the dominant one. Marian changes that at the end of the novel. She literally becomes independent, and grows immensely to let everyone know that women have just as much a right as anybody else.

The role of women as mothers is challenged in the novel, "The Edible Woman". Clara is "traditional" mother in the sense that she is married and stays at home with her young children while her husband goes to work. She is clearly unhappy with the arrangement, however, and depends on her husband to do most of the domestic work in addition to making money for the family. Clara refers to her children as "leaches" and "barnacles" and wonders aloud how anyone can love their children before they are actually human beings. Clara dropped out of college to marry Joe and feels resentment towards the loss of her identity and places this unhappiness on the shoulders of her children.

The part and parcel of a consumer society Marian is faced with a choice of being edible to her husband and remains single as an individual and asserts her. Consequently she chooses the later and thus refuses to be the edible woman. It is through a series of hunting images, a sequence of dream-like hallucination which flicker through the mind of Marian. The novel presents a kaleidoscopic picture of her life. To make the picture more real, Marian is presented as a perfect foil to her friends, where in

owing to her coming into contact with them, she learns immensely of women's problems.

The Edible Woman is a successful comic novel which offers constantly the pleasure of surprise and incongruity through the wit and sheer unexpectedness of its striking yet relevant images, through the startling yet somehow logical reversals of intention and action by its characters, and through reversals of normal expectations as to how people should talk, feel, and behave. It instructs us in certain realities of the world we live in, providing both the satisfaction of recognition and the shock of novelty and combining them as it transforms the familiar into the novel. Atwood suggests that in conventional society, women are edible. They are swallowed up by their male counterparts. Marian accepts this and decides that if she must be eaten, then she will take control of her own life and eat herself. The objective of this novel is to present female confrontation to social expectations and demands, which is inseparably associated with the female body. Eating disorders in Atwood's works are therefore employed as symbols of women's bodies' responses to social pressure.

Atwood is pessimistic about social change. Nothing in her novels suggests that society is recognizing the need of women for self-realization, although her novels are clear demands for such change. At the same time, her protagonist does come to an intuitive understanding of herself and of her own needs. Marian Mac Alpin survives her trials, and the novel concludes with her assertion of her own personality.

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