Clothes Maketh the Woman:

An examination of Atwood’s use of clothing in *The Edible Woman, Lady Oracle* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Research Question:

How and why does Margaret use the motif of clothing in these three novels?

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Abstract

This extended essay examines Margaret Atwood’s use of the motif of clothing in three of her novels, *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This essay will answer the question: **How and why does Margaret use the motif of clothing in these three novels?** This essay will prove that Margaret Atwood uses the motif of clothing to characterize her female protagonists as being inferior to men to critique the subjugation of women in male dominated societies. This essay focuses mostly on the female protagonists, Marian, Joan and Offred; however there are also references to minor female characters.

Atwood has three general criticisms of male dominated societies’ view on women. The first is that men are superior to women and that women need to maintain these stereotypes. The second criticism is that women disguise themselves in order to please men and the third that women allow themselves to be influenced and controlled by men.

Atwood employs the use of clothing to give insight into her characters and to explore stereotypes placed on women by men. In all of the novels, the theme of deception is heavily prevalent through the affairs that each of the protagonists partakes in and the clothing that accompanies these affairs signifies the importance of this theme in relation to the power relationships.

Atwood highlights bluntly the power and control that men have over women. In creating her characters, Atwood portrays that it is not the fault of a single gender for these problems, but the fault of all humans for this inequality.

In examining this topic, Atwood forces her audience to think about these issues in relation to the modern world. Do these gender barriers still exist? Are men still trying to be the dominant species? Are women allowing them to do so?

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Feminist novelist and poet, Margaret Atwood, writes novels on various themes normally associated with relationships, deception, female suppression, and self-identity. In order to successfully examine these themes, Atwood uses different symbols and motifs. A recurring motif is the use of clothing. Many authors employ clothing as a symbol or motif to develop characterization. In addition, Atwood delves even further by depicting character power relationships as a means to critique male dominated societies. This extended essay intends to answer the question: how and why does Margaret Atwood use the motif of clothing in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Lady Oracle*, and *The Edible Woman*? In these novels, Margaret Atwood uses the motif of clothing to characterize her female protagonists as being inferior to men to critique the subjugation of women in male dominated societies. Atwood has three general criticisms on this topic: the idea that men are superior to women and women need to maintain that stereotype, that women disguise themselves in order to satisfy men’s desires and finally, that women allow themselves to be influenced and controlled by men.

Prior to analyzing the research question, a succinct summary of the three novels is necessary. Set in a consumer driven world, *The Edible Woman* is the story of Marian McAlpin who lives in the shadow of her boyfriend Peter. While attempting to find her true identity, Marian struggles to overcome conservative conventions and therefore, becomes disgusted with food. The second novel, *Lady Oracle* is the story of Joan who runs away to Italy after faking her own death. During her life, Joan has had numerous identities as a best-selling author, a nom de plume gothic novelist, a timid married woman, and an experimental woman in an affair. The novel looks at Joan’s transition from obese childhood to womanhood. The third novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, depicts a young woman, Offred, living in the male dominated Republic of Gilead. Offred’s sole purpose in life is to reproduce and this novel portrays her difficulty in conforming to this oppressive society.
Atwood uses clothing to embody her female characters as inferior to men to critique the idea that men are superior to women and that women need to maintain that stereotype. Atwood portrays the protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, Marian, as a quiet follower. Atwood depicts Marian as having a clean, innocent, almost naïve appearance and during Marian’s journey for self-discovery she realizes “that innocence had something imperfectly – defined connection with clothes” (Atwood, 1969, p.209). This statement demonstrates that Marian understands the connection between her clothing and her personality. Since this quote comes when Marian is inferior to Peter, it shows that in wearing the right clothes, Marian will not be hurt. This highlights the power that Peter has over the apprehensive Marian. Like everything else in Marian’s life, clothes seem to serve a purpose since “her coat there lying with its arms at its sides, was really more functional than it looked: it was acting as a sort of decoy for other coats” (p.253). Atwood shows Marian’s practicality and struggle to be independent. The “arms at its sides” (p.253) also symbolize Marian’s submissiveness to Peter’s control. The clothing here mimics Marian’s subservient relationship with Peter. Marian is more functional than anything for Peter – to him, she is just an object to use when he deems necessary. Marian’s foil, her roommate Ainsley is described as an outgoing, vibrant, and colorful character. Through the portrayal of her clothing, where she wears an “orange and pink sleeveless dress, which [Marian] judged too tight across the hips” (p.12) and “her bluegreen dress, much worse for the wear” (p.302). Atwood emphasizes her confidence and her apparent freedom from men. Atwood stresses the problem of societal influence by highlighting how Ainsley has to change her clothing to fulfill her needs. Even a strong, confident woman has to revert to being the timid, approachable woman to move ahead in a male dominated society. Another character that Atwood develops through the motif of clothing is Marian’s friend, Clara. Atwood illustrates the personality of Clara through the “maternity smock she was wearing; the stylised petals and tendrils moved with her breathing,
as though they were coming alive” (p.38). By having Clara wearing this flowery outfit, Atwood mirrors the idea of Clara’s fertility. Since Clara is continually pregnant, she is constantly giving life, and the busy pattern on the dress reflects Clara’s demanding lifestyle. Clara appears so fatigued that it is necessary to leave all of the work to her husband. Even though he is cooking and cleaning, stereotypically female work, he is doing more than Clara, making her seem vulnerable and fragile, which then reinforces the male superiority criticism. Even in Marian’s workplace, Atwood uses the motif of clothing to develop her characters. Lucy, Emmy and Millie are all trying to find love without any success. Atwood forces the audience to see Lucy as glamorous in her “purple velvet, with silver eyelids and false lashes” (p.258), Emmy as an immature teenager with her “pink chiffon, faintly suggestive of high-school formals” (p.258), and “her slip” (p.258) showing, and Lucy, as simply trying too hard to find love by being “encased in pale blue satin which bulged in odd places” (p.258). However, as they try “in vain” (p.258) to attract men, Atwood positions them as being unable to succeed and trying too hard, which is reflected through their choice of clothing. The idea of women having to be stereotypically beautiful in order to be loved supports Atwood’s criticism of the subjugation of women in male dominated societies.

Similarly, in Lady Oracle, Atwood uses clothing to explore and develop her female characters in relation to men. Due to her many romantic relationships in her life, the protagonist of the novel, Joan, acts like a chameleon and changes her clothing to suit her lifestyle. Joan has many identities and her vast wardrobe of clothing reflects this fact. When Joan is truest to herself, she enjoys wearing “big red roses” (Atwood, 1976, p.11) or her “red-and-gold sari, [her] embroidered caftan, [her] apricot velvet gown with the ripped hem” (p.19). However, when she leaves Canada for Italy, she cannot bring her colorful clothing and Atwood manipulates Joan’s personality to adapt to the new surroundings. Depending on her environment, Joan’s clothing and personality change considerably. For example, when she is
with her husband Arthur, Joan is quiet, reserved and focused on not offending or upsetting Arthur. This clashes with her preferred clothing and Joan changes herself to meet Arthur’s standards. Once again, Atwood highlights how women maintain the stereotype of being the lesser gender by changing to suit men’s needs. When Atwood discusses Joan’s childhood as an obese child, Joan’s rebel attitude is extremely prominent. Her mother gave Joan a “clothing allowance, as an incentive to reduce” (p.89). Instead of embracing this, Joan chose to purchase “clothes of a peculiar and offensive hideousness, violently coloured, horizontally striped…The brighter the colors, the more rotund the effect, the more certain [she] was to buy” (p.89). During this period of her life, while wearing these outrageous clothes, Joan had very little contact with men. As she wore hideous clothing, men did not want to associate with her, reinforcing Atwood’s first criticism. Atwood creates these numerous identities for Joan to develop Joan’s character as being inferior to men.

Minor characters are also depicted with stereotypes to attest women’s beliefs of needing to appear a certain way. Whenever Atwood mentions Joan’s mother, she is “dressed in her navy-blue suit with the white collar; her white gloves, hat and shoes” (Atwood, 1976, p.183). This smart, conservative fashion imitates the attitude of Joan’s mother towards life in general. She feels that to impress her doctor husband, she must have stereotypical appearance of an upper class intellectual. This cool attitude reflects her lack of relationship with her husband. In stark contrast to Joan’s mother, Aunt Lou wore “extravagant hats with feathers and bows… bulky fur coats and heavy tweeds, which made her look even taller and fatter” (p.82). Atwood highlights the significance of Aunt Lou in Joan’s life since Joan’s personal extravagant clothing choices in her adulthood are influenced by her aunt. Like her clothing, Aunt Lou’s romantic relationships are bizarre. Her lover partakes in an alternative religion which focuses on communicating with the dead. When Aunt Lou dies, Joan remembers, “her breezy clothes, her gay scarves, and follies” (p.123). Atwood ensures that Joan remembers
her Aunt Lou as breezy and gay. Like most of Atwood’s characters, her clothing reflects her personality.

In contrast to the other novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is more hidden for assessment in the development of female characters since all clothing is imposed. Nevertheless, the fact that the clothing is enforced is significant as it symbolizes the power man has over women. Gilead is a forced society, yet a question arises, whether women fought against it or whether they allowed men to make all of the decisions. Within the female divisions, Atwood uses the stereotypes to criticize male dominated societies. Red, the color of blood, symbolizes the fertile Handmaids, green symbolizes the hardworking Marthas, blue symbolizes the delicate and calm Wives, and when there is a mix of color, it symbolizes the busy Econowives. There are mentions of characters that have no affiliation with the Republic of Gilead. Towards the beginning of the novel, Offred comes across some stereotypical Asian tourists. Offred comments that it had “been a long time since [she’d] seen skirts that short on women. The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out beneath them, nearly naked in the thick stockings, blatant, the high-heeled shoes with the straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture” (Atwood, 1985 p.38). Atwood uses the stereotypical Asians to embed the notion that the dominance of men over women occurs around the world and not just in one particular society. The shoes that are “instruments of torture” (p.38) show how even basic necessities have become painful tools to be worn by women at an attempt to please men. Atwood is making an attack on the way men want women to look. Atwood uses irony when describing skirts reaching below the knee with covered legs to highlight how uncomfortable Offred is in the presence of these tourists. To Offred, the tourists “seem undressed” (p.38) and yet she remembers that she “used to dress like that too” (p.38). Atwood suggests that Offred used to have the freedom to choose even simple things like clothing before being forced into her red habit by men. It also shows how the previously free woman now has
adapted to male ideas. In all three of the novels, Atwood makes a pointed criticism of women who maintain their stereotypical nature in male dominated societies.

Another of Atwood’s criticisms is women disguise themselves in order to fulfill the needs of men. Atwood’s female characters both intentionally and unintentionally use clothing as a means of disguise and this reinforces the idea that women are not confident enough to let their true selves show. In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood unites both Marian and Ainsley with the idea of disguise using clothing. Marian hides herself, physically and emotionally, in her clothing and Marian states “It’s probably the way we dress: Ainsley says I choose clothes as though they’re a camouflage or protective colouration, though I can’t see anything wrong with that. She herself goes for neon pink” (Atwood, 1969, p.12). Marian’s lack of confidence comes from her relationship with her over-bearing boyfriend Peter. Her camouflage clothing is a protective layer of anonymity when dealing with her boyfriend. For Marian to stand out with color would cause her boyfriend to become more demanding in his needs and wants. On the other hand, Ainsley, who is extremely confident, wears childish clothing to pretend she is a teenager to trick Len into having a baby. The fact that Ainsley needs to change physically to get what she wants demonstrates the power that this man has over this confident woman. To deceive Len, Atwood dresses Ainsley in “a cotton summer creation [Marian had] never seen before, a pink and light-blue gingham check on white with a ruffle around the neck” (p.72) to show how even the most confident woman needs to disguise herself to order to satisfy men’s desires.

In contrast to Ainsley, Joan in *Lady Oracle* is not confident and there are numerous references to her wearing uniforms and costumes. When Joan fakes her own death, she chooses clothing that is inconspicuous so that no one will remember her. Interestingly, Atwood does not always allow Joan to choose when to wear costumes. Joan is introduced to the idea of costumes and disguises by her mother as a child which she later uses as an adult.
with men. When Joan was a child, she participated in ballet and Brownies. As an adult, she wore disguises in her deceptive relationships with Arthur and The Royal Porcupine. While the costumes did not affect men when she was a child, it is still important as it paved the path for the disguises of the future. As a child, Joan did not understand why she was not allowed to be a butterfly in the ballet recital but while reflecting on it as an adult, Joan realizes that “the problem was fairly simple: in the short pink skirt, with [her] waist, arms and legs exposed, [she] was grotesque” (Atwood, 1976, p.44). Atwood uses a simple example to highlight how reality was hidden from a child, reiterating the theme of disguise and showing how Joan is a different person depending on the clothing she wears. It also exhibits Joan’s insecurities and explains her lack of confidence as an adult. When the young Joan joins Brownies, she likes “wearing the same baggy uniform with its odd military beret and tie” (p.54) because she enjoyed the equality. Even though she is still alienated, Joan loved the fact that she looked the same: “At Miss Flegg’s you were supposed to try to be better than everyone else, but at Brownies you were supposed to try and be the same, and [Joan] was beginning to find this idea quite attractive” (p.54). Joan’s love of looking the same as others can be taken in that Joan believes everyone should be equal, males and females, and that as she grows older, it is more difficult for her to adhere to this idea because of the powerful men in her life.

Since the clothing in The Handmaid’s Tale is imposed, there are not many instances of disguise. Nevertheless, there is one particular occasion where disguise is prominent as Offred is forced to wear a costume when she and the Commander visit the strip-joint. The women present at the club are dressed to satisfy the men’s sexual desires. Offred does not ask to be taken out and although the Commander perceives it as being a treat for Offred, it is really an exertion of his power and control over Offred. Offred comments on the clothing: “I’ve never worn anything remotely like this, so glittering and theatrical, and that’s what it
might be, an old theatre costume, or something from a vanished nightclub act; the closest I ever came were bathing suits, and a camisole set, peach lace, that Luke bought for me once” (Atwood, 1985, p.242). Atwood uses the motif of clothing to show Offred’s insecurity with going to the strip joint. She is being dressed up to please the Commander. Atwood embodies the way that women wear disguises to please men in all three of these novels through the motif of clothing.

Margaret Atwood’s third criticism that is prevalent in all three of these novels is while women allow themselves to be influenced and controlled by men to present the fact that the subjugation of women does occur in male dominated societies, women do very little to resist it. Due to the male influence and control, the female characters do not just change their clothes, but change emotionally as well. All of the female protagonists are involved of male dominated relationships and through these relationships, there are varying levels of influence and control. Atwood incorporates this by showing men subtly and outwardly highlighting their male dominance through the motif of clothing. In *The Edible Woman*, Peter has immense control over all aspects of Marian’s life and while Atwood depicts this mainly through Marian’s loss of appetite, the motif of clothing plays a major role. Whenever Peter feels he has lost his friends through marriage, he gets angry, and forces Marian to have sex in peculiar locations to show Marian, and reassure himself, that he is the dominant one in their relationship. His fear of sharing power with a woman is specifically shown when he tells Marian “to buy a dress…not so mousy” (Atwood, 1969, p.231). The connotation associated with the word “mousy” show how Peter does not consider Marian suitable to be on public display. Marian feels his embarrassment whenever she does something wrong and perceives herself as not being his equal until she meets Duncan and begins her journey of self-discovery. When Marian finally overcomes Peter’s control, Atwood’s references to clothing are few, highlighting Peter’s loss of influence over Marian. As Marian’s character changes
from being controlled to finally becoming an individual, Atwood ensures that any references to clothing do the same. It can also be argued that Marian is controlled by Duncan, as she longs to see him and her life begins to revolve around him. Ironically, they meet at laundromats and he constantly calls her, wanting to do her ironing. The action of ironing, in removing the creases, is symbolic of Marian’s journey for self-discovery. Duncan is an interesting character, as like Peter, he does not accept Marian as anything but an object. Yet, with Duncan’s uncaring, controlling nature, Marian learns and discovers her true nature. Atwood makes the statement that women should be in control of their own lives and not let themselves be dominated by men.

Like Marian, men control Joan in Lady Oracle, emphasizing Atwood’s critique of male dominated societies. In her first power relationship with the controlling Arthur, Joan feels like it is difficult to share anything with him. Due to Arthur’s radical antics, Joan is too scared to voice her opinions and Joan finds herself living with someone who does not know her. She does not tell him that she was obese as a child since she believes he will not ‘love’ her anymore, which shows the immense power men have over women. Atwood makes an interesting comparison between Arthur and Joan’s clothing: “He found these clothes an affront of some kinds, a personal insult. At the same time he was fascinated by them, as he was by all the things about me he disapproved of. I suspect he found them arousing and was irritated with himself because of it” (Atwood, 1976, p.20). Atwood creates links between Arthur and Joan’s clothing, which shadows their bizarre relationship and shows Joan’s lack of resistance to Arthur’s power. While Arthur is attracted to Joan, he disagrees with her ideas and therefore, tries to force his beliefs onto her, assuming total control of their relationship. In comparison, her second power relationship with The Royal Porcupine influences Joan to wear new, different clothing. She changes her clothing in order to suit his needs by wearing “black lace-ups with steel toes, washerwoman boots, but even these were desirable. [They]
bought them, and later a pair of black net stockings to go with them” (Atwood, 1976, p.271). Since The Royal Porcupine was “an underwear freak,” (p.27) Joan changes her choice of lingerie to suit his needs. Since their relationship is purely sexual, Joan’s dress begins to cater for this and her clothing choices change. Joan is available for The Royal Porcupine’s disposal. Whether this is a conscious choice or not, Joan cannot stop herself from The Royal Porcupine’s call. Joan changes herself to keep him interested, and when The Royal Porcupine tries to mimic Arthur’s style of dress to entice Joan, Joan gets bored of him. Like Duncan helping Marian, The Royal Porcupine helps Joan to find herself, which means running away of her power relationships. Atwood highlights Joan’s desire to be free when she finishes their relationship due to his uncanny similarities to Arthur when the Royal Porcupine wears” no cape, no cane, no gloves; just a pair of jeans with a T-shirt that Honda on it.”(p.288) The Royal Porcupine gets angry and begins to stalk Joan because he is in love with the power associated with being with her. Like Arthur, The Royal Porcupine enjoys the control he has over her.

Out of the three novels, The Handmaid’s Tale highlights this point the strongest. The Republic of Gilead controls everything and while this is more of a control issue, Atwood ensures that the audience understands how women are influenced by describing Offred’s clothing with three different men. Prior to being part of the community, Offred is comfortable in overalls and hiking boots with Luke. Whenever Offred is around other women and the Commander, she is stuck in the hot, sweaty, red habit of the Handmaids. Once she becomes more comfortable with the Commander, she begins to loosen her habit, which shows her partiality towards him. Finally, when Offred is alone with Nick, she is always naked. By having Offred without clothing Atwood shows her level of comfort with Nick, Atwood demonstrates that even within the strict society, different men can change and influence
women in through their clothing choices. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, women are forced to wear their daily habits. Yet, the men are also wearing habits. The main difference is that since the society is male dominated, the vast majority of men chose and accepted the lifestyle, emphasizing the power of men. Offred is forced to wear certain articles of clothing. However, there are moments where the control is not as strong. This is prominent between the Commander and Offred. At their first illegal meeting, they are both correctly dressed. Yet as time passes, Offred becomes more comfortable and human around the Commander. Therefore, she begins to loosen her clothing, and for example, says, “My red shoes are off, my legs tucked up underneath me on the chair, surrounded by a buttress of red skirt” (Atwood, 1985, p.193). While Offred is comfortable around the Commander, she still understands the rules of the society and hence, keeps her legs covered by her skirt. There is still a barrier between the two characters. Atwood does this also to emphasize the lessening desire of Offred’s to be in disguise around the Commander. While this relaxed attitude arises between the two characters, the Commander still forces Offred to wear the skimpy outfit to the strip-joint and there is no resistance from Offred at all. Atwood highlights the male dominated relationships and uses the motif of clothing to signify how men can and do control women both emotionally and physically through their dress. In showing the female characters not resisting the male power, Atwood proposes that the blame cannot be placed solely on men.

In examination of *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle* and *A Handmaid’s Tale*, it can be concluded that Margaret Atwood uses the motif of clothing for a variety of purposes. In general, Atwood utilizes the motif of clothing to characterize her female protagonists to appear inferior to men in order to analyze male dominated societies. Atwood cleverly and subtly critiques male dominated societies through stereotypes, disguises and power relationships. Atwood forces her audience to think about these criticisms in relation to the
modern world. Do these gender barriers still exist? Are men still trying to be the dominant species? And perhaps most importantly, are women allowing them to do so?

Word Count: 4000
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