

# Analyzing the performance of feminine gender roles in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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## Introduction

When dealing with the humanities and what defines being human one must not neglect the issue of gender. Even in the old testament gender already occupies a central role in the creation story. It is striking that the bible contains two foundation stories. One that presents women and men as being equal, and one that implies that women were created after men in order to assist them. Throughout history of human kind the role of women has been defined and influenced by patriarchal society and for centuries male and female behavior has been believed to be defined by nature. It is only in the *XIX*<sup>th</sup> century that this convention starts to be questioned. Margaret Atwood's book "*The edible woman*", written in 1965 humorously presents the society of that time, as well as some core questions that start to be addressed regarding the feminine role. This essay attempts to give insight in how the female protagonist and female supporting characters of the book *The edible woman* enact their assigned gender role and set this into the book's historical context. In order to do this, it first discusses the historical framework and then digs closer into character analysis. Finally it compares the different approaches and finishes with an examination whether Atwood's work can be seen as a profeminist work.

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## 1 Historical and social background on the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

### 1.1 Historical background on the women's right movement

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women, in the United States, were granted many important rights, making them more and more equal to men in front of the law. One of the greatest achievements undoubtedly is the obtaining of the right to vote that was passed on August 26<sup>th</sup> in 1920.<sup>1</sup> However, women's rights did not only improve on political ground, but also on societal front, as during the 1920s birth control got widely accepted by the public. As an immediate consequence the United State's birth rate decreased by about 20%.<sup>2</sup> Social acceptance of the contraceptive pill in 1960 marks another milestone in the women's fight for the right to control their body. Only 3 years later, in 1963, Betty Friedan publishes her book *"The feminine mystique"* in which she talks about the dissatisfaction many American housewives feel. Friedan refers to this deep dissatisfaction as *"the problem that has no name"*.<sup>3</sup> The book had a great impact on American society and even Margaret Atwood admits to having read it *"behind locked doors"*<sup>4</sup>. Thus, it has surely influenced Margaret Atwood when writing her book *"The Edible woman"* which is the reason why it will serve us as primary literature in order to reconstruct the feminine role model of the 1960s and put the book *"The Edible Woman"* in context.

### 1.2 The ideal woman of the 1960s according to Betty Friedan

According to Betty Friedan in the 60s American society believed femininity, as well as the roles connected to it to be determined by biology. She cites Freud to underline her statement: "Anatomy is destiny"<sup>5</sup>. This is why during the 60s, for instance, child care was seen as a feminine task and most women became housewives instead of pursuing a professional career. Betty Friedan believes that the dream of many American women in the 60s was to become a *"suburban housewife"*<sup>6</sup>. Society expected them to be *"beautiful, educated [...] [and] only [concerned] about her husband, her children, her home"*<sup>7</sup>. Those virtues corresponded to what was understood to be *"true feminine fulfillment"*<sup>8</sup>. The impact of this feminine role, idealized by the vast majority of the American, manifested itself in a dropping marriage age at the end of the 1950s, when the

<sup>1</sup>cf. Imbornoni, Ann-Marie. "Women's Right Movement in the U.S.". infoplease. 27.06.2016. <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/womenstimeline1.html>.

<sup>2</sup>cf. "Birth control movement in the United States". Wikipedia. 27.05.2016. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birth\\_control\\_movement\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birth_control_movement_in_the_United_States).

<sup>3</sup><http://www.infoplease.com/spot/womenstimeline2.html>

<sup>4</sup>Atwood, Margaret: *The edible woman*, London 2009, p.X

<sup>5</sup>Friedan, Betty: *The feminine mystique*, New York 1963, p. 24

<sup>6</sup>Friedan, Betty: p.18

<sup>7</sup>Friedan, Betty: p.18

<sup>8</sup>Friedan, Betty: p.18

women in America got married at an average age of only 20. This development was accompanied by a decreasing number of women attending college. In 1920 about 47% of the college students were female, in 1958 this number dropped to a mere 35%.<sup>9</sup> Moreover 60% of those attending college did not graduate because they married during college or because they feared that they would face difficulties finding a husband if they were to become "too educated". Increasing birth rates in America were additionally part of this development. Many women were –again– giving birth to an increased number of children.<sup>10</sup> On the job market, a third of American women were employed. However, most women were only employed on a part-time basis and did not intend to develop a professional career.<sup>11</sup>

What made Betty Friedan's book so controversial was that she found that most of these housewives were suffering under the role they had assumed.<sup>12</sup> But most women felt too much shame about their own unhappiness and lack of fulfilment to talk about this specific problem.<sup>13</sup> This is the reason why she often talks about "*the problem that has no name*"<sup>14</sup> in order to underline the reluctance of American society to discuss the actuality of the problem. She herself describes the problem as the dissatisfaction of the women with their role as "*a wife and mother*"<sup>15</sup>. The statement of one women: "*I [...] feel I have no personality*"<sup>16</sup> perfectly describes the fear consuming the protagonist Marian McAlpin of Margaret Atwood's book "*The edible woman*" for the duration of the book.

## 2 An analysis of the characters in terms of their enactment of "femininity"

### 2.1 Marian's struggle

Marian, the protagonist of the book, is a recent college graduate working for a consumer survey institute. This job doesn't satisfy her, as she knows that it holds no possibility of professional advancement. She feels pressure from her surrounding to get married, but her relationship with Peter, a young lawyer, at first seems stagnant as well, as Peter had made it clear that he did not want to get married. Peter later on does decide to get married, and Marian agrees to his proposal. After having accepted Peter's marriage proposal, Marian makes several attempts to satisfy the perceived ideal of a perfect wife. Before her engagement, she does not make a particular effort to conform to the ideal of the single woman, but she also doesn't rebel against it in any way. Even her cloths are chosen "*as though they're a camouflage or a protective colouration*"<sup>17</sup> indicating that she does not want to stand out and wishes to remain a part of the crowd. Most of changes she undergoes are small enough that they might not be

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<sup>9</sup>cf. Friedan, Betty: p.16

<sup>10</sup>cf. Friedan, Betty: p.17

<sup>11</sup>Friedan, Betty: p.17

<sup>12</sup>cf. Friedan, Betty: p.26

<sup>13</sup>cf. Friedan, Betty: p.19

<sup>14</sup>Friedan, Betty: p.26

<sup>15</sup>Friedan, Betty: p.29

<sup>16</sup>Friedan, Betty: p.21

<sup>17</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 16

noticed by the public. However, they show the effort she invests in an attempt to fulfill society's, as well as Peter's, expectations. It is interesting to note not only Marian undergoes these changes, but Peter does so as well. Before their engagement, they both never called each other pet names such as "darling", but shortly after their engagement they start calling each other "darling"<sup>18</sup>. Peter also starts calling her more frequently while she is at work, in order to discuss personal matters, such as his plans for the evening.<sup>19</sup> When he calls to cancel their dinner date the conversation starts to get heated. This puts Marian at unease, especially since her colleagues are eavesdropping their conversation. After having finished talking to Peter, she reminds herself that she should be much more gentle to him, because he has a demanding job.<sup>20</sup>

This shows Marian's determination to be a good wife to Peter by treating him in a kind manner. Beyond that, the fact of being eavesdropped puts some additional pressure on her and illustrates that she does not only try to satisfy Peter's expectations, but society's expectations as well.

This desire to satisfy social expectations is strongly exhibited when she lets the choice of the marriage day up to Peter because she rather "*leave the big decisions up to [him]*"<sup>21</sup>. This statement can be seen as a gesture of submission by Marian towards Peter. She suggests that, from now on, it should be *him* making all the important decisions. Thus, she does perfectly act in correspondence to the ideal of the American housewife, one that is only concerned with domestic matters, but leaves all the other decisions up to her husband.

This attitude is showcased even more clearly when Marian attends the Christmas party organized by the ladies working in the office. At the party she is disgusted by their gluttony, their need to consume. Since she is afraid of becoming a woman just like them, she starts to feel very uncomfortable. This is when she longs for Peter's presence to comfort her.<sup>22</sup> Marian's particular desire to be comforted by Peter shows to which point she starts to letting Peter resolve major issues and accepts and internalizes simultaneously that, as a future wife, she is not supposed to deal with those kind of problems.

An other scene showcasing her assuming of typical gendered behavior takes place when she, as part of her ongoing transformation and in response to her engagement, decides to go through a makeover before the engagement party. To help her with this task, she enlists the help of several women in her life. She asks one of the office virgins –the fake blond embodiments of the feminine ideal– for the address of a hairdresser, lets Ainsley do her makeup and seeks her approval for the outfit she is wearing. This illustrates how feminine behavior is learned and passed from one woman to another. But after the makeover, she does no longer feel like herself. Seeing her reflection she goes through the following thought process.

*[Her arms] were the only portion of her flesh that was without a cloth or nylon or leather or varnish covering, but in the glass even they looked fake, like soft pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible . . .*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 98

<sup>19</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.97

<sup>20</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.97-98

<sup>21</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 79

<sup>22</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p. 143

<sup>23</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 194

This clearly indicates that she doesn't feel comfortable in her costume, the way that her dress hugs her body and in how her hair is piled up artfully on her head. Her getup does not feel natural, but artificial. The role she is supposed to play and the costume she must wear do not match up with her "core". Marian is seemingly willing to compromise her own dreams for a life in conformity. But her willingness only goes as far as her consciousness. Her body – her core – rejects her actions.

Her relationship with food and consuming food emphasized this rejection. As Marian's engagement with Peter progresses, her body refuses to consume and increasing number of foods. It starts out with the Steak at dinner with Peter, and progresses to more and more foods until she "*can't eat anything at all. Not even a glass of orange juice.*"<sup>24</sup> The closer she gets to having to completely subdue herself under Peter and conform to society's expectations, the less food can she consume. Through this the reader gets a sense of how strongly her subconsciousness rejects Marian's action and rebels against her consciousness. This development is likewise marked by a change to third person narration in the mid section of the book, emphasizing the loss of control over herself Marian experiences. We only return to first person narration after her engagement falls through. Moreover, she is finally able to eat after she consumes –and thus kills– the ideal self she could never have conformed to.<sup>25</sup> After having regained her sense of self, Marian reconstructs the time of their engagement as "*Peter trying to destroy*"<sup>26</sup> her. This clearly reflects that she sees her attempts to act in accordance to her assigned gender role as a loss, even as a destruction, of her own personality. The deformation of her personality reaches its peak at the engagement party. Although she is receiving many compliments on her appearance from her friends who think that she "*should wear red more often*"<sup>27</sup>, Duncan reminds her that this outfit merely is a "*masquerade*"<sup>28</sup>. He realizes that this is not how Marian would have dressed. When confronted with Duncan's statement Marian is irritated and her first reaction is to evade by explaining him that he "*just [has] never seen [her] dressed up*"<sup>29</sup>. When invited to join the party Duncan refuses to come in and leaves for the laundromat. Marian gets back in and continues to "play her role".<sup>30</sup> When Peter announces to her that he is planning to take some photographs of her later the evening she makes the decision to run from the party. She feels uneasy because Peter was already trying earlier in the evening "*to get a couple of shots of*"<sup>31</sup> her. The use of the word "shot" already reflects that the situation is perceived by Marian to be similar to the one of a huntsman chasing his prey. This gets especially evident when Marian is described as being unable to move not even "*the muscles of her face*"<sup>32</sup>. The use of vocabulary that reminds the reader of a hunting scene is used by the author to stress Peter's masculinity. Marian's unease with the role as the victim can further be interpreted as her unease with the inferiority inherent in her role as a woman. Her escape of the party can be seen as a first

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<sup>24</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 216-217

<sup>25</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.284

<sup>26</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 233

<sup>27</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 202

<sup>28</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 203

<sup>29</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 203

<sup>30</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 203

<sup>31</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 197

<sup>32</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.197

break in trying to conform that ideal.

## 2.2 Ainsley's non-rebellion

Ainsley Tewce is introduced to us as Marian's messy and seemingly free spirited roommate. Unlike Marian, she is not concerned with societal expectations. She routinely calls people crude or conventional.<sup>33</sup> Marian notes that "[the lady below] has decided Ainsley is not respectable, whereas"<sup>34</sup> she is. We get a sense that Ainsley behaves against what the lady down below – representing a stronghold of societal norms in the book– expects a young woman like her to behave. Most notably, she decides, against all conventions to have a baby on her own. During the night out with Marian, Peter and Len, it becomes obvious that she knows how women are supposed to behave. In her young girl's costume she only speaks when she is asked, giving only short, shy answers. As Peter and Len talk, she lowers her eyes and just listens.<sup>35</sup> She behaves like this in the presence of Len to seduce him. While at first she showed no interest in Len, she later comes to the conclusion that he would be a suitable "sperm-donor", hence she decided to act like the perfect young girl. This showcases how she uses gender roles for her own benefit. In reality she is individualistic and calculating, acts on her own accord, and she sometimes chooses to conform to gender roles, sometimes to defy them, depending on which offers her the greatest benefit. Unlike other characters, many of her actions directly follow from her worldview. She does not care about marriage. In fact, she is against it on principle, and against Marian's wishes she decides to raise a child on her own, at a time when single mothers were seen as a social ill. She explains,

*Every woman should have at least one baby"[...]"It's more important than sex. It fulfils your deepest femininity."*<sup>36</sup>

Her seemingly subversive ideas, lead her to make choices that go against societal expectations. However her worldview is everything but revolutionary. The first indication of this can be seen very early in the book. Ainsley's current dream is to work at an art gallery.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, her desire to work there does not stem from a love of art, but her wish to meet artists to, presumably, date them. On top of that she is convinced that no woman's life can be fulfilling without children. This motivates her decision of having a child, without questioning her idea any further. She has internalized this part of her role as a woman. Moreover, she accuses Marian of "*rejecting her femininity*"<sup>38</sup> when Marian decides to eat her cake doppelganger. This accusation shows that to Ainsley femininity is inherent in all women, as one cannot reject something that one doesn't possess, and that she sees the rejection of certain culturally assigned roles as a grave mistake. After an appointment with a psychologist, she breaks down crying because they told her that "*if she has a child, he's absolutely certain to turn into a homosexual*"<sup>39</sup>. Subsequently, she decides to get

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<sup>33</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p. 39, p.61

<sup>34</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 14.

<sup>35</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.61

<sup>36</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 39

<sup>37</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.39

<sup>38</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 230

<sup>39</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.155

married, indicating that her fear of having a *homosexual* child is so great that she, against her original intent, is willing to get married.<sup>40</sup> She does not reject or question the popular notion that homosexuality is bad or question where the psychologists assessment stems from. This again highlights how she simply accepts many social norms as the truth. In conclusion, even though she is first presented as someone not following the norm, she ends up falling into the role society expects her to play. She is lucky that her “ideal” life coincides with what society expects from her. Her rebellion may upset some people, but it does not question the status quo. Her development indicates that to liberate oneself from the constraints of societal expectations, one has to do more than just be willing to defy them. Being part of a society is being raised to accept some norms as inherent. Ainsley accepts social norms as universal truths without questioning them.

### 2.3 Clara’s struggle with her role as housewife and mother

Clara’s story is typical for a young woman living in the 60s. She married her college-sweet heart, Joe, and had her first child a few months after the wedding.<sup>41</sup> She dropped out of college after the marriage, devoting herself to raising her children. She lives a life that at that time was thought to be the most full filing for a woman like her.

But Clara can not fully conform to her assigned role. She is bored by just being a mother and housekeeper, which already becomes evident in the very beginning of the book, when Marian is “*invited as an entertainer*”<sup>42</sup> to a dinner at Clara’s. Although it was Clara who urged Marian to visit her, the household is mostly run by Clara’s husband Joe. Clara herself does not have the energy to be the perfect housewife and mother. Joe has to help her out. When Marian and Ainsley come to visit it is him who prepares the dinner, plays the role of the host and takes as well care of the children. Clara stays very passive and rests in the garden. The reader gains the impression that the house, the young family is living in, is not very well maintained as the garden is neglected, the stairs of the back porch are overflowing with trash and objects are lying on the floor in the inside of the house.<sup>43</sup> One would expect that as a housewife Clara should be in charge of keeping everything clean and proper, but apparently she does neglect or cannot fulfill this task. When dealing with her children, she calls her son as a “*little bastard*”<sup>44</sup> and rhetorically asks “*how anyone can love their children till they start to be human beings*”.<sup>45</sup> Clara’s behaviour does thus not come up to how an ideal, loving mother would behave. Moreover, the reader gains the impression that she desperately fails in being a good mother to her children. Clara’s life seems to be that of a perfect American housewife: she got married to her husband early in college, is living in a suburb, is expecting her third child and her husbands job allows her to stay at home. However, she clearly does not correspond to the ideal of the American housewife. She even fails trying to fulfill this role.

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<sup>40</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.181

<sup>41</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.35

<sup>42</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.197

<sup>43</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.30

<sup>44</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.33

<sup>45</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.33

As Clara does not openly talk about her feelings, it is necessary to read in between the lines to get a clue about what is going on inside her. As mentioned before one can see that Clara is apparently bored with her situation. This is why her husband, Joe, makes such an big effort so that Marian “*come[s] and see[s] [them] again soon*”<sup>46</sup>. So that she can entertain Clara because “*she has so few people she can really talk to*”<sup>47</sup>. Additionally she also seems to be tired of having children, as well mentally as physically. To Marian she appears to be “*even more fragile*”<sup>48</sup> because of her pregnancy. And the way that she treats her children implies that the responsibilities that come with raising children do overburden her. Clara admitting that “*after this [...] [baby she will be taking] the pill*”<sup>49</sup> underlines that she does not wish to have more children, because the workload she has right now is already demanding enough. Clara’s alcoholism can also be interpreted as a response and as an escape from her situation. On the back porch Marian notices many “*empty bottles of all kinds, beer bottles, milk bottles, wine and scotch bottles, and baby bottles*”<sup>50</sup> lying around. This shows that apparently someone is consuming a lot of alcohol and most likely it is Clara, since she asks Joe for a Vermouth when he is offering beer before dinner.<sup>51</sup> It seems that, as she fails in fulfilling the feminine role model and is unhappy with the live she is leading, she has become alcoholic. Betty Friedan portrayed many women felt difficulties talking about the problem that has no name. This is also the case as far as Clara is concerned, because she does not confide to her friend Marian. On the other hand Marians attitude can be interpreted as the general attitude of society in those day’s. She senses that Clara somehow is suffering, but does only make half hearted attempts to help her.<sup>52</sup> She also believes that Joes and Claras situation is due to the fact that they are not “*practical enough*”<sup>53</sup>.

It is Joe that is making reflections about Clara’s situation and the reasons for her unhappiness. Her struggle with her role is further emphasized and explained as Joe pointedly remarks to Marian that:

*“I worry about her a lot, you know,” Joe continued. ‘I think it’s a lot harder for her than for most other women; I think it’s harder for any woman who’s been to university. She gets the idea she has a mind, [...] they treat her like a human being; when she gets married, her core gets invaded...”*<sup>54</sup>

The reader again can sense how Clara suffers under her new role, how the lack of mental stimulation gets to her. Joe knows why Clara is suffering but he can not help her alleviate it. He does everything he can, but the role of a housewife in itself part of Clara’s problem and Joe himself knows that *Clara’s feminine role and her core are in opposition*.<sup>55</sup> When Joe confronts Marian

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<sup>46</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.36

<sup>47</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.36

<sup>48</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.30

<sup>49</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.33

<sup>50</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.30

<sup>51</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.32

<sup>52</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.33

<sup>53</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.89

<sup>54</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 200

<sup>55</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.200



with his thoughts, although she feels as if she should “reassure”<sup>56</sup> him, she does not do so. Instead she just overs him an olive which illustrates her incapability to deal with that issue as well as her neglecting the existence of that “problem that has no name”.

Keeping in mind the results of Freida’s work, this portrayal of the dissatisfied stay at home mother was –while common– not talked about at that time. Clara did everything society told her to do in order to live a good life, but she is still not happy. She is deeply dissatisfied and does not feel completely human anymore. She is a round bellied shadow of her former self.

### 3 A comparison of their approaches

Clara, Marian and Ainsley do all have to struggle with the role society imposes on them. However, they chose different approaches to deal with the problem arising from the role they are expected to fulfill as women. Each approach chosen by the three women can be seen as an indicator of their autonomy and will be analysed more deeply in this section.

Clara is the perfect example of housewife suffering from the problem that has no name. As Joe perfectly described, Clara neglected her personality when trying to live up to the role of the housewife, mother and wife.<sup>57</sup> That is to conform to society’s expectations. Although she is visibly unhappy with her situation, she does not take any initiative to change it. Joe complains about her passivity, as when he encourages her to take action “*she just gives [him] a funny look*”<sup>58</sup>. This leaves Clara to be the one that is the less autonomous, since even though she is unhappy she does continue conforming to social norms.

Ainsley sometimes chooses to conform, as it can be seen when she tries to seduce Len, and sometimes doesn’t care, which the reader quickly learns as Marian points out the many “inappropriate” behaviors she displays. She does whatever *she* deems to be the best choice in any situation. She first doesn’t want to get married because she thinks that being raised by two parents is “what’s wrong with most children”.<sup>59</sup> But later on quickly changes her mind and decides she needs to get married when her psychologist convinces her that her child needs a “strong Father Image”<sup>60</sup>. She doesn’t need to negotiate much with her surroundings because she is extremely adaptive to them. Her strong willingness to adapt herself to the situation additionally explains why, at the end, she lives the most “conforming” life out of all three women. She may be a bit rebellious in everyday matters, but when it comes to the big questions she aligns herself with the rest of society. This conformance seems to be so smooth as her “core aligns much with what society wants her to behave as and her lack of questioning the current norm. Due to this she does not seem to suffer as much as Clara under social constraints, even though ultimately they both live as housewives and mothers. Unlike Clara she doesn’t have to deal with much social stigma. This can explain why she appears to be the most satisfied with her role out of all three.

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<sup>56</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.200

<sup>57</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.200

<sup>58</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.200

<sup>59</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 38-39

<sup>60</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p. 155

Although Marian is not as rebellious as Ainsley, she finishes by being the one that becomes the most autonomous. As already developed in the previous section Marian undertakes a big effort in order to conform to the feminine role model of the time. Regardless of her efforts, it gets evident that this is not the life she is wishing for. After having set up her mind about that point Marian breaks up her engagement with Peter. Additionally by eating the woman shaped cake she does not only literally reject the role she was so desperately trying to come up to. By decidedly going against what society expects her to do Marian stand out. She is without question the one that has undergone a process that leaves her being the most autonomous compared to Clara and Ainsley.

## 4 Atwood's work and the topics of second wave feminism

Atwood's work happened to coincide with the emergence of feminism in 1969, but as a matter of fact, the book was written long before it's publication date of 1965. Notably, it is interesting that the book approaches many core ideas of second-wave feminism. The most obvious one is the issue of Clara, who represents the "problem that has no name". As it was outlined in the analysis of Clara's character, Clara fails to fulfill her duties as mother, wife and housewife, and is unhappy with her general status as a mother and housewife. She can be seen as the "anti-ideal" of the perfect American housewife, but she nevertheless gives insight into many women's way of life at that time. Ainsley's attitude towards Clara's situation is very much conform to society norms and reflects the popular opinion regarding the "*problem that has no name*". Joe's opinion, however, is the most surprising. More so as he represents a male intellectual reflecting on the problem. His conclusion, that women in Clara's situation must be unhappy, because they do not fulfill nor develop their personality being housewife's and mothers is much in accordance with Betty Freida's work in "*the feminine mystique*". She as well sees the main issue in women devoting themselves to their families and forgetting to pursue their own interests and dreams. Thus, this aspect constitutes one of the most innovate, or feminist, ideas of the book. Another main aspect of the book is its representation of femininity as being a product of social norms. This is emphasized when Marian prepares for her engagement party. The author humorously compares Marian's visit to the hairdresser to "*being admitted to the hospital to have an operation*"<sup>61</sup> and the hair dryers with "*mushroom-shaped machines*"<sup>62</sup>. All in all the dressing up of Marian for the engagement party, conjures up the image of an actress dressing up for the play. This is underlined by Marian trying out her mimics in front of the mirror in order to practise the perfect eye drop.<sup>63</sup> This impression is reinforced again when the party is narrated in a way that is strongly reminiscent of guideline indicating the exact position of the actors on the scene of a theater or which actor is to enter the stage the next.<sup>64</sup> Through this, the reader gains the impression that male and female behaviour are no more than roles performed and imposed by society. Femininity, as well as masculinity are only constructs

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<sup>61</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.178

<sup>62</sup>Atwood, Margaret: p.179

<sup>63</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.189

<sup>64</sup>cf. Atwood, Margaret: p.198

of the society and each individual should be able to choose to or not to play along with this role. Marian's final decision to reject the role that society wanted to impose upon her can be interpreted as an rebellious act.

However, feminist ideas in the book are often encountered with passivity and the issues arising from them are left unresolved. Thus, when Joe is confronting Marian with the "problem that has no name" referring to Clara's situation, she reacts by disregarding the actuality of the problem. Furthermore, at the end of the book, we do not get to know what becomes of the couple and their particular situation. Although we know that Marian breaks up her engagement with Peter, her future is left open. She is in fact searching for a new job, but whether she will succeed or what kind of employment she will be offered is left uncertain. As far as Ainsley is concerned, at last she conforms to society and accepts to marry, so that her baby can have a father, because she could not face the outside pressure placed on her. This indicates that although the book picks up many interesting subjects concerning the feminist movement, it fails to provide any solutions to the dilemma women in the book face. Thus it seems adequate to classify it as being a prototype of the feminist movement, than rather being a product of it.

## 5 Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *"The edible woman"* can thus be categorized as a profeminist work that by then already brought up some basic issues of the feminist movement. Its comical narrative style certainly takes the gravity of the arising questions, but never the less it's clairvoyance is highly astonishing. In the early 1990s, nearly 30 year's after Margaret Atwood wrote her book, Judith Butler, an American philosopher, claims that the notion of gender is merely a social construction than imposed by biology: *"the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention"*<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory". JSTOR. 25.05.2016. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3207893.pdf>