



**The Other Side
of the
Looking Glass:**

Image and Identity in Margaret Atwood's

THE EDIBLE WOMAN

by Dell Texmo

The search for an identity, a traditional theme in the novel, is given new emphasis and definition in Margaret Atwood's first novel, The Edible Woman. (1) Marian MacAlpin, Atwood's heroine, joins Jane Eyre, Sue Bridehead and Ursula Brangwen, among others, in her attempt to free herself from the bondage of contingency and to forge for herself an identity not dependent on marriage or a man. In order that she may become a woman who knows who she is, Marian must first "see through" and reject the assorted images which her employer, colleagues, friends and fiance would have her project. The great variety and complexity of the images which bombard and beguile her militates against her immediate transcendence of the "looking glass" and all the superficiality it symbolizes. Stereotypes of womankind such as the Career Girl, the Virgin and the Dark Lady vie with each other for Marian's attention and leer grotesquely at her from all reflecting surfaces. The inanimate world with its mechanical images--epitomized by the camera and mirror--reflects, distorts and mocks Marian's endeavours to achieve meaning through elaborations of the exterior person rather than through explorations of the interior. In The Edible Woman

Atwood graphically depicts the difficulties entailed in rejecting the two-dimensional image in favour of a multi-dimensional identity.

The tripartition of the novel reflects the thematic concerns with identity, its nature, loss and recovery, and parallels Marian's movement from "I" to "she" and back to a more meaningful "I." Part I of the novel covers Friday through Monday of the Labour Day weekend. Friday morning Marian wakes up feeling "more stolid than usual" (p. 11) but by bedtime she feels "unsettled" (p.43). In just four days she alters from a self-confident young career woman to a female beleaguered by unpleasant choices and selves, who has not even got the wherewithal to say "I" any longer. Marian the person becomes paralyzed into Marian the thing. She lies on her bed, "almost like being on a rubber raft, drifting . . ." (p. 103), on the surface of her existence, too listless to undertake the necessary dives to find her real self. (2) Part II of the novel takes place entirely in the third person because Marian's sense of self has vanished; she thinks of herself as though she were someone else, and to a certain extent she is, illustrating in a singular way woman's position

as "the Other."⁽³⁾ Stereotypes of femininity as well as photographic and reflective images proliferate and threaten to engulf her. Part III returns to the first person as Marian returns to health and humanity, able to mock and consume the image of herself that nearly consumed her, aware finally of the impotence of the image and of the potency of independence. These shifts in point of view reflect respectively Marian's foundering, her disintegration and her final reintegration of self.

Although the "working world" is often seen as a panacea for women who want to "be somebody," Marian's work as a consumer consultant for Seymour Surveys is little more than a placebo for what ails her. It gives her the illusion of meaningful occupation but fails utterly to provide her with any real direction in life. She and the other office women are like "the (caged) armadillo . . . going around in figure-eights. . ." (pp. 95, 108) even after it has been set free. Most of the office women are escaped housewives, the interviewers are housewives paid for their part-time labour and the ones interviewed are all housewives paid nothing. In the way Seymour Surveys employs and exploits women, particularly housewives, it is imitating and reinforcing the established social structure not changing it. "Layered like an ice cream sandwich," with Marian's department "the gooey layer in the middle," the company is a microcosm of sexist society:

On the floor above are the executives and the psychologists--refer-

red to as the men upstairs, since they are all men. . . . Below us are the . . . I.B.M. machines . . . ; I've been down there too, where the operatives seem frayed and overworked. . . . Our department is the link between the two: we are supposed to take care of the human element, the interviewers themselves. (p. 19)

Marian realizes that her job is not a career but a dead end. She cannot "become one of the men upstairs" (p. 20) and comes to realize that she does not want to "turn into" one of the women in the middle either.⁽⁴⁾ An invitation to join the Pension Plan puts Marian into a panic about the future, consigning herself to Seymour Surveys in perpetuity and committing herself to a "pre-formed" image, the Career Girl turned into Old Maid:

Somewhere in front of me a self was waiting, preformed, a self who had worked during innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward. A pension. I foresaw a bleak room with a plug-in heater. Perhaps I would have a hearing aid, like one of my great-aunts who had never married. I would talk to myself; children would throw snowballs at me. (p. 21)

The pathetic pensioned "self" that Marian here conjures up is a familiar one, not because women who work and do not marry all become hard of hearing but because it is based on a stereotype. To nullify such a powerful negative image, Marian needs a positive role

model, a real person who has transcended the limitations of a woman's job in a man's world.

There are no such models resident in the office, the inmates of which are epitomized by Mrs. Bogue ("bogey") and Mrs. Grot ("grotty"), who are both nasty and frightening to Marian. These female colleagues are described collectively as "a Sargasso Sea of femininity," an allusion to a line in Ezra Pound's poem "Portrait d'Une Femme,"(5) in which the ostensibly neutral comment, "Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea," is actually a condemnation of a woman's self as a pastiche of the flotsam and jetsam of others' personalities: "No! there is nothing! in the whole and all,/Nothing that's quite your own./ Yet this is you." "Nothing" does not quite capture the quality in her colleagues that offends Marian. They, like Pound's woman, are not their own. They seem to be what they eat, omnivorous as some primitive science fiction monster devouring all in its path, threatening to suck Marian in and spew her out:

. . . she could see the roll of fat pushed up across Mrs. Gundridge's back by the top of her corset, the ham-like bulge of thigh, the creases round the neck, the large porous cheeks; the blotch of varicose veins glimpsed at the back of one plump crossed leg, the way her jowls jellied when she chewed, her sweater a woolly teacosy over those rounded shoulders; and the others too, similar in structure but with varying

proportions and textures of bumpy permanents and dune-like contours of breast and waist and hip; their fluidity sustained somewhere within by bones, without by a carapace of clothing and makeup. What peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato-chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears, and garbage . . . (p. 167)

On the inside and the outside these women are nauseating, superfluous, without definition. They expand and shrink like figures in a funhouse mirror. What sustains them is not an identity, but on the inside a skeleton and on the outside a "carapace" of clothes and makeup. Marian rejects them and all that they stand for; she does not want to be "like that."

Since Marian's fastidiousness is related to the fact that most of the office women are older and fatter than she is, one might expect that Emmy, Millie and Lucy, "the office virgins,"(6) her own age and size, would appear as more congenial to her, but while they are not dependent for their identity upon the "group," as Marian perceives the other office women to be, they all seem to be in a state of suspended animation, lying in wait for the men who will give them names and raisons d'être: their every action is geared toward the Pygmalion who will "make" them. They are all unreasonably

envious of Marian's Peter, and their eyes in the powder room mirror appear to "glitter" rapaciously. Furthermore, they have no depth, only surfaces in varying states of repair: Emmy is always "unravelling," with loose threads hanging, scales of lipstick sloughing off, wisps of hair and flakes of scalp drifting down; at the other extreme Lucy is so well-veneered that her surface might be peeled off in a single piece. Though deploring their apparent desperation for a man and recognizing their falsity and brittleness of character, it is through their eyes that Marian perceives the desirability of having a man. She is not thinking for herself but is accepting one of the axioms of every female's existence, that a woman without a man is nothing. Emmy, Millie and Lucy do nothing to belie that impression and, perceiving that to be manless like them would be a retrograde step, Marian takes a step in the other direction.

Where the professional life fails to provide meaning for Emmy, Millie, Lucy or Marian, the domestic life, traditionally satisfying to women, might fill in the gap. A visit to her old college friends Joe and Clara enables Marian to see whether having a husband, home and family can give life purpose and meaning. Ostensibly a "liberated" couple sharing childcare and household responsibilities, Joe and Clara have lost themselves in the process of breeding, bearing and rearing, dwelling in a constant state of domestic anarchy. Two

broken-down toys on the doorstep of their house, a teddy bear losing its stuffing and a "decapitated doll," are each symbolic of the state to which Joe and Clara are reduced. (Joe answers the door tucking in his shirt or "stuffing" and Clara, in the last months of pregnancy, is "all body.") As Joe is a teacher of philosophy and Clara a college graduate, we know they are not unintelligent but both appear to have been taken by surprise by the arrival of children. Clara, like the office women, is defined by her bodily functions, although unlike them, she retains a sense of irony about it, and would appreciate Joe's comment to Marian that she has lost her "core." This remark applies to Joe as well, however, as Atwood has indicated through the teddy bear, and for Marian, now trying to locate her own core, Clara and Joe's corelessness is decidedly unappetizing: ". . . she thought of apples and worms."(p. 236)

A variation on the marriage-and-maternity theme is provided by Marian's roommate Ainsley, who decides to have a baby but not to marry. The cold-blooded way in which she selects and seduces a good breeding partner horrifies Marian, who perhaps sees in Ainsley's approach a parody of the dating and mating game in which Marian herself is a passive participant. Len's indignant outburst when he discovers that Ainsley has seduced him is redolent with echoes of the stereotyped injured maiden:

"All along you've only been using me
. . . . You weren't interested in me
at all. The only thing you wanted

from me was my body!" (p. 159)
While Ainsley's appropriation of the man's role as seducer has a certain poetic justice to it, her dependence on the role is evident in her very reversal of it. Her flexibility when it comes to the masks she wears and the images she projects would seem to argue against the existence of any central Ainsley. Marian's objection to the way Ainsley's room is littered with dirty discarded clothes is actually an objection to the selves Ainsley sports awhile and then casts off. In the course of the novel she plays every conceivable role in her own allegory from Innocence to Experience, Child to Earth Mother, even making the Child pregnant so that she may become the Mother. In this virtuoso performance is no integrity, no inner direction. Ainsley is always cued by her mirror and by books, popular works of anthropology and psychology and, when she reads that a baby must have a "father figure" (as opposed to a father), she wastes no time in locating one. (7)
Ainsley combines the cold-bloodedness of the office virgins with the fertility of Clara to become another intimidating element of Marian's existence.

Despite the warnings provided by Ainsley and Joe and Clara, Marian still contemplates a man and marriage as a means to selfhood. That she expects to find identity through a liaison with a man like Peter Wollander is ironic indeed, since he has so little real substance that he must constantly feed off of others, depleting them in the process.

Tremendously concerned with his "image," he takes care to manipulate his surface so that it is as glossy as the magazines he reads. Marian perceives the hairs on his arms as being "carefully arranged," he appears "meticulously unshaven" one morning, and she always thinks of his clothes as "costumes." This superficiality extends to their relationship as reflected in the terminology Marian uses to describe it: their dating follows specific "patterns," Peter becomes "a pleasant habit," they accept each other "at face value," and, seeing each other only at weekends the "vener" has not yet worn off. (p. 61) There is no central Peter; he is a collage of the images projected by his friends and magazines. His proposal to Marian is not motivated by love but by self-defense for, when his last unmarried friend Trigger marries, he has no one he can look to for a model or mirror for bachelor-Peter. Made to seem important by his status in the office virgins' eyes, his value--and his "identity"--derives entirely from his maleness and he goes as far as one can go on gender alone.

Marian is defined and limited by Peter but she does not object to his habit of making her whatever he wants her to be at the time, even when it is something as unpleasant as "a version of the designing siren who had carried off Trigger." (p. 27) To Peter she is "the kind of girl who" and then he fills in the blank. Her basic attraction for him is that she is "the

kind of girl who wouldn't try to take over his life," (p. 61) that is, the kind of girl whose life he can take over, the kind of malleable doll whose limbs can be arranged into any sort of position (as when he makes love to her in the bathtub), who walks, talks, cries and fakes orgasm ("Was it good for you?" he asks, every time). Even his sexual fantasies are derivative and he gets his ideas for love-making from images in the magazines to which he subscribes. Peter's concern for the image, both pulp and flesh, is the result of a more reprehensible unconcern for the reality. He never thinks of Marian as a real woman, making it more difficult for her to do so.

Not only does Peter not augment Marian's sense of self, he actively threatens her with his annihilative machines. Although he and Len see themselves as "man's men," they are really "mechanical men," and when together, ignore any women present, swap hunting stories and talk about the technicalities of cars, guns and cameras, all props for their personae. Len's name is undoubtedly a play on "lense;" he is "in television." He and Peter converse about "self-portraits," "reflecting images in mirrors, self-timers, . . . the correct focussing of the image" until Marian feels reduced to two dimensions herself, "a stage prop." (p. 71) Camera and gun merge into a single threatening instrument whereby Peter can "shoot" and kill Marian. His mechanization is concomitant with his dehumanization; he is humanoid, not human, and it is strange

that Marian does not recognize him for what he is--or isn't.

Her failure to see through Peter explains her failure to see that there are so many factors in her environment operating to deprive her of an identity and to force her into a false position. Endowed with awareness, sensitivity and a sense of irony, she sees all the parts without seeing the whole. It is through her irrational behaviour that the reader first comes to understand that Marian's body and unconscious are trying to tell her something but Marian does not put all the pieces together until she makes the cake. An early message relayed by the subconscious is a dream Marian has which clearly indicates the foundering of her sense of self and her fear of losing her identity like the gelatinous office women:

. . . I had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time only to find that the ends of my fingers were turning transparent.
(p. 43)

Other warnings relayed by Marian's subconscious in Part I are disguised rebellions against Peter's attempted incorporation of her. The night he proposes to her she manifests two bizarre pieces of behaviour: she literally runs away from him (he catches her in his car) and she "burrows" into a retreat under a studio couch (he ferrets

her out). The movement of Part I is surrealistic: ostensibly moving closer to Peter and marriage, Marian is running backward as fast as she can go. The goal toward which she moves, a dream man and a dream marriage, is transmuted into a nightmare as Marian loses ground in her search for a meaningful self. In her conscious mind she believes she wants to be Peter's wife but in her unconscious mind this alternative is rejected, as symbolized by the running and burrowing, before it is even proposed. When Marian's two escape attempts fail, Peter proposes to her:

I drew back from him.

A tremendous electric blue flash, very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes.(p. 83)

Her drawing back signifies her body's recoiling once again from marriage to Peter, while the lightning flash reveals her subconscious understanding of the instant diminution, in his eyes and her own, entailed in this acceptance of the unacceptable.

Because she lacks the ability to recognize on a more conscious level the implications of marriage to Peter, she accepts his proposal and becomes an official non-entity. So limited is her perspective that she believes her problems have been solved but she will soon learn they are only just beginning. She is not going to marry

into an identity; marriage to Peter will obliterate whatever vestiges of an identity she still retains.(8) Using her engagement ring as a protective talisman to hold her crumbling ego together she tries to keep herself from "dissolving" as in the dream. When the "Sargasso Sea of femininity" at the office threatens to drown her she focuses on Lucy's gold bracelet and the thought of Peter and when she fears dissolving in her bathtub she focuses on her engagement ring and the idea of marriage. That she turns to marriage as a means of preventing dissolution is ironic if we consider the traditional imagery of marriage as a "consummation," a "dissolving" of one identity into another.

It is not Peter who will dissolve into Marian, however; he begins to feed on her as soon as she allows herself to become an edible woman. During a dinner with Peter she loses her appetite as she watches him carving and eating a steak, as though he is following a cookbook diagram of a cow with dotted lines drawn over it indicating where to cut and imagines him buying a marriage manual "with easy to follow diagrams."(p. 150) She is going to be butchered just like "the Planned Cow;" they are sisters. Because she is being eaten up, she comes to identify with and have sympathy for everything edible, from eggs to vitamin pills, and cannot bring herself to eat them. Thus, while Peter is consuming her she is starving herself. The threat of death by "consumption" looms

as real for Marian as for any Victorian heroine.

The objectification of Marian is illustrated both by her identification with edible things and by the way in which things begin to look like her. That is, wherever she turns she sees herself in things looking back at her: mirrors, teaspoons, kettles, tabletops, eyes, even faucets reflect their two-dimensional and distorted versions of Peter's woman. Marian's self-image is not self-generated. That she perceives herself through these external reflectors indicates that the image-from-outside has become her only reality, more important than the identity-from-within.

Not only the inanimate world mocks Marian. The people around her are sloughing off their old skins for new ones. Clara gives birth and changes from a "queen-ant" back to the "real Clara. (p. 115) Ainsley is struggling out of the little girl image and into the earth mother.(p. 119) Peter is exchanging his "free-bachelor image for the mature fiance one. (p. 120) Len is changing from one of the "lions" to one of the "Christians." (pp. 122-123) Another friend appears and disappears in a theatre like the Cheshire Cat.(pp.124-126) Because everyone around her is participating in this mad charade, Marian is forced to the conclusion that it is she who is not normal.

The concern with normality, depths,

cores and surfaces is comically explored through a mysterious character called the Underwear Man, a pervert who, pretending to work for Seymour Surveys, telephones housewives to ask them what kind of underwear they are wearing. Marian sees him as a victim of the advertisements, a man so bombarded by the subway girdle ads that his mind cracks under the strain and he searches in vain for the impossible rubberized woman he has come to love. His tastes in women thus parallel Peter's, which may be what inspires Marian's fantasy that Peter, paragon of superficiality, is in fact the Underwear Man:

Perhaps this was his true self, the core of his personality, the central Peter. . . . Perhaps this was what lay hidden under the surface, under the other surfaces, that secret identity which in spite of her many guesses and attempts and half-successes she was aware she has still not uncovered: he was really the Underwear Man.(p. 118)

In the light of Peter's utter hollowness, Marian's conjecture is fantasy indeed, and she can relate more readily to the Underwear Man's "perverted" interest in what lies beneath the slick suburban surface than she can to Peter's "normal" interest in what lies on top.

In the surrealistic existence where what is perverted seems normal and what is normal seems twisted, Marian's eccentric friend Duncan hardly appears out of place. Initially appearing to be part of her

problem, he is ultimately revealed to be part of the solution, for he acts as a guide to lead Marian through the labyrinth to her goal, her Self. The many identity games he instigates confuse and annoy her but also instruct her. Although she goes to his apartment to interview him for Seymour Surveys, she finds herself enacting the part of Goldilocks to his Baby Bear and, on another occasion, playing the role of Florence Nightingale to his dying Crimean soldier. Duncan indirectly makes the reader aware of Atwood's confidence as an artist, for she uses him to mock the very ideas being seriously presented in the novel. For instance, he tells Marian that he broke a mirror because "I got tired of being afraid I . . . wouldn't be able to see my reflection in it," then asserts that it was "a symbolic narcissistic gesture," changes tack and says "I've got my own private mirror. One I can trust . . ." and finally reduces the event to a simple desire to "break something." (pp. 139-140) His apparent assaults on Marian's identity throughout the novel are in reality assaults on the very nature of role-playing. He encourages her to act out and then recognize these roles; Atwood seems to be suggesting that it is not role-playing in itself which is bad but the failure to recognize the act. When Marian's "normal" world and "normal" friends begin to seem very strange to her, Duncan's eccentricities, like his compulsion to iron, begin to appear stable by contrast.

The climax of the novel, and of Marian's

identity crisis, is a party Peter throws. For it Marian molds herself into a stereotype of womanhood adored by critics and lovers alike, becoming, with Ainsley's experienced aid, the Dark Lady. Woman's position as the Other is graphically rendered as Marian is transmogrified into an Other Woman with a new hairdo, a new red dress and a face done by Ainsley. As she looks for some part of herself she can still call her own, like her arms, she sees them in the mirror changing before her eyes to "soft pinkish white rubber," (p. 229) indicating that she is becoming the thing she looks like: a doll.

Although even objects have a sort of integrity and autonomy, they are not indestructible and Marian fears fragmentation. "A dark doll" and "a fair doll" which sit on either side of her dresser mirror exert a disintegrative force upon the Marian in the middle:

The centre, whatever it was in the glass, the thing that held them together, would soon be quite empty. empty. By the strength of their [the dolls'] separate visions they were trying to pull her apart. (p. 219)

These two dolls represent the two traditional images of woman, goddess and temptress, Mary and Eve; Atwood is here embodying that schizophrenia with which every woman is familiar whereby she is placed both on a pedestal and in the gutter, untouchable and yet common property. It is not just that some women are whores and some goddesses but

that each woman is treated as both, even by the same man.(9) Ironically, marriage is often the neutralizer of this spell, after wedlock the woman becoming "just a wife." The preferable alternative to being a whore and/or a goddess is to be a multi-faceted, wholly integrated human being but being "pulled apart" is woman's more likely fate, as Atwood's mirrors illustrate so well.

What pulls Marian together, apart from the extremity of the situation, is the clear-sighted Duncan, who sees through her masquerade and forces her to question it, asking "Who the hell are you supposed to be?" (p. 239) He leaves Peter's party because "one of us would be sure to evaporate," thereby speaking to Marian's own fears. However, it is not this threat, but Peter's attempt to photograph and fix her in the present image forever which finally precipitates the action she has avoided taking throughout Part II. Marian runs away for good, finding Duncan at the laundromat--an appropriate point from which to begin afresh.

Duncan helps Marian iron herself out just as he has ironed her laundry for her. He guides her through the labyrinths of images to her real self, allowing her to play one last role before showing her that it is just a role. He pretends to be a virgin, and Marian, in a clinical spirit, tries to help, only to learn that he has in fact had prior sexual experience. The "nurse" walks out the door and Marian is free to begin to rebuild. Duncan's statement that

"Florence Nightingale was a cannibal" (p. 100) becomes meaningful: people feed and grow on such images of themselves. This last removal of illusion is symbolized by a trip Marian and Duncan make to the ravine at the heart of the city, "so close to absolute zero . . . as near as possible to nothing."(p.263) But if Duncan shows her the ravine, the death of self, he also shows her the way back, and at last she can meaningfully say "Now she knew where she was."(p.265)

Marian is no longer the edible woman, and to celebrate her liberation she bakes a cake. She rejects angel's food and devil's food as she rejects the images of the fair and dark dolls, selecting sponge cake as being more symbolic of her flaccid former self, and then she makes the titular edible woman, externalized and objectified in an acceptable way, an image of the self she has already rejected. "You look delicious," she tells the cake, "that's what you get for being food," (p. 270) meaning any woman who tarts herself up like this deserves to be consumed. Whereas she has earlier identified herself with a heart-shaped Valentine's Day cake which Peter eats with gusto after making love to her, she is no longer inviting or enduring any parallels.

In a written interview with Atwood, Graeme Gibson asks about the meaning of the cake, an issue that seems to have puzzled most readers and critics who perceive Marian's acts of making and

eating the cake as significant, whether as affirmation or negation. The term "cannibalism"(10) is often used, wrongly I think, since it is herself, a dis-carded self, she is eating. And do we call the self-consuming phoenix a cannibal? In response to Gibson's question, "Is she asserting herself in the baking of the cake . . .?" Atwood disingenuously replies, "I don't know, nobody's ever been able to figure that one out."(11) But seen in the light of Atwood's careful development of an image-identity dichotomy, eating the cake clearly symbolizes Marian's liberation from the bondage of the image.

To see if Peter will find this woman as delectable as he found her, Marian offers him a piece, but he is horrified at the idea because the image qua image has so much significance for him. Ainsley too is aghast, seeing in the edible woman real edible women, and accuses Marian of "rejecting [her] femininity," (p. 272) as though a cake could be a real woman. While she might allow herself to be gobbled up, Ainsley cannot eat the cake; where Peter could consume Marian, he cannot consume the cake. Duncan, knowing the difference between an image and an identity, between Marian and a cake, cheerfully joins her in eating the cake, just as he can cheerfully shatter a mirror. Marian can now transcend her dependence on mirrors and men and learn to eat again. Experience will serve to nourish not deplete her and her sense of self will enable her to

withstand that consumation which threatens every woman, that invitation to be grist, fodder, fuel for persons other than herself. She eats the cake because it is "just a cake." As the image is no longer potent, Peter has lost her and she has found herself. She has reached the other side of the looking glass.

Marian thus becomes one of the very few literary heroines to escape the doll's house without death or madness or inanition ensuing. The comic mode which generally dictates marriage as the happy ending, the heroine or hero's reward for suffering, is here reversed and the reward is freedom or liberation from the tender trap. The result is not tragedy: the reader who reads Marian as victim, who sees her final deeds as signifying nothing, may still be in bondage to the conditioned response that any woman unmarried at novel's end is somehow pathetic. Many heroines who marry retain their integrity in spite of and not because of their marriage. Jane Eyre, for instance, is admirable not because she finally catches a man but because she has already managed to survive and succeed without him; even Elizabeth Bennett of Pride and Prejudice is impressive not because she has managed to marry as her sisters have done, but because she marries on her own terms, without compromising herself. In other words, these women manage to marry and still retain their identities. With The Edible Woman Margaret Atwood provides a viable fictional alternative for those women who do not want to eat their cake and have it too.

NOTES

1. Toronto, 1969. Subsequent parenthetical page references are to this edition of The Edible Woman.
2. This metaphor is developed in Surfacing (Toronto, 1972), the humourless sequel to The Edible Woman, in which Atwood's nameless heroine plays no games or roles, wears no masks, projects no false or frivolous images. She is searching for the keys to her identity by stripping off the layers of culture and civilization, returning to nature, and attempting to understand the messages her unborn progeny and dead ancestors have for her. The same search goes on in many of Atwood's poems, "After the Flood, We," "The Landlady," "Astral Traveller," "Journey to the Interior," "A Night in the Royal Ontario Museum," and "This is A Photograph of Me" to name but a few.
3. Cf. Simone de Beauvoir: "[Women] is defined and differentiated with reference to man, and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute--she is the Other." From The Second Sex, translated and edited by H.M. Parshley (N.Y., 1964), p. xvi.
4. The phrase "turn into" reflects a mode of thought which Marian has inherited from her family, who have always feared that she would "turn into a high school teacher or a maiden aunt or a dope addict or a female executive," (p. 174) implying that what one becomes is not a logical extension of what one is, or a natural growth of character, but that an individual can undergo radical transformations, like Alice in Wonderland after obeying the "Eat me" note.
5. Ezra Pound, Collected Shorter Poems (London, 1968), p. 73.
6. Although written in 1965 The Edible Woman was not published until 1969 because the publisher lost the manuscript (according to a statement to the American publisher of Power Politics quoted by Joan Larkin in a review entitled "Soul Survivor," Ms., May 1973, p. 35). This may account for certain anachronistic elements readers complain of in the novel, "the office virgins" being a case in point.
7. He is, appropriately, a symbol-conscious theory-spouting utrophile named Fish. A Lawrentian diatribe he indulges in is indicative of his love for abstractions, particularly those pertaining to womankind: "We need a new Venus, a lush Venus of warmth and vegetation and generation, a new Venus, big-bellied, teeming with life, potential, about to give birth to a new world in all its plenitude, a new Venus rising from the sea. . . ." (p.200)
8. The psychologist Erik Erikson's observations on women and identity, for instance, suggest that a woman's identity is in suspension until she marries and bears children whereupon her "identity" becomes consolidated by her husband's and children's identities ("the doctor's mother," "the lawyer's wife"). (From "Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood," Daedalus 93 [1964], pp. 582-606). This attitude seems to me to pervert the entire notion of identity as something organic.