THE CANNIBALISTIC REDEMPTION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE EDIBLE WOMAN

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood’s novel, The Edible Woman (1969), is a fertile ground to analyze gender roles and the stereotypical artificial behavior prescribed for men and women to be seen as normal. The protagonist of the novel, Marian, feels herself entrapped by the codes of female perfection that consist of passivity beyond her fiancé, Peter, and shapes her body into a Barbie doll. Confronting such values of female perfection, Marian, together with her lover, Duncan, cannibalize a woman-shaped cake which symbolizes the codes of normality for the bodies and the behavior of men and women in western societies. Literary critics, such as Robert Doty, Margaret Miles, and Gina Wisker agree that being grotesque in the eyes of a perfectionist society is a possible way of salvation from being eaten by stereotypical values that predetermines what are the acceptable and unacceptable laws of male and female normal behavior which consists in female passivity vs. male domination.

Key Words: Grotesque, Feminism, Gender Roles

Resumo: O romance de Margaret Atwood, The Edible Woman [A mulher comestível], é uma obra rica de exemplos para analisar os papéis de gênero e o estereotipado comportamento artificial prescrito para homens e mulheres serem considerados normais. A protagonista, Marian, se sente enclausurada por códigos de perfeição feminina que consistem em ser passiva diante de seu noivo, Peter, e tornar-se atraente ao olhar masculino como se ela fosse uma boneca Barbie. Confrontando tais valores de perfeição feminina, Marian, juntamente com seu amante Duncan, canibalizam um bolo no formato de uma mulher que representa os códigos de normalidade que o comportamento e o corpo de homens e de mulheres devem obedecer em sociedades ocidentais. Críticos literários como Robert Doty, Margaret Miles e Gina Wisker acreditam que tornando-se grotesco aos olhos da
sociedade perfeccionista é um caminho possível de salvação para não ser devorado pelos valores estereotipados que predeterminam o que é aceitável e inaceitável nas leis que regem o comportamento de homens e mulheres, sendo a passividade uma qualidade feminina e o poder uma qualidade masculina.

**Palavras-Chave:** Grotesco, Feminismo, Papéis de gênero

The renowned author and literary critic Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada, in 1939. Her father was an entomologist and, partly because of that, she spent most of her early life surrounded by Canadian forests in northern Ontario and Quebec. Atwood is one of Canada’s most eminent writers and has published more than forty books including fiction, poetry, critical essays on literature and books for children that are illustrated by her. Most of Atwood’s work has been translated into more than thirty-five languages, suggesting that she is internationally well respected as a writer and as an artist.

Atwood is known worldwide for her works that provide reflections on marriage, guilt, memory, violence, relationship between the sexes, and gender roles in patriarchal societies. Atwood disrupts the classic feminine and masculine stereotypes, questioning, above all, the victimization of women. A common trait of her fiction is the portrayal of female protagonists that begin in a passive position towards the society in which they live, behaving in accordance with the prevailing codes for feminine behavior that are imposed upon them. As the narrative goes on, such female protagonists go through a process of self-recognition that ends with their confrontation to the stereotypical feminine roles they had been playing, thus, questioning them.

Some of the Atwoodian female characters develop grotesque characteristics as a means of reacting against their patriarchal society. The theory of the grotesque proves to be a fertile ground for the development of a feminist criticism, that questions representations and pre-established models of behavior for women. Refusing the status of an object of male desire, such female protagonists rebel against societal impositions, and gender-based stereotypes, by behaving in a
grotesque way in order to dismantle the conquering strategies of a patriarchal society. These female characters who reject the role and rules of feminine behavior imposed on them as “normal” carry the desire for freedom and redemption which are responsible for their change. In other words, some of these female characters find salvation from their gender-role imprisonment by responding grotesquely.

According to Robert Doty, one of the elements that characterizes the grotesque is “a clash of elements, an obsession with opposites which force the coexistence of the beautiful with the repulsive, the sublime with the gross, humor with horror, the organic with the mechanical” (DOTY, 1969, p. 6). On the same line of thought, the feminist critic Margaret Miles believes that the grotesque is difficult to be defined but it is possible to be categorized as caricature, inversion, and hybridization (MILES, 1997, p. 96). She also believes that the condition of being a woman in a patriarchic society is part of the problematization of considering a character as monstrous. In her words, “I hesitate to participate in this time-honored academic dynamic, but find it difficult to make my point without demonstrating that former definitions of the grotesque have missed one of its crucial components; namely, the essential role of gender in creating the quality of grotesqueness” (Miles, 1997, p. 89). In this light, she understands that women are bound to be the grotesque counterpart of men, who are the ones that society has empowered as perfect.

Taking into consideration that the grotesque is always the reverse element of a prevailing norm in society, *The Edible Woman* has a love triangle that is shaped by characters who carry the image and behavior of what is stereotypically seen as models of perfection and imperfection. This juxtaposition of opposites seems to ground the theory of the grotesque in which beauty (whatever beauty is for a certain society) clashes with what is considered ugly. Aware of these problematic definitions, Atwood introduces elements of male and female perfection, according to patriarchal stereotypical values, against which the ugly and the beautiful would contrast (267).
The protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, Marian, finds herself linked to two opposite male options. The “beautiful” specimen comes shaped as Peter, Marian’s Prince-Charming fiancé. The other is Peter’s opponent, which comes in the form of Duncan, Marian’s somber lover. Peter is a 26-year-old lawyer who is successfully developing his career. It is interesting that Atwood portrays both, Duncan and Peter with the same age: twenty-six (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 64). Peter plays the part of the correct character. Concerned with the rules that society has to obey, Peter is portrayed as a lawyer. Duncan, whose family name is not even mentioned, is undefined in every aspect of his being. Peter is punctual to his appointments, clean in his appearance, perfect as an ideal boyfriend and has the necessary adjectives that qualify an idealized man for a woman who belongs to a traditional patriarchal society: Peter is rich, loyal and handsome. Duncan is the very opposite of Peter: he has no job, he does not even have a degree, he is not to be trusted and his body resembles a cadaver because he is extremely thin.

The description of the Peter–Marian–Duncan love triangle works as a device used in the narrative to support their status of normality and grotesqueness in a society that embraces perfection. Peter is the one who is surely aware of what he wants in life: financial success and a submissive beautiful wife to conform to the stereotypically perfect married couple image. Duncan knows only that he does not want to belong to this flawless world of Peter’s. At this starting level of the narrative in which Marian relates to both men, she does not know whether she embraces the feminine role of a married life or will try an alternative female option outside patriarchal rules.

The narrative shows that Peter is very concerned with his appearance. In his bedroom there is a cupboard door with a full-length mirror, suggesting that he is a vain person. At the moment Marian enters his home, from the den’s door she smells – “Peter’s smell” – which consists of soap and cologne. Peter, as Marian says, is constantly taking a shower and his smell is associated with dentist’s chairs and medicine. In one scene, Marian arrives at Peter’s apartment while Peter is in
the shower. He asks Marian to prepare a gin and tonic for him and she promptly goes to his kitchen. She knows where everything is in his well-stocked liquor shelf, and knows that he never forgets to refill the ice-cube trays (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 61). Marian returns to the bathroom with his drink, and as she sees Peter naked she realizes that he is just like the bathroom: clean, white and new. She touches Peter’s arm and sees that the hairs are not in a mess but arranged in rows and his skin is unusually smooth for a man’s. According to her, people notice Peter “not because he had forceful or peculiar features, but because he was ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 61). From the above examples, it can be inferred that Peter is caricaturized as the stereotypical icon of male perfection. He resembles the male figure of Barbie dolls: Ken. He is not shy when displaying his positive features in public such as his neatly organized apartment and his collection of pens, weapons and cameras. It is possible to make a connection with the projection of male belongings that actually work as phallic symbols. The display of Peter’s collection of pens, weapons and cameras can be seen as a device of harsh exposure of his power and maleness towards Marian. He does not stow such belongings in a case or in a closed cupboard. On the contrary, Peter wants everybody to look at his weapons, cameras, and pens as if he has the need to show his power.

Being Peter’s counterfoil inverted image, Duncan is not really concerned with his health. He eats indiscriminately all kinds of junk food, such as beer and chocolate, besides eating a considerable amount of food that are rich in cholesterol such as ham and eggs. In addition to his bad eating habits, Duncan is a compulsive smoker and when trying to cut down the number of cigarettes, he eats pumpkin seeds or chocolates, to make up for the addiction to nicotine. His body does not follow the patterns of an attractive male body, exemplified by Peter’s healthy habits and well built body, mainly perceptible in Duncan’s unhealthy eating habits and lack of concern about his outfits. The “unromantic” things he says and does to Marian help to shape Duncan as a reverse
of what is expected in an attractive male character. Peter tells Marian stereotypical complimentary sentences that are usually said by a gentleman to his future wife. On the other hand, Duncan teases Marian, saying that she looks awful, due to her anorexia problem, and Marian fiercely replies: “you’re not exactly the picture of health yourself” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 256).

The first time Marian sees Duncan, when visiting his apartment for the beer research she is working on, her impression of him is that of a cadaver. Later on, at a museum scene, Duncan compares himself to a mummy and tells Marian that he would like to be a mummy who is eternalized in a skeleton shape. He tells her that he thinks he would like to live forever and not have to “worry with Time anymore.” Marian does not enjoy seeing mummies and she finds Duncan’s fascination with them odd. She instantly imagines her hand touching him and his body crumbling to dust like a mummified corpse. Such an image drives her to say that he is being morbid and Duncan immediately replies, as in warning: “Don’t take me seriously” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 187). In the eyes of Marian, Duncan is “cadaverously thin”. He answers the door of his jammed and dirty apartment barefoot and wearing no shirt, showing that his ribs “stuck out like those of an emaciated figure in a medieval wood cut.” His skin is colorless and his melancholic eyes, with black circles around them, are partly hidden by a rumpled mass of straight black hair. Unsure of his age, and having to interview adult men for a beer questionnaire, she asks: “Are you really fifteen?,” which makes him reply dolefully: “I’m twenty-six” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 48-9). Considering such imprecise answer, Marian understands that he is not supposed to be trusted. Despite that, Marian feels attracted to him.

The closer Marian gets to her wedding with Peter, the more she erases her identities in order to please her husband-to-be. Marian understands that Peter sees her “as the kind of girl who wouldn’t try to take over his life” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 61). She plays the role of a passive woman who obeys the orders of her husband. The more passive Marian becomes, the more she resembles a
Barbie doll. At the day of her engagement party, Peter asks Marian to buy a new dress and gets one that is “short, red, and sequined” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 208) shaping herself in accordance to what the patriarchal consumerist society in which she lives in dictates to be appropriate for a beautiful woman to wear. After that, she goes to the beauty salon to have her hair done and she feels like a doll being manufactured. In the voice of the narrator of the novel, Marian “looked sideways down the assembly-line of women seated in identical mauve chairs under identical whirring mushroom-shaped machines. All that was visible was a row of strange creatures with legs of various shapes and hands that held magazines and heads that were metal domes” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 209-210). The other women appeared to her as if they were amorphous aliens. Marian buys a dress that she does not like and arranges her hair in a way that she thinks it is “extreme for” her (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 210) just to please society and Peter. When she looks at herself in the mirror, she understands that she has eliminated her identities and corrupted her beliefs in order to please her fiancé, as she puts it: “Peter will probably like it. Anyway, it will go with the dress” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 211). It is interesting to perceive that Atwood compares the doors of the beauty salon to a box of chocolates, suggesting that Marian has finally become edible in the eyes of men. The narrator remarks that “she [Marian] had walked through that gilded chocolate-box door of her own free will and this was the consequence and she had better accept it” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 210-211).

At this point of the narrative it is implied that people, men and women, accept their rolls in society with free will, in other words, they force themselves into a mold of perfection that shapes them into perfect people; with perfect bodies, and perfect behavior, according to their artificial rules of behavior. In the middle of her engagement party Marian understands that she is becoming somebody else that is not what she intends to be: a passive housewife who obeys the orders of her husband. Decided not to be food in the consumerist society that she is inserted, Marian runs away
from Peter’s apartment in the middle of the engagement party and decides to fabricate a substitute of her that will suffer the consequences of being edible in society: a woman-shaped cake.

Marian buys fresh ingredients to bake a cake. The trick is that this cake will be in the shape of woman. She refuses to be a victim and makes a substitute of herself. As the narrator describes the process:

She [Marian] took the cake off the sill, felt it to see if it was cool enough, and put it on the kitchen table. Then she began to operate. […] The spongy cake was pliable, easy to mould. She stuck all the separate members together with white icing, and used the rest of the icing to cover the shape she had constructed. […] Now she had a blank white body. It looked slightly obscene, lying there soft and sugary and featureless on the platter. She set about clothing it, filling the cake-decorator with bright pink icing. […] She made a smiling lush-lipped pink mouth and pink shoes to match. Finally she put five pink fingernails on each of the amorphous hands. The cake looked peculiar with only a mouth and no hair or eyes. She rinsed out the cake-decorator and filled it with chocolate icing. She drew a nose, and two large eyes, to which she appended many eyelashes and two eyebrows, one above each eye. For emphasis she made a line demarcating one leg from the other, and similar lines to separate the arms from the body. The hair took longer. It involved masses of intricate baroque scrolls and swirls, piled high on the head and spilling down over her shoulders. The eyes were still blank. She decided on green – the only other possibilities were red and yellow, since they were the only other colours she had – and with a toothpick applied two irises of green food-colouring” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 269).

The excerpt above illustrates many aspects of this new Marian who decides to speak for herself in order to refuse the stereotypical feminine values that have been oppressing her. The cake evokes the image of that Marian who leaves the beauty salon as if she were a chocolate candy to be eaten. Here, the verb “to eat” someone has a double meaning: to destroy another person or the taboo expression to have sexual intercourse with someone. The way Marian dresses herself for the engagement party and the way she dresses the woman-shaped cake are actually female models of perfection that serve men and has a passive position towards society; Barbie dolls who do not think for themselves. This new Marian rejects such values of female perfection and creates a double of herself, the cake. Instead of being food for this consumerist society in which she lives in, Marian makes a substitute to preserve her identities.

Feeling like Doctor Frankenstein who has just finished creating her monster, Marian
understands that now, in the male gaze, she is the one who is going to be seen as a repulsive figure because she no longer wants to be used. In case Peter wants to “eat” a perfect woman, he will need to satisfy himself with the woman-shaped cake. As the following excerpt indicates:

“You look delicious,” she [Marian] told her [the cake]. “Very appetizing. And that’s what will happen to you; that’s what you get for being food.” […] Peter was not the enemy after all, he was just a normal human being, like most other people. […] She [Marian] went into the kitchen and returned, bearing the platter in front of her, carefully and with reverence, as though she was carrying something sacred in a procession, an icon or the crown on a cushion in a play. She knelt, setting the platter on the coffee-table in front of Peter. “You’ve [Peter] been trying to destroy me, haven’t you,” she said. You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn’t it? I’ll get you a fork,” she added somewhat prosaically. Peter stared from the cake to her face and back again. She wasn’t smiling. His eyes widened in alarm. Apparently he didn’t find her silly” (ATWOOD, 1999, p. 271).

It is paramount to observe that Marian sets the living room to perform her ritualistic act of cannibalizing the oppressive pattern of femininity, which is the woman-shaped cake. She is not in the kitchen, which is the stereotypical place for a woman to be. She does not offer Peter a plate together with regular silverware but only a fork, as if he has to help Marian to destroy an icon of oppression. No wonder that the narrative ends up with Peter fleeing from Marian’s apartment and the woman-shaped cake being eaten by Marian and Duncan, the ones who do not believe in stereotypes of male and female perfection.

Despite being published during the second feminist wave, in 1969, The Edible Woman still brings to light the issue of the female body being used for the pleasure of the male gaze and the issue of women having to acquire a submissive position towards men to be seen as “normal”. The literary critic Gina Wisker says that Atwood’s work “deals with everyday life, expresses forms of perception and demystifies the stereotypes, the personal, national or gendered myths and representations through which we conceive and manage our lives” (WISKER, 2012, p. 4). Even people who read The Edible Woman with their twenty-first century eyes and preconceptions, Atwood “continues to engage with issues of human behavior, the paradoxes and delights of living the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, being female, postcolonial, Canadian, and also questioning limiting representations of gender, nationality and identity (WISKER, 2012, p. 5). Atwood is, indeed, a keen observer of society and the gender roles that put people in a behavior straightjacket.
in order to mold people into supposedly normal beings.

Acting in a grotesque way, in a symbolic act of cannibalism, Marian rescues herself from being food for a consumerist society with predetermined roles for men and women to follow in order to be considered as acceptable. The constraints of female roles that force women in Western societies to behave accordingly to patriarchal values is fiercely questioned at the moment Marian finds a new way of life outside the oppressive male ruled world. At the same time some men, like Peter, might think Marian has lost her mind when cannibalizing the Barbie doll-shaped cake, their counterpart male representatives, such as Duncan, might see Marian as fighting for her own freedom.

References:


Margaret Atwood is a poet and novelist who seems to be able to do anything she wants." -Newsweek. "A pleasure." -Canadian Forum. "[Atwood is] a subtle and penetrating observer of relationships between men and women." -Sunday Times. "Delightful - spare, precise, mordantly witty. Exquisitely written." -Journal of Canadian Fiction. "[Atwood] knows exactly what she is doing with every phrase." -Vancouver Sun. Books by margaret atwood. Fiction. The Edible Woman (1969). Surfacing (1972). Lady Oracle (1976). You may think weâ€™ve reached Atwood market-saturation, but turns out Atwood market-saturation just doesnâ€™t exist. Today, Variety reported that the rights to Margaret Atwoodâ€™s brilliant 1969 debut novel, The Edible Woman, have been picked up by Entertainment One. The adaptation will be executive produced by Francine Zuckerman of Z Films and Karen Shaw of Quarterlife Crisis Productions. In case you havenâ€™t read Atwoodâ€™s debut, hereâ€™s how her publisher describes it: Ever since her engagement, the strangest thing has been happening to Marian McAlpin: she canâ€™t eat. First meat. Then eggs, vegetables Like many of Atwoodâ€™s other works, The Edible Woman (1969) and Lady Oracle (1976) are explicitly concerned with the complexities of body image. More specifically, however, these novels usefully exemplify her attempt to demystify the female form. Taken together, these subject matters demonstrate how the body â€ feedsâ€™ identity and how a womanâ€™s corporeal experience directly influences her cultural experience. Through a close engagement with recent theories of embodiment, I analyse the extent to which Atwoodâ€™s fiction might dismantle culturally-encoded concepts of femininity and propose a useful corrective to traditional readings of the female body in which the re-embodiment of the self is equated to a re-embodiment of culture.