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THE DESIRE FOR TRANSFORMATION: A STUDY OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CLOTHES IN ATWOOD'S FICTION

by

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Abstract

Description of women characters' garments occupies an important place in Margaret Atwood's fiction: Clothes construct a woman's personality to such an extent that they form a major key to one of the main themes of Atwood's fiction, namely, that of women's identity quest.

Society has particular, although implicit and ambiguous, codes as regards its members' sartorial behavior. Maternal figures implant society's clothes standards in women's minds in their childhood and mass-media advocate traditionally feminine clothes along with conventional images of femininity. Some Atwood women characters, like Marian MacAlpine in *The Edible Woman*, conform to the sartorial rules in order to survive in society. Elizabeth Shoenhof, in *Life Before Man*, uses the clothes values to assert her superiority over other people, who are less informed of sartorial regulations.

Clothes both restrict and liberate the wearer. *The Handmaid's Tale's* narrator describes her life confined in the red uniform and the role of a Handmaid which the dress defines. Imposed costumes, like childhood clothes and sartorial gifts, not as obviously limiting as uniforms, can be unpleasant and restricting when the images they envoke contradict the wearer's self-image. *Surfacing's narrator*, feeling uneasy under the pressure to conform to the clothes codes, struggles to cast off her artificial self by throwing away her garments. Some other women characters, like Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, attempt to liberate themselves from social convention, by assuming eccentric and/or assertive costumes. They hope to create new, more congenial images, by changing their wardrobe. Their efforts, however, are not successful; because the women, unable to go beyond their society's ideas about women, try to utilize the existing images of femininity, they end up being confined within the new roles their dresses prescribe. The same social and sartorial systems from which they wish to escape trap them.

However, Atwood's fiction invites the reader to further the characters' quest and to explore the new possible modes of living and thinking they glimpse at in the narratives.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

> That's my technique, I resurrect myself through clothes. In fact it's impossible for me to remember what I did, what happened to me, unless I can remember what I was wearing, and every time I discard a sweater or a dress I am discarding a part of my life. I shed identities like a snake, leaving them pale and shrivelled behind me, a trail of them, and if I want any memories at all I have to collect, one by one, those cotton and wool fragments, piece them together, achieving at last a patchwork self, no defence anyway against the cold. I concentrate, and this particular lost soul rises miasmic from the Crippled Civilians' Clothing Donation Box in the Loblaws parking lot in downtown Toronto, where I finally ditched that coat (106).[1]

The passage above from "Hair Jewellery," which is a first-person narrative by a thoughtful and self-reflective woman, summarises some aspects of clothes enlarged on in Atwood's writing. Clothes are so much a part of one's life, of one's personality, that one may reconstruct one's past life by referring to what one was wearing on particular occasions. One can also transform herself by changing her clothes, or at least can discard those parts of her life which have been represented by the clothes which are being cast off. This ease with which clothes can transform one's personality, however, emphasizes the fragility and unreliability of a woman's identity. Identity is at its best a "patchwork" of fragments of approved images. Also clothes are no more reliable than one's identity is; they are no real protection.

There are more aspects to clothes. They are used as standards by which to judge or evaluate other people. They are put on to show one's social status or to gain self-confidence. While imposed dresses diminish one's freedom in activity and thinking, at the same time adding to the enforcer's sense of control, changing one's dress develops a new identity and thus some women seek new possibilities in their lives by assuming new garments.

Clothing is a big part of a person's identity, whether female or male, since dress "links the biological body to the social being, and public to private."[2] It is a fact, however, that women are more aware of its implications, probably because women as caretakers of

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[1] Margaret Atwood, *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* (1977; Toronto: Seal Book, 1977) 106. All the quotations from Atwood's works are from the corresponding paperback edition.

[2] Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago Press, 1985) 2.

families have been more directly engaged in supplying clothes as well as food to their family members. Also the position of women as men's property or ornament has made their appearance more important than men's.

The passage quoted above from one of Margaret Atwood's short stories points out the importance of clothing in a woman's search for identity, a chief concern of women's writing. In pursuing this theme, women writers heavily rely on the description of clothes and food, which comprise a major part of the life of their protagonists, who are mostly female. Atwood's novels share with the other women writers' works the theme of identity search by women and the concern with clothing and food in women's lives. The minute and pervasive description of clothes in her writing is certainly one major key to the problem of the protagonists' identity quest.

The purpose of my thesis is to explore portraits of and references to clothes in Atwood's six novels in relation to women's identity quest, linking this topic to other themes of her fiction, such as consumerism and the link between sex and violence. The discussion will cover four topics: conformity to society's rules of clothing, childhood education in clothes, imposed dresses, and transformation through change of clothing. The final objective is to see how much clothing restricts women's lives and how far women can possibly go by reversing the controlling relationship between the wearer and the clothes, that is, by using clothing to create their new selves instead of letting clothes define them.

Chapter One

In Atwood's novels, what characters are wearing often determines other characters' evaluation of, reaction to, and treatment of them. Characters' self-image is also frequently expressed and/or defined by their garments. Atwood, however, does not simplistically represent the standards of judgement, the sartorial codes which these characters use as the basis of their evaluation. Rather, Atwood sees these rules as ambiguous and changeable, easily influenced by the setting and the relationships of the characters. This complexity enables Atwood to use description of clothes as one major key to the way people think and act.

Each society has a particular set of values and rules related to clothing; for example, "every society has its own conception of modest dress and behavior,"[3] youthfulness in dress appreciated in one period is despised in another,[4] and the average clothing is different between the urban and the rural area.[5] In some societies, white-collar workers are required to wear a suit and tie or a jacket and skirt on all business occasions; in others, only those in higher positions in companies or bank and insurance clerks wear ties and/or jackets in summer. In some cultures, swimwear or jogging pants on the main street are subject to chastisement by policemen; in others, they are admissable or even regarded as healthy and youthful. Some people regard expenditure on clothes as a virtue; others, as vanity or vulgarity. All this difference does not arise so much from diffrences in material conditions such as local climate or living standards as from ideological conditions. For example, although the climate of England has changed little in the last hundred years, the English ideas of what women should wear before and after marriage have considerably shifted. In the 1900s, single girls wore concealing dresses whereas married women featured evening dresses which exposed and

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[3] Ina Corrine Brown, "What Shall We Wear" in *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order*, eds. Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher (New York, London and Sydney: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965) 10. Also see J.C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), the chapter on Modesty (pp. 53-67).

[4] Alison Lurie comments that at some periods in history youthfulness in fashion is appreciated and at others dressing older than one's own age is praised. See *The Language of Clothes* (New York: Vintage books, 1981), 60.

[5] For example, see Lurie's comparison of the British urban and rural clothing in *The Language of Clothes* 101-105.

accentuated their plump arms and bosoms:

> [Nowadays] Well-bred girls go dancing in revealing costumes of neon red, orange and green. Their mothers, on the other hand, wear modestly-cut party clothes in the same limited range of colors they favor for day: brown, tan, black, white and pale or navy blue. One possible reason for this change is that there has been a shift in sexual morality. Aristocratic Edwardians, though they paid lip service to virtue and demanded virginity before marriage, condoned a discreet promiscuity afterwards. Today well-born young women...are tacitly allowed to sleep around and even live around a bit before marriage. After the wedding, however, they are expected to behave themselves or get out.[6]

Of course it cannot be denied that material conditions can considerably influence people's attitude. When society is generally poor, expensive garments point to one's affluence. But whether to interpret this display as gorgeous or arrogant depends on people's ideology. Among the aristocrats, extravagance was a virtue which exhibited their difference from, and dominance over, the common flock. The bourgeoisie, a class which gained power in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century in Europe, have advocated decency as opposed to the aristocrats' outrageous taste.[7] Decency is being inconspicuous and in harmony with one's social setting. Decency is a bourgeois value, which seems relatively independent of monetary limitations; one can be decent without being wealthy. Propriety is also a bourgeois standard, which dictates how much money and attention one should devote to garments. The other measure is good taste, which good education--itself a symbol of affluence--can give. Good taste attests to interests in, and spare time for, something other than making and spending money. These values--decency, propriety and good taste--interact in the attitudes and behavior of Atwood's characters, who are mostly from the middle-class, prosperous and well-educated and whose choice of clothes is directed by the bourgeois clothes values.

These sartorial codes shape people's choice of clothes: the rules control people by first controlling their appearance and then restricting their ideas and feelings through the control of appearnce. Though rules and values about clothes are not written down or explicit nor are they constant through history, they are as effective as the written law in upholding the status quo. The British historian Thomas Carlyle's remark in the 1830's that "Society is founded

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[6] Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* 252.

[7] For the history of bourgeois clothing values and the bourgeois principle of decency, see Elizabeth Wilson's argument in *Adorned in Dreams* 24-35.

upon Cloth"[8] is still true of today's society. Whereas the law uses soldiers and policemen as its agents, social rules are supported by the general population, who appraise, classify and censor each other on the basis of clothing; as Mary Ellen Roach argues, "Clothing is a criterion or symbol employed by individuals in assessing the status of others."[9] Not all the Atwood heroines are clearly aware of this role of clothes. Some of them, like Marian of *The Edible Woman*, vaguely follow their social "instinct" (actually "lessons" implanted by their mothers and other grown-ups) just because they feel they should, to be on the safe side. Some, like Elizabeth in *Life Before Man*, are very conscious of the way the rules work and even try to take advantage of them. Others, like the narrator of *Surfacing* halfway through the narrative, dislike being controlled by the rules but feel powerless under the pressure to conform. This chapter will examine how Atwood's characters deal with these standards, that is, how they conform and how they use the code to evaluate other characters. In *Life Before Man*, Elizabeth Shoenhof, one of the three central characters who are also narrators, shows a strong, almost obsessive desire to control her world. Elizabeth's fashionable, neat outfits show her desire for control and order: "a black turtleneck pullover, a straight black skirt, a mauve slip, a beige brassiere with a front closing, and a pair of pantyhose, the kind that come in plastic eggs" (4). Black is a chic color, "the color of bourgeois sobriety."[10] It also heightens the good taste and social status manifest in the simple form of her dress; in our society, well-off wives favor "comfortable, practical clothes [which] always turn out to have been bought very recently from the most expensive shops."[11] Black projects the person rather than the dress and makes the wearer look serious. Mauve is a feminine color, signifying Elizabeth's sexual maturity and elegance just as her "flowered skirt (new, mauve tone...)" (240) does. Both black and mauve, moreover, were popular colors in the seventies, the period in which the novel was set. Elizabeth's costumes, like the pantyhoses in egg-shaped capsules which are more expensive than those in flat plastic bags but not as costly as those by brand designers,

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[8] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34; London: the Curwen Press, 1931) 63.
[9] Mary Ellen Roach, "Clothing and the American Family" in *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order* 84.
[10] Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* 189.
[11] Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* 117.

usually imply her middle-class values and habits which along with her principle of neatness are her legacy from Auntie Muriel, her childhood guardian.

Everything Elizabeth purchases has to be in good taste; it helps her to feel that her world is in good order and she is respectable. Her furniture is one example of this criterion:

> There are three bowls on the sideboard, pinkish mauve, porcelain, Kayo's, he's one of the best. She's confident in her taste, she knows enough to have earned that confidence.... She wouldn't have anything in this room that was not a good piece (16).

The bowls are empty; they have no practical value. But their good appearance testifies to her good taste, which "alone is sufficient to endow a person with high status" in today's society.[12] Whereas Auntie Muriel's love of order and control made her value decency, Elizabeth's measure is good taste. She shows contempt for people who merely follow the sartorial conventions; they are, in her eyes, endowed with no originality, while Elizabeth herself can build something of her own on these customs.

Neatness is the principle of Elizabeth's life. Though her marriage to Nate is hardly in good shape, their life is well organized. Both have extramarital affairs with each other's explicit consent, and Elizabeth even makes arrangements for their adulterous rendez-vous: Thursdays for Elizabeth and her lover Chris Beecham, Saturdays for Nate and Martha; she allows no irregular phone calls or unexpected visits to disturb their family life with the two children. For Nate, marrying and living with Elizabeth has meant internalizing numerous rules of hers and observing them, even in the minutest occurrences of everyday life.

Elizabeth's ostensibly calm surface, however, hides her other, demonic side, vented in reckless sexual adventures begun in her adolescence to protest Auntie Muriel's suffocating dominance. Although her aventures have taken a more rational form after her marriage to Nate, the violence in Elizabeth's psychology shows in her encounter with the underwear salesman, with "a suitcase full of crotchless underpants, a halo of sleazy joy,"(207) whom Elizabeth compares to safer lovers, "the friends of friends, the husbands of friends, well-tailored, predictable" (207).

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[12] Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang "Fashion: Identification and Differentiation in the Mass Society," in *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order* 343.

Chris, the last of her lovers, kills himself as a desperate bid for independence. Throughout their affair she has forced upon his territory her kind of order while refusing to let him affect her surroundings. In the end she has decided to reject him so that her world will not lose its superficial harmony. Chris emphasizes his grudge against Elizabeth by playing out the drama of suicide in formal wear, "a suit and tie, a white shirt"(8), which ironically challenges Elizabeth's obsession with formality and propriety.[13] Chris' suicide obviously shakes her neat world. Uncertainty has entered her world, despite her efforts to shut it out. It seems to her as if her world is falling apart and being sucked into "the black vacuum on the other side"(3) of the walls.

Immediately after Chris has killed himself, her husband, Nate, leaves her for Lesje, a younger woman who is her colleague. However, even this classically miserable position--her lover has commited suicide because of her and her husband walks out upon her to start a new life with a young woman--cannot totally destroy Elizabeth.[14] She stays in character to the end.[15] The death of Auntie Muriel, following the disclosure of the weaker side of this formidable old woman whose harshness has long been Elizabeth's support, does not deprive her of her sense of control over herself and the world. Her sense of personal chaos does not increase as the story develops and her desire for order is as much in force at the end as ever. She still has a world to preserve:

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[13] Davidsons, "With his subsequent suicide, Chris makes a final conclusion to the rituals of the civilized." See their article "Prospects and Retrospects in *Life Before Man*" in *The Art of Margaret Atwood; Essays in Criticism* eds. Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson (Toronto: Anansi, 1981) 210. See also Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood: Feminist Poetics* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1984) 87.

[14] Davidsons comment on Elizabeth's position as "Abandoned lover in one triangle, betrayed wife in the other" but also say that "even in her initial, passive, helpless role, we see that Elizabeth possesses an almost indomitable strength that soon separates her from the earlier heroines." "Prospects and Restrospects in *Life Before Man*," *The Art of Margaret Atwood* 217.

[15] Sherrill E. Grace and Ildiko de Papp Carrinagton agres that Elizabeth does not change throughout the story, though Grace's interpretation is negative and Carrington's is positive. Grace finds Elizabeth at the end of the novel "still as alone as she was in the opening parageraph, still longing for paradise, and still rooted in daily reality." "'Time Present and Time Past': *Life Before Man*," *ECW* 20 (1981), 168. Carrington sees Elizabeth as supporting the structure of the novel. "Elizabeth's experiences structure the novel." "Demons, Doubles, and Dinosaurs: *Life Before Man*, The Origin of Consciousness and the 'Icicle.'" *ECW* 33 (1986): 71.

> she's still alive, she wears clothes, she walks around, she holds down a job, even. She has two children..... Her house is not perfect; parts of it are in fact crumbling, most noticeably the front porch. But it's a wonder that she has a house at all, that she's managed to accomplish a house. Despite the wreckage. She's built a dwelling over the abyss, but where else was there to build it? So far, it stands (278).

Elizabeth's view may sound too self-complacent. She may be overvaluing her achievement. Her world is, in fact, in much worse condition than at the beginning of the novel. However, Elizabeth is not blind to this fact, the precariousness of this world. Because she has been all along aware of the danger of losing her balance and letting reality overwhelm her, she has set rules of orderliness to prevent the mental avalanche. Indeed, Elizabeth's strength comes from the realization that the world is, if one does not watch out, always about to fall apart.[16] "She has no difficulty seeing the visible world as a transparent veil or a whirlwind. The miracle is to make it solid" (278). She is determined to accomplish this "miracle," or at least never to give up. She is trying to arrange the world around her and make the order visible; she is an arranger of her own and other people's lives, just as she is a professional arranger of the lifeless objects in the Royal Ontario Museum. Her position at the ROM reflects her position in real life--that of an arranger of people whom she wishes to be as static,[17] as passive and as easy to handle as the fossils of the ROM.

Marian MacAlpine, in *The Edible Woman*, shows a similar taste in clothing, that is, a preference for sensible and repectable clothes. The difference between Marian and Elizabeth is that whereas Elizabeth has a clear view of the world and knows what she wants to do with it, Marian has "no really strong views on anything"[18] or definite desires; she has no philosophy of her own. Marian feels and uses the power of clothes but hardly analyses the social code. If she appears to be diffident to the reader from time to time, it is because she has no particular

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[16] Sharon Jeannotte notes that "Elizabeth is the most powerful character in the book, although not without limitations of her own. She is the only one who sees the ambiguity of human relationships, and she uses this knowledge to manipulate reality to suit her needs." "Tension between the Mundane and the Cosmic." *Sphinx* 3.(4) (1986): 77.

[17] Ildiko de Papp Carrington points out the "stasis" of Elizabeth's chapters. "Demons, Doubles, and Dinosaurs" *ECW* 33 (1986): 71.

[18] Sheila Page criticizes Marian, saying that "although she perceives the hypocrisy and unreality of much of society, she still accepts it." "Supermarket Survival: A Critical Analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*." *Sphinx* 1 (1974): 9.

goals, not because she is uncertain.

Marian is a sensible girl, good at avoiding or solving predicaments. She is a proper woman, unassertive and eager to please other people. Marian's wardrobe is as sensible and as proper as its owner. Her dresses harmonize with her setting while unobtrusively proclaiming her social, economical and educational status. She sallies out to conduct interviews for her market research company in a carefully chosen outfit; "Then I dressed in an outfit suitable for interviewing, an official-looking skirt, a blouse with sleeves, and a pair of low-heeled walking shoes" (43). She has a set of clothes for every possible occasion of life, and her choice of outfit for the day is decided not by her present mood or whim but by the suitability of the dress to her activity. Even her laundromat-going has to be done in a special costume, that is, her "laundromat clothes--denims, sweatshirts, and a pair of plaid running shoes"(93). For shopping, she thinks "a plain grey wool [will] be appropriate"(274).

Marian's concern with propriety is underlined by her roommate, Ainsley, a self-proclaimed feminist, who comments on Marian's choice of wardrobe as protective, conservative and boring. Ainsley's remark "[You] choose clothes as though they're a camouflage or a protective coloration",(12) emphasizes Marian's attitude to clothes as social protection. Proper clothes, in Marian's eyes, protect one from the calumny of society, which she depicts " as a group of middle-aged ladies in evening dress" (74), an image attesting to her sense that she belongs to the prosperous middle class. Alison Lurie comments on the link between clothes as a camouflage and social success; "the better camouflaged people are, ...the more successful they generally prove to be."[19] The view of clothes as protection is shared by Duncan, with "his head drawn down into the neck of his dark sweater like a turtle's into its shell"(97). Duncan, seeing Marian in her afterwork outfit, remarks "without that official shell you look sort of --exposed"((5). In *Life Before Man*, similarly, when Elizabeth's world is disturbed by Chris's death, she feels exposed, stripped of her protective shell:

> I live like a peeled snail...: I want a shell like a sequined dress, made of silver nickles and dimes and dollars overlapping like the scales of an armadillo. Armored dildo. Impermeable; like a French raincoat" (3).

[19] Lurie refers to "the principle of camouflage" of British dresses, in *The Language of Clothes* 102.

And Rennie Wilford in *Bodily Harm* "feels at a disadvantage, without her shoes on" (144) when Paul, her future lover, visits her in the island hotel room.

Since Marian thinks safety lies in obscurity and constantly seeks for concealment, she is fastidious about the propriety of her clothes which she believes will protect her from social reproach. Though she usually is confident that her appearance deserves no criticism, she is always wary. Despite her chosen laundromat outfit, she feels others' disapproval when she takes her dirty clothes on the bus on Sunday. For she has not forgotten:

> a previous incident, a black-silk-swathed old lady with a mauve hat who had clutched at me one Sunday as I was getting off the bus. She was disturbed not only because I was breaking the fourth commandment, but also because of the way I had dressed in order to do it: Jesus, she implied, would never forgive my plaid running-shoes (94).

It seems that it is not Jesus but the Christian society that "would never forgive" her for breaking the code. It also seems that one has to wear clothes that answer not the need of an occupation--here, washing one's clothing--but the demand of society and its present activities.

Marian also feels out of place in her red party dress when she passes the housewares department where middle-aged housewives in their sombre clothes gather for a demonstration of an apple-coring attachment. Hostility toward Marian emanates from this group of women who are in their own way properly dressed, in "heavy coats and overshoes drab in the basement light" (217):

> Several of the women turned and glanced at her in an appraising way, summing her up. Anyone with a hair-style like that, they must have been thinking, would be far too trivial to be seriously interested in graters (217).

In return, Marian wonders:

> How long did it take to acquire that patina of lower-middle income domesticity, that weathered surface of slightly mangy fur, cloth worn thin at cuff edges and around buttons, scuffed leather of hand bags; the tight slant of the mouth, the gauging eyes; and above all that invisible colour that was like a smell, the underpainting of musty upholstery and worn linoleum that made them in this bargain basement authentic in a way that she was not? (217)

Marian feels both ill at ease and superior to these women whose class is much lower; "Somehow Peter's future income cancelled the possibility of graters" (217-218). Determined to grab this chance to move upwards in the social ladder, Marian feels at a safe distance from

the "lower-middle income domesticity," but at the same time guilty of her privilege; "They made her feel like a dilettante" (218). Clothes both help Marian to cope and alert her to social and psychological questions she believes she should not pursue.

Her boyfriend and later fiancé, Peter, possesses a wardrobe which effectively symbolizes his social position. He is an articling lawyer with a promising future and with a proper circle of friends who are also promising professionals with proper wives. His costume unfailingly shows his sense of propriety:

> He was wearing one of his suave winter costumes--dark suit, sombrely-opulent tie--not as jaunty as some of his young-man-about-town suits, but more quietly impressive (150).

This outfit also suits the elegant restaurant where they are having a modestly expensive dinner. Marian proudly reflects:

> Some men could never wear dark suits properly, they got flaky on the shoulders and shiny at the back, but Peter never shed and never shone in the wrong places (150).

Knowing the effect of good clothes, Peter wears a similar "dark opulent winter suit" (250) for their engagement party, so that Marian's friends can see how wise Marian's choice has been and how well she is marrying. Peter's clothes prove his success and his understanding of his world. His lawyer friends are also properly dressed:

> The friends collectively were all well-dressed and on the verge of being successful, and they all had wives who were also well-dressed and on the verge of being successful (181).

Peter and his friends are "the symbol of society"[20] with its code of propriety and standards of success. He is a proper young man, never ahead of his times or behind them, and his decision to marry Marian marks his conformity to the social convention. His friends are all married and he needs a wife to take to parties which are for couples. A wife is part of the corporation lawyer's costume and it goes without saying that she should be a proper young woman in proper attire, Peter's image of Marian.

Even for informal occasions, such as their casual meeting with Len, Marian's old friend, Peter's costume is always perfectly matched and neat:

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[20] Catherine McLay. "Peter, the symbol of society, as decision maker." "The Dark Voyage: *The Edible Woman* as Romance," *The Art of Margaret Atwood* 130.

> Peter was wearing one of his more subdued costumes, a brownish-green summer suit whose cut emphasized the functional spareness of his body. All his accessories matched(66).

In Ainsley's word, he is "well-packaged"(150), a product of consumer society. He is so well programmed by sartorial propriety that it is impossible for him to dress carelessly. After an alcoholic night Peter visits Marian's apartment:

> He did look hung-over. He was carelessly dressed but it's impossible for Peter to dress with genuine carelessness; he was meticulously unshaven, and his socks matched the colour of the paint-stains on his sports-shirt (90).

Such calculated carelessness has a comical effect in this passage but begins to look sinister when one realizes how deep-rooted the principles of propriety and conformity are in this healthy-looking young man. He always depends on clothes to express his feelings, as if he had no other means of articulating his emotions. And, since he adjusts his costume to the environment, his feelings automatically adapt to the situation. He feels obliged to take on proper costumes, proper attitudes and proper emotions required by the situation. Or rather, he has no other choice. When he comes to accuse Marian of running away from the engagement party:

> The expression on his face, a scowl combined with a jutting chin, meant he was still angry. He was wearing a costume suitable for being angry in: the suit stern, tailored, remote, but the tie a paisley with touches of sullen maroon (278).

The tasteful but playful pattern of the tie is meant to indicate to Marian that it is quite probable that he will soften at her apology.

Peter has been shaped completely by the social mold and he is perfectly satisfied with this arrangement. He is a flat, expressionless character, for whom costumes mean a great deal, probably everything. He is like those dolls small girls play with, whose costumes can be changed to suit the imagined situations and express suitable feelings. Marian, therefore, thinks of Peter's future selves in terms of clothing:

> Will he dress sloppily on Saturdays, in wrinkled blue jeans for his workshop in the cellar?... There was Peter, forty-five and balding but still recognizable as Peter, standing in bright sunlight beside a barbecue with a long fork in his hand. He was wearing a white chef's apron (250).

These images Marian finds "reassuring"(250) for they testify to his normalcy.

Peter is a mannequin whose costume represents the society's faith in connection between costume and behavior. Looking at the neatly arranged display of his clothes which represent his seasonal aspects, beginning with "his midsummer aspect"(235) followed by "the series of his other phases from late summer through fall"(236), Marian feels "something like resentment"(236), probably the resentment a child feels for an oppressive parent;[21] it is similar to what Chris must have felt against Elizabeth's control.

Marian finds Peter's stereotyped views less and less acceptable although she remains uncritical towards her similarly banal ideas. In getting engaged to Marian, he has simply "exchanged the free-bachelor image for the mature-fiance one"(123), both of which are ready-made male stereotypes approved by society, and "adjusted his responses and acquaintance accordingly"(123). He has even substituted photography for hunting as a hobby, exchanging his gun for the camera he will need in taking family portraits.

The narrator of *Surfacing* shares Marian's awareness of the unspoken codes of clothing that society imposes on its members. Having grown up in a small Quebec village, she knows the villagers' opinions and viewpoints concerning clothes too well to feel free to wear anything she likes on their territory. Though the local residents live closer to untamed nature, their ideas are as culture-bound as those of urban people. Yet they are more old-fashioned and less liberated because of their distance from fashionable society and because of the closed nature of their small community and its religious values. In the village store, Madame "is in a long-skirted dress and black stockings and a print apron with a bib, Paul in high-waisted trousers with braces, flannel shirt-sleeves rolled"(21). They resemble "carvings, the habitant kind they sell in tourist handicraft shops"(21) so much that the narrator feels annoyed. "[B]ut of course it's the other way around, it's the carvings that look like them"(21); Madame's and Paul's clothes represent the clothing of villagers everywhere in French Canada. Local souvenirs appropriately seem replicas of them.

Not only elderly people but young habitants in the village wear outmodish clothes. A village woman of the narrator's age has "brassier-shaped breasts and a light auburn

[21] In the interview with Graham Gibson, Atwood refers to Peter as a father figure. Graham Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973) 21.

moustache; her hair is in rollers covered by a pink net and she has on slacks and a sleeveless jersy top"(27). Archaic as this outfit may seem to an urban dweller, it is much more modern than the clothes the narrator observed long ago:

> The old priest is definitely gone, he disapproved of slacks, the women had to wear long concealing skirts and dark stockings and keep their arms covered in church. Shorts were against the law, and many of them lived all their lives beside the lake without learning to swim because they were ashamed to put on bathing suits (27).

This childhood memory explains the narrator's concern that the shopkeepers might "find [her] jeans and sweatshirt and fringed over-the-shoulder bag strange, perhaps immoral, though such things may be more common in the village since the tourists and the T.V."(21-22). The villagers' clothes are as much restricted by the sense of propriety as Marian's and Elizabeth's are. They are also restricted by the economic state of their community. City dwellers like Marian and Elizabeth, though they are also working people and only modestly well-off, seldom feel economic limitation, because they have some disposable income. They also believe that good taste enables them to dress well without spending much money; or rather, dressing inexpensively but well is the sign of good taste. The proper dresses for villagers are different only because their rural community has its own clothes values different from city standards.

The narrator worries about how the villagers will evaluate herself and her city friends. She condemns Anna's city wear as out of place and resentfully recalls that she has advised something more suitable for the bush:

> She's wearing a purple tunic and white bellbottoms, they have a smear on them already, grease from the car. I told her she should wear jeans or something but she said she looks fat in them (11).

For Anna, a stylish urban woman, personal appearance is far more important than convenience or conformity to local standards. While the narrator's jeans and sweatshirt, the perfect outfit for an urban dweller on vacation in the bush, risks being judged immoral by the villagers' standards, Anna's easily-stained costume is impossible.

Rural communities, like the Quebec village in Surfacing, have much less flexible sartorial values than big cities. Clothes both mask and proclaim differences, but individuality is frowned upon in the narrator's village, whereas in Toronto being different from other people, dressing so as to emphasize one's merits and hide one's shortcomings, in other words,

showing oneself to advantage, is the most important goal in choosing costumes.

In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie perceives that the islanders' way of dressing is governed by moral principles similar to those that restrict the villagers in *Surfacing*. Paul tells her that the women of the island "don't like the way white women dress.... You'd never see a local woman wearing shorts or even pants, they think it's degenerate"(148). Clothes distinguish the tourists from the islanders; American girls from the Midwest are wearing T-shirts with mottoes designed specially for tourists and shorts and have bikinis on under these T-shirts and shorts. An old American couple are seen "in their adventurous shorts, their binoculars hanging like outsized talismans around their necks"(186). They think of the resort as "a disaster area."[22] The island tourists are all enjoying an island resort which they can leave at any moment.[23] They have to show their temporary freedom from responsibility in their clothes, to distinguish themselves from the islanders who work to make their stay pleasant. When Rennie wears North American, sophisticated and expensive clothes, a group of island schoolgirls gather around her "examining her dress, her purse, her hair" (232). Rennie herself is determined to dress and behave like a tourist and a journalist to avoid involvement in the island's politics. She wants to avoid unwanted attention or overtures from men. Her strategy does not, however, succeed as she wishes, because her journalistic activities take her out of the usual touristic route to places where they and her career-woman clothes make her conspicuous. She is tagged as a foreigner but not the kind she thinks she is.

Rennie's "plain white cotton dress"(59), one of Rennie's futile attempts to look like an outsider, can be categorized as "Colonial white."[24] White dresses show that one is free from physical labor and that one can afford to pay for the washing and/or the replacement. As opposed to the washer woman's "green print dress with large yellow butterflies" (232)

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[22] Lurie comments that American citizens "think of other nations as mere showplaces for picturesque scenery" or wilderness for adventures. Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* 107.

[23] Diana Brydon thinks that *Bodily Harm* and Austin Clark's *The Prime Minister* equate "tourism with irresponsibility, showing their tourists as the new imperialists, happily exploiting a country they can easily leave behind." "Caribbean Revolution and Literary Convention," *CanL* 95 (1982): 183.

[24] Lurie refers to "British Colonial white." *The Language of Clothes* 187.

which gives an impression of vitality and fertility, Rennie's white cotton dress implies her wish to appear uninvolved and detached. In the end, however, it emph[illegible]r immaturity, ignorance, and vulnerability. The clothing she chose to signify her detachment has been interpreted by the islanders as evidence of her indifference to the critical situation of the former colony. These opposing attitudes come from their different views of the locale--the island. For the tourists the island is a resort; for the islanders it is the place for living--survival. In the last part of the novel, however, the soiling of Rennie's dress by her prison experience indicates her movements from innocence to knowledge, from irresponsibility to responsibility, from powerlessness to resistance, from vulnerability to some capacity of protecting herself and others.

Women in Atwood's fiction thus use sartorial codes in evaluating other people. Marian in *The Edible Woman* has the principle of propriety so firmly imprinted on her mind--the reason is not clear to us for we are not told much about her past life, except that she has learned to conform to the social rules at school--that she evaluates everyone around her by that standard. Ainsley goes for conspicuous clothing in strange colors and radical shapes; therefore she does not behave with propriety. On this point Marian agrees completely with the landlady who, to Marian's satisfaction, has "decided Ainsley isn't respectable, whereas [Marian is]"(14) by the way they dress. Ainsley's lifestyle in general makes Marian, her antithesis, feel good over being a proper, therefore superior, person. Ainsley not only wears improper clothes but also drinks. She even coaxes Marian into doing most of the laundry, dumping shamelessly her colorful lingerie, "lacy frivolities"(96), into Marian's laundry bag. Marian obeys without complaint and even fixes an alkaseltzer for Ainsley when she is suffering a hangover, all the time enjoying the feeling of superiority and self-control these acts of feminine self-sacrifice and sympathy give her. She feels herself to be the model of femininity[25] in everything she does, especially when she has Ainsley as her foil.

[25] Perry Nodelman in his article, "Trusting the Untrustworthy" (*JCF* 21(1978): 73-82), refers to "Marian's...soft femininity" (74) as her chrysalis, but concludes that "her triumph is that she does not sink into that warm 'sargasso-sea of femininity'" (82).

The three office virgins, with whom Marian occasionally spends the coffee-breaks but whom she neither respects or likes, are also viewed in terms of their appearance--their hair-do, their make-up, and their dresses. They are "all artificial blondes"(20); the elegant Lucy has "long perfectly-shaped iridescent fingernails"(22) and "display[s] her delicious dresses and confectionery eyes"(114) in her search for a future husband:

> Emmy always looks as though she is coming unravelled. Stray threads trail from her hems, her lipstick sloughs off in dry scales, she sheds wispy blonde hairs and flakes of scalp on her shoulders and back; everywhere she goes she leaves a trail of assorted shreds(21).

Lucy is too neat to make men feel relaxed and confident while the other two, Millie and Emmy, lack neatness and elegance. Marian feels superior to them for they are desperate in their search for proper husbands while Marian has got Peter to propose to her without such obvious efforts. Not as naive as the three girls, Marian has packaged herself in a very subtle way so that Peter would choose her. At Marian's engagement party they are again seen in clothes that typify their values. "Lucy was in purple velvet, with silver eyelids and false lashes"(239)--making her resemble an expensively elegant doll--"Emmy was in pink chiffon, faintly suggestive of high-school formals. Her hair had been sprayed into stiff wisps and her slip was showing"(239)--messy as usual and nervous--and "Millie was encased in pale blue satin which bulged in odd places"(239). They are, in Marian's opinion, sexually immature, and ineffective. Finding Lucy adoring and flattering Peter, Marian haughtily thinks:

> So Lucy had abandoned the siege of Leonard. She must have realized it was futile, she had always been more astute about those things than the other two. But how touching of her to try instead for Peter; pathetic, actually. After all Peter was off the market almost as definitely as if he was already married (243).

The three virgins' dresses, stiff, frigid, school-girlish and awkward, symbolize the girls themselves. Their awkwardness makes Marian contemptuous towards their packaging while Peter's neat and confident appearance gives her a "sense of proud ownership"(150). Clothes and the quality of the wearer they represent must be of the kind that society approves.

Unsuitable clothes invite Marian's criticism and upset or embarrass her. Fischer Smythe, whom she has unwisely invited to the engagement party, almost panics her with his "broad woolly back..., an aggressively-casual striped turtleneck sweater"(246), while the

effeminate Trevor, who is "immaculately suited, shirted and tied" (246), makes Fischer look the worse for the comparison. Fischer has dressed as if for a graduate students' party, not for a semi-formal party of working people. His casual sweater is "aggressive" for it expresses contempt for the fuss people are making about formalities, and it invades or attempts to subvert the whole social system which Marian's ideas about clothes and people's attitude towards social occasions such as parties support.

Elizabeth, in *Life Before Man*, is a merciless judge who determines a person's social value on his/her wardrobe. Her standards are the taste and expensiveness of clothes, the wearer's confidence in wearing them, and the wearer's status and ability which she thinks the clothes represent. Elizabeth's dismissive and contemptuous view of Martha, Nate's ex-mistress, is "based...on her wardrobe"(254) as far as Nate knows; Martha is always "tak[ing] up a cause or a hobby after the peak"(253) as she does outmoded clothes. Martha's overtly sexy clothes are not in good taste either. Elizabeth also criticizes William, Lesje's boyfriend, with whom she is about to have a tasteless affair in order to keep the balance of sexual relationships, saying that "Someone with William's choirboy complexion should not wear beige and maroon"(165). She then concludes that "If Lesje lives with a man who has such poor taste in ties, she's hardly worth defeating"(165). For her a person's taste in clothes determines his/her social value and even that of the people who associate with him/her. Elizabeth feels superior to Lesje, for Lesje, though admittedly youthful and slender, does not seem to know how to wear elegant clothes:

> Elizabeth quickly appraises her clothes: jeans again. Lesje can get away with it, she's skinny enough; also she's only a curational assistant. Elizabeth herself must dress more responsibly (134).

In Elizabeth's logic, The youthful slimness Lesje's casual clothes accentuate is cancelled by the professional inferiority the same clothes symbolize.

Convinced of her superiority, Elizabeth invites Lesje for dinner, deliberately without telling her that it will be formal:

> Just a couple of friends, Elizabeth said, Casual. So Lesje wore pants with a long sweater-coat, and the two other women are in dresses. Elizabeth for once is not in black; she's wearing a loose grey chiffon number that makes her look younger and thinner than she does at work. She even has a necklace on, a chain with a silver fish.

> The other woman is in flowing mauve. Lesje, in her perky, clean-cut stripes, feels about twelve years old (136-137).

Elizabeth's favorite colors, grey and black, imply sophistication and success. The other woman's mauve is also feminine and elegant. Both dresses are classical and womanly, suitable as evening dresses. The subdued elegance of these dresses suits the social occasion which Elizabeth is creating, whose style of informality Lesje has not understood. The fabrics express the two older women's affluence and clothes sense. On the other hand, Lesje's girlish stripes make her feel unimportant, immature.

The evening ends in Elizabeth's absolute victory, with Lesje bolting into the bathroom and feeling "graceless...worthless" (140). This sense of dominance over others keeps Elizabeth up even at the end of the novel. Elizabeth's preference for black can also be interpreted as a sign of her self-importance, of her love for dramatic effects and formalities and even of her pessimistic outlook combined with a strong will to keep going on in this troubled world.

Elizabeth, Marian, *Surfacing* 's narrator and all the other characters examined in this chapter live in a world where a person's value is decided and/or expressed by what s/he wears. The members of their society share codes and rules about what and how one should wear and judge other people according to these standards. Atwood's main characters also criticize, appreciate, and evaluate people around them by those values. This practice is so familiar to them they do not even seem to be aware that they are exercizing it. The reader shares the code, agrees with the women characters' conformity and evaluation, but at the same time has doubts about the validity of the code. For sartorial conformity and evaluation to be such a deep-rooted habit for the women characters, however, there must have been a long-time training since their childhood. To trace the process of women characters' internalizing these values is the purpose of the following chapter.

Chapter Two

When a baby is born, it has no sense of its social position or gender. The process of the new-born's initiation into society, however, begins at once and presently gives it the sense of its social status and gender. Since society treats girls and boys differently just as it does men and women, "a girl's sense of identity is seen as being socialized into a different mold than that prepared for a male child."[26] One of the important aspects of this initiation process is the education in dressing oneself to suit and/or proclaim one's social position, one's gender and the occasion.[27] Chapter One has discussed what one wears and how one wears it as powerful determinants and/or expressions of one's position in society, of one's role in it. By learning what to wear and how, the child learns to locate itself in the pattern of society and also to announce this position by means of clothing. In other words, the child learns the importance of clothing in his/her attempts to establish him/herself as a member of society. Clothing plays an equally significant role in defining the child's sense of its own gender. Since children's garments no less than adult clothes reflect society's ideas and ideals about the sexes, "At a very early age the investure of the child provides the materials out of which the reflected sexual identity and its qualifications are formed."[28]

Many of Atwood's central women characters recollect their childhood experience concerning clothes. Apart from Marian of *The Edible Woman* whose past is almost totally concealed from the reader, and the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, whose memory starts from a more recent point in the past, all the other main characters describe their childhood garments with feelings other than simple nostalgia. Rennie, in *Bodily Harm*, recollects her women-only household and the inconspicuous dresses of her grandmother and mother. Elizabeth and Lesje, in *Life Before Man*, remember the unlikeable dresses imposed on them

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[26] T.D. MacLulich, "Atwood's Adult Fairy Tale: Levi Strauss, Bettelheim, and *The Edible Woman*" *ECW* 11 (1978): 125.8

[27] Mary Ellen Roach discusses the importance of sartorial training in a child's initiation process. See her essay, "Clothing and the American Family," in *Dress, Adornment and the Social Order*, 82-86.

[28] Gregory P. Stone, "Appearance and the Self," *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order* 234.

by their foster-mother and grandmother. Joan Foster, in *Lady Oracle*, narrates how her mother sought to put her into proper dresses and shape her according to proper feminine images. The narrator of *Surfacing* regards the photos of her old dresses as evidence of her own civilizing process. There are two major agents in Atwood's novels who attempt to initiate the girls, by teaching conformity to the clothing codes of society. Mothers or mother surrogates have considerable control over the girls' garments, especially when they are small. Since conformity to social rules will make the girls' survival easier, some mothers, even if they do not agree with the present mode of women's life, feel that it is their duty to instruct their girls on how to conform; other mothers, themselves bound by convention, cannot think of other ways of dressing and guiding their daughters.

Journalism and consumerism also influence people's ideas, ideals, and desires through the mass-media. Advertisements dominate in magazines, dictating what the reader should purchase on her next excursion to a shopping mall, Factors which contribute to consumerism occupy a great deal of attention and time of the average person. Atwood, depicting characters' memories of and responses to the maternal instruction, presents the social influence in her description of visual advertisements, journalism, and her character's reaction to them.

This chapter will explore how Atwood depicts the influence of society and its cultural and economic pressure on small girls' self-definition in the particular area of costumes. The discussion will include Rennie, Lesje, Elizabeth, and the narrator of *Surfacing*, but omit Joan, whose rebellion against all pressure to conform makes her experience fit the models I shall discuss in later chapters. *Surfacing*'s narrator's experience will be the topic of the concluding part of Chapter Two, since her view of clothing and her attempt to discard her clothes, and the civilization that they represent, is the best index of the sartorial phase of a girl's initiation process in Atwood's novels.

It is hard to trace each character's growing-up process, except in *Surfacing*, whose theme is the heroine's self-quest into the past. Atwood depicts individual episodes rather than describing the women's past as a whole. The characters themselves do not attempt to link the

flashbacks or explain a chain of cause and effect. The fragments, however, when put together, proffer sufficient material for studying the impact on women of childhood education in clothes.

In *Surfacing*, the unnamed narrator becomes painfully aware of the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the body and the mind, and between culture and nature. As part of this process she recollects how her mother tried to "civilize" her when she was a small girl. She remembers being taken to small girls' birthday parties in the city, a place antithetical to the natural world of the bush where the narrator thinks she belongs. As a child, she has hated this social ritual:

> I despised them [birthday parties], the pew-purple velvet dresses with anti-macassar lace collars and the presents, voices going Oooo with envy when they were opened, and the pointless games, finding a thimble or memorizing clutter on a tray (76).

She refused to play these games, for she did not want to fix herself in one of the available roles, just as she did not like to conform to the formal dress of these parties. However, despite her loathing, she could not avoid the civilizing process in order to survive in society. Her old photos visually mark her progress:

> Glossy color prints, forgotten boys with pimples and carnations, myself in the stiff dresses, crinolines and tulle, layered like store birthday cakes; I was civilized at last, the finished product (116).

This image of herself in a layered dress like a birthday cake meets the demands of society whose consumerism is reflected in the image of a birthday cake, ornamental and ready to eat. The dress, like the narrator's first boyfriend, has been acquired to prove her normalcy. Boyfriends and dresses mark the stages to becoming a proper, grown-up member of the society. Her urban friend, Anna, exclaims, "Is that you?... Christ, how could we ever wear that stuff?"(116) This remark sounds ironic, coming from such an artificial, made-up, doll-like woman as Anna,[29] who obviously is unaware that she and the narrator live and look now as unnaturally as they did in their girlhood.

In contrast to her botanist father whose occupation connects science and nature, imposing a scientific classification and explanation upon nature and representing logic in this

[29] Sherrill Grace calls Anna "a sterile doll, a playboy centerfold." *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Vehicle, 1980) 102.

novel, the narrator's mother is initially seen as a suppporter of nature.[30] She is often remembered as feeding small wild birds. However, in Atwood's novels, mothers or older female figures force the central women characters into the mold of the culture of their society in their childhood, and the mother in *Surfacing* is also seen as an agent of civilization as far as clothing is concerned.[31] Her contradictory behavior can be explained as an expression of a mother's eager wish to make her daughter's future life in society easy, a wish which surpassed her dislike of artificiality.

In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie Wilford, who has been brought up in a small town called Griswold and is now a successful free-lance journalist in the city of Toronto, has also been shaped socially by her mother and grandmother. Unlike the father of *Surfacing* and like Joan Foster's father in *Lady Oracle*, Rennie's father was an absent figure, for he had forsaken his family for another woman. This "joyless repressed female environment,"[32] whose oppression is much more severe than that of *Surfacing*, taught Rennie how to restrain herself in the company of grown-ups:

> As a child I learned three things well: how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them. When I think of that house I think of objects and silences. The silences were almost visible.... My grandmother was the best at silences. According to her, it was bad manners to ask direct questions (54).

In this loveless household where touching and speaking are equally inhibited, the only way of

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[30] Comments on the mother being close to nature are abundant. Peter Klovan comments that "The mother's relationship with nature, however, appears to have been the most intense relationship she had." Klovan, "'They Are Out of Reach Now': The Family Motif in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*," *ECW* 33(1986): 11. Also see S. F. Schaeffer, "'It Is Time That Separates Us': Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*," *Centennial Review* 18 (1974): 320: Keith Garebian, "*Surfacing*: Apocalyptic Ghost story," *Mosaic*, 9 iii (1976): 3: McLay, "The Divided Self" 87: and Bjerring, "The Problem of Language in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*," *Queen's Quarterly* 83 (1976): 606: Rosemary Sweetapple, "Margaret Atwood: Victims and Survivers," *Southern Review*, 9 (1976): 54.

[31] Sherry Ortner's article, "Is Woman To Nature As Man Is To Culture," in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphore (Stanford, California: Standford Univ. Press, 1974), demonstrates how small children's initiation into culture, such as their sartorial training, before they are old enough to understand more complicated conceptions, is left to women, mostly mothers; higher education is, of course, exclusively conducted by males, which fact emphasizes patriarchal society's conviction of male superiority in intelligence.

[32] A phrase from Dorothy Jones' article on *Bodily Harm*, "'Waiting for the Rescue': A Discussion of Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*," *Kunapipi* 6;3 (1984): 94.

communication is visual; therefore a person's appearance is very important. One is not, however, supposed to express herself through her appearance, or clothes, but to suppress the desire for self-expression. Inconspicuous clothes, silences and lifeless objects characterize this world. In the Griswold vocabulary, one is expected to be "decent." In Rennie's home, "decency was having your clothes on, in every way possible" (55). Griswold values negate the exposure of the female body and condemn touching unclothed parts of other people. Rennie's grandmother, Rennie remembers, "was prying [Rennie's] hands away finger by finger. She's smiling" (53) when Rennie as a small girl clung to her legs. The later scene of her grandmother suffering from a hallucination of not being able to find her hands emphasizes Rennie's memory. It also leaves a deep scar in Rennie's mind and inhibits her free participation in intimacy.

By the Griswold code, even if one's whole body is covered with clothes, one can be still indecent for some clothes are themselves indecent because of their conspicuous colors and/or shapes:

> Clothes could be decent or indecent. Mine were always decent, and they smelled decent too, a wool smell, mothballs and a hint of furniture polish. Other girls, from families considered shoddy and loose, wore questionable clothes and smelled like violets (55).

Rennie recollects her mother as an "old" woman who always kept company with older people and always wore clothes old people wore. "She wore clothes like theirs too, dark dresses with high collars and small innocuous pattern, dots or sprigs of flowers" (54). Rennie's mother and her friends chose these expressionless and unassertive clothes to avoid attention to their bodies.

Rennie fears exposure. Being seen naked is being a victim. Later, talking about her sense of being in love, Rennie compares her uncertainty in this vulnerable state, to the feeling of being exposed without anything to shield her body, of being naked:

> Being in love was like running barefoot along a street covered with broken bottles.... It was like taking off your clothes at lunchtime in a bank. It let people think they knew something about you that you didn't know about them, it gave them power over you. It made you visible, soft, penetrable; it made you ludicrous (102).

Proper clothes properly put on are the shield of decency, which wards off society's reproach.

Rennie's belief that invisibility confers an advantage was implanted early in her life, but this idea will be uprooted by the time the story ends.[33] Her family's negation of the female body and its lesson that the body is something to be ashamed of, to be kept clothed at all times, make Rennie focus on surfaces both in her profession as journalist and in her private life, especially her relationship with men, until she learns the limitation of this attitude from two kinds of bodily harm: her experiences of cancer and of imprisonment, both threatening her with death, the final disappearance of the body, the ultimate invisibility.[34]

Other Atwood's heroines have equally unpleasant memories of the outfits imposed on them by mother-figures in their childhood. Elizabeth, whose guardian, Auntie Muriel, implants in her both the desire for order and repugnance to it, recollects with distaste the costumes which her aunt chose for their propriety, "the blue tweed coats with velveteen collars and matching velveteen hats that Auntie Muriel considered the proper thing for downtown excursions" (259). Yet, she makes her daughters put on " white knee socks and Mary Janes" (106) which "they won't willingly put on for any other occasion, little mouths carefully shut, hair clipped back from their faces with tight barrets, hands in their laps" (106) on their visits to the aunt in question. It is significant how quick children are to assimulate these sartorial rules. For Auntie Muriel's funeral they put on the clothes they used to wear on their visits to her:

> They're wearing their white knee socks and Mary Janes: Janet's idea, since these were what they wore to visit Auntie Muriel. Janet is weeping decorously; she knows this is what you do at funerals (275).

The sense of propriety attached to both costumes and behavior is already deeply rooted in these young girls.

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[33] Diana Brydon comments that "Rennie's powerlessness in *Bodily Harm* is also linked to her invisibility, although ironically she has first assumed it as protective camouflage. "Caribbean Revolution and Literary Convention," *CanL* 95 (1982): 182.

[34] Or this "bodily harm" could be classified into Nora Stovel's three categories of "sexual sadism, medical mutilation, and political violence." This triple division would be more comprehensive, covering the whole course of the novel. Nora F. Stovel, "Reflections on Mirror Images: Double and Identity in the Novels of Margaret Atwood," *ECW* 33 (1986): 63.

The second central woman figure of *Life Before Man*, Lesje, has also unhappy memories of her dresses. Her father used to run a little girls' dress shop, which was called *Little Nell's Dresses* or *Tinker Bell* and which his mother forced on him after his father's death. The store was stacked with dresses appropriate to its name, and Lesje had no option but to wear these outfits:

> Lesje grew up wearing them and resenting them. For her, luxury was not the piqué and lace collars of the Little Nell line, but the jeans and T-shirts the other girls wore (99).

In her adulthood (though she hardly looks grown-up) she rebels, by wearing jeans, against the Little Nell image.

Nevertheless, Lesje yearns for the conventional femininity of long dresses. Her fantasies contradict the impression of her characteristic costume of jeans and sweatshirts. She tries on long dresses in clothes shops and then puts them aside with a resigned sigh:

> She flips through the racks, looking for something that might become her, something she might become. She almost never buys anything. The dresses she tries on are long, flowing, embroidered, very different from the denims and subdued classics she habitually wears (18).

These dresses' "delicate, easily damaged materials"[35] also conform to one of society's ideals of femininity, by suggesting frailty. Lesje at once seeks to flee from the modern society into prehistoric times and to achieve the image of an ideal woman which society advocates. Lesje's conflicting tastes reflect her contradictory desires and show her mental instability.

Lesje obviously does not succeed in escaping reality, past or present. When Lesje looks at these dresses, what comes into her mind first is not any historical reference or recollection of Elizabeth's wardrobe but concern with society's evaluation of these clothes which springs from her childhood instruction; "How her grandmother would laugh [at these dresses]" (18). This thought makes Lesje flinch; she feels humiliated by the imaginary laugh. She can never be liberated from her grandmother's clothes philosophy which Little Nell Dresses visually sum up and which is merely a reflection of society's view of clothes. Her

[35] Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* 216. Lurie refers to this type of material in discussing the feminine ideal of "Romantic frailty" in the early nineteenth century, but this ideal is still widely appreciated today. Lurie elsewhere comments that "To some extent, fabric always stands for the skin of the person beneath it" (232); delicate fabric represents the delicate skin of the wearer and her delicate frailty.

grandmother's laugh is not a sign of her absolute confidence in her judgement of clothes; it rather reveals how even those who are convinced of their taste may not be aware of the source of the taste.

Lesje and Elizabeth alike have rebeled against the conventional forms of clothing for girls and the images of ideal adolescent femininity they represent but neither can liberate herself from the lessons she was taught in childhood. The direct source of information on these rules is usually older female members of the family in Atwood's novels, but the origin is the society which the girls have been born into and for which they have to be shaped and prepared in order to survive.

Society has shaped the narrator of *Surfacing*'s images of femininity. Although she ostensibly dislikes various expressions of culture such as birthday parties and formal dresses, it is evident that she has been fascinated by the stereotypes of women highly acclaimed in the popular culture. Her old scrapbooks contain many drawings of women in fashionable attire:

> Ladies in exotic costumes, sausage rolls of hair across their foreheads, with puffed red mouths and eyelashes like toothbrush bristles.... They're wearing shoes with Petunia Pig toes and perpendicular heels, and their dresses have cantaloupe strapless tops like Rita Hayworth's and ballerina skirts with blotches meant for spangles (46).

Since clothes play a major role in defining women's images, the narrator as a child meticulously copied the outfits of women who had attracted her attention. The fact that her scrapbooks have been kept and she tells so much about them gives particular emphasis to what she has drawn. Such female ideals impose on small girls' imagination partly because popular dresses are modelled on screen stars' costumes. Actually the narrator's old drawings are imitations of "the paper dolls they had in the city, cardboard movie stars," which come with "two-piece bathing suits printed on their bodies and cutout wardrobes of formal gowns and lacy negligees"(47). She has played with paper-clothes dolls in the schoolyard:

> Little girls in grey jumpers and white blouses, braids clipped to their [illegible] pink plastic barrettes, owned and directed them; they would bring the[illegible] and parade them at recess, propping them up against the worn brick [illegible] feet in the snow, paper dresses no protection against the icy wind, inventing [illegible] and parties, celebrations, interminable changing of costumes, a [illegible] (47).

The schoolgirls are collectively fascinated by costumes and dolls and they [illegible] dolls

the future life promoted by the mass-culture of their society. Because they sense that in "the scrutiny of [their attractiveness] might lie the answer to whether [they] will be loved,"[36] schoolgirls instinctively realize that in order to survive in the culture they have to conform to the most popular taste, which is the standards of female attractiveness. The narrator's "childhood drawings [are] the objectifying of a yearning for security, stability, and identity in her adult-dominated world."[37] This conformity to the dominant taste of society repeats in the narrator's career as a professional illustrator. She draws for children's books pictures which she perceives as unnatural but which express the conventional adult conception of how the world should be represented to children. She is "accustomed to cultural lies."[38] She has already learned how to compromise in order to make a living. "[N]ow I compromise before I take the work in," she says, "it saves time" (57).

But just as the Quebec folktales she illustrates sound like German fairytales, widely approved stereotypes, rather than genuine local legends, the dolls and their costumes represent a false flamboyant life. The uselessness of the paperdresses in the cold weather symbolizes the unreality of such life. Their lack of practical value also suggests that the essential function of clothing is "not warmth or decency, but ornament."[39] Their fragility and falseness also imply the same qualities in the women who try to resemble the ideal appearance of dolls.

The heroine of *The Edible Woman*, Marian MacAlpine, has worked for four months for a market research company, one of the newest signs of the fast growing consumerism. Her work makes Marian familiar with every kind of advertisement, which she handles matter-of-factly in sorting out consumer questionnaires. Marian is at the same time a victim

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[36] Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire : Women's Sexuality Today* (London: Paladin Books by Granada Publishing Ltd., 1984) 81.

[37] Donald R. Bartlett, "Fact and Form in *Surfacing*," *University of Windsor Review* 17 (1) (1982): 22.

[38] Carol Gerson comments that "The narrator...is...accustomed to cultural lies" but concludes that "Just as the Quebec wilderness is the place where the narrator strips away her own false surfaces, it is also the place where she learns to see through the facades of her friends and the culture they represent." Gerson, "Margaret Atwood and Quebec: A Footnote on *Surfacing* ," *SCL* 1 (1977): 117-118.

[39] Thomas Carlyle in *Sartre Resartus* assefts "The First purpose of Clothes...was not warmth or decency, but ornament" (48).

and an advocate of consumerism,[40] but is unable to analyze either position and apparently feels no anxiety in her daily life. However, a transit ad she sees in the bus on her way to the laundromat upsets her, accustomed though she is to devices of consumerism. It is an ad for girdles:

> a colorful one of a young woman with three pairs of legs skipping about in her girdle. I must admit to being, against my will, slightly scandalized by these advertisements (95).

She sees through the deception of the message the ad offers:

> perhaps the lithe young woman was a self-image; perhaps the purchasers thought they were getting their own youth and slenderness back in the package (95).

Marian interprets and criticizes with an alarmingly sharp insight but does not indict or denounce these tools of consumerism. Marian's instinct for survival nips the bud of critical thoughts in her consciousness; or her "stolidness is a disguise."[41] Atwood presents Marian's limitation as an example of how "social instinct" for survival prevents a woman from criticizing the reality of her society, the cause of the difficulty of her survival.

Instead of articulating criticism, Marian's imagination produces threatening images out of the girdle ad, whose public transportation's location disturbs Marian's sense of decency. She imagines a man, crazed by staring at this ad, changed into the "Underwear Man," an obscene phone caller:

> She saw him as wearing a business suit and a fairly conservative tie, diagonal stripes in brown and maron; shoes well-shined. Perhaps his otherwise normal mind [as is shown in his sensible clothes] had been crazed into frenzy by the girdle advertisements on the buses: he was a victim of society. Society flaunted these slender laughing rubberized women before his eyes.... He had found when he had tried to buy the garment in question at store counters that it came empty of the promised contents (120).

Consumer society exploits and markets sex. It stirs sexual desires, uses them to sell

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[40] Marian's position as both victim and advocate of consumerism is pointed out by Catherine McLay and Jerome H. Rosenberg. See McLay, "The Dark Voyage," *The Art of Margaret Atwood* 133 and Rosenberg, *Margaret Atwood* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984) 97.

[41] Perry Nodelman says that "For Marian, [her] stolidness is a disguise; because it is what people expect her to be, it simplifies her dealings with them." Nodelman, "Trusting the Untrustworthy," *JCF* 21 (1978): 77. To appear stolid and uncritical makes her survival easier.

merchandise and denies the promised or at least implied satisfaction.[42] Half-naked women are seen everywhere in ads, ads for cars, typewriters, etc. Surely these women have nothing to do with the advertised goods, they will never be given to the purchaser, but they are supposed to attract customers. And they do. Men as well as women are deceived and seduced by advertisements; both are victims of the consumer society. The "Underwear Man"'s use of the name of Seymour Survey Company, Marian's firm, in his obscene calls suggests that it is in fact consumerism, not his personal propensity, that is causing this mad obsession with underwear; his act also reflects Seymour Company's invasion of people's private lives with its interviews and questionnaires.

Marian is but another victim consumer. Vaguely aware as she is of the harm of advertisements, she hardly liberates herself from their influence. Instead she is addicted to the nurse-in-white image of an ad:

> I stared for a long time at an advertisement with a picture of a nurse in a white cap and dress. She had a wholesome, competent face and she was holding a bottle and smiling. The caption said: GIVE THE GIFT OF LIFE (103).

This life-saver image, one of the oldest ideals of women, Marian's relationship with Duncan. However, when Duncan discloses his lie about being sexually uninitiated, Marian realizes the falseness of this angelic image. "The starched nurse-like image of herself she had tried to preserve as a last resort crumpled like wet newsprint" (271), and she wonders why she could have been so misguided. The red dress which is now making her look like a tired prostitute with her morning face of half-faded make-up creates a striking contrast to the healthy nurse costume.

Such familiar, established images as those of nurse and "good" mother, offered by movies and advertisements for medicine, food and household goods, appear to make life easier. By assimulating a socially approved stereotype a person can feel confident about

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[42] For commentary on the use of sex in commercial advertisements, see *Inside Women's Magazines*, by Janice Winship (London and New York: Pandora, 1987) 58: Janice Winship's essay, "Handling Sex," *Looking On : Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, ed. Rosemary Betterton (London and New York: Pandora, 1987) 25-39: also Rosalind Coward's "Naughty But Nice: Food Pornography," in *Female Desire* 99-106.

his/her acceptance by society and gain a good reputation. Good character encased in good clothes ensures social success. This formula seems to make life simple. But it is an dangerous illusion because it puts life, which is full of variety, into specific molds, classifying people in inflexible categories. The "starched" nurse fantasy let Marian see the world divided by clear lines, uncomplicated; if one can fit in a simple image, the world must be a simple place, too. But the flat surface of cloth, which Duncan seeks to create in his obsession with ironing and partly succeeds in assuming in his expression, is a temporary appearance of the reality which can "crumple" and transform itself at any moment. Over-simplification will never work.

In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie, the journalist, specializes in lifestyle articles for women's magazines, suggesting to the reader what to wear, what to eat, how to live.[43] She defines what women should wear and even how they should put it on; she sounds authoritative and important as if what you wear ultimately decides the value of what you are doing in the costume. Before Rennie began her career, it is true, she wrote about social issues. But to get her articles accepted by publishers, she had to change her approach:

> Instead of writing about the issues, she began interviewing the people who were involved in them. Those pieces were a lot easier to sell. The *In* wardrobe for the picket line, the importance of the denim overall, what the feminists eat for breakfast (64).

More stylish than critical, this writing was given the name of "Radical chic" (64) and it has become Rennie's style. Rennie's articles emphasize trivial shifts in fashion, losing sight of more important events in life, but this is deplorably the main trend of contemporary journalism. The influences of magazines help Rennie sound authentic. She even tries to create new trends through the authenticity of prints:

> sometimes Rennie liked to write pieces about trends that didn't really exist, to see if she could make them exist by writing about them.... Successes of this kind gave her an odd pleasure, half gleeful, half sour; people would do anything not to be thought outmoded (25).

The last comment summarises the arrogance in journalism. A sense of control over the reader reassures journalists, as do the lists they make, classifying things into two opposite categories such as "In and Out" or "Plus and Minus" (65):

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[43] Janice Winship authoritatively discusses how women's magazines dictate the female reader's life in her *Inside Women's Magazines*.

> such lists reassured people, including those who wrote them. It made them think they could make distinctions, choices that would somehow vindicate them (65).

A list Rennie's journalist colleagues once made concerning "Class Who Has It, Who Doesn't" (65) shows not only people's desire to be on the right track but also how appearance--clothes--can decide the value of an activity:

> Ronald Reagan didn't have class, Pierre Trudeau did. Jogging didn't have class, contemporary dance did, but only if you did it in jogging pants, which did, for that but not for jogging, but not in stretchy plunge-back leotards, which didn't for that but did if you went swimming in them, instead of in bathing suits with built-in bra cups, which didn't. Marilyn's didn't, the Lickin' Chicken on Bloor, which didn't sell chicken, did (65).

Rennie's question, "What about the word class?" exposes the basis of the game, so "they weren't sure whether that was funny or not." (65) Atwood uses this both to reveal the shallowness of these journalists' philosophy and to point to Rennie's ability to criticize herself.

Despite her doubts about journalism, Rennie, an "expert of surfaces,"(26) seemingly is satisfied to limit her concerns to this level, or is trying to content herself this way. Her childhood inhibition still prevents her from going deeper into the essentials and she feels safer dealing with surfaces, even if she is not certain if it is the right thing to do. Dr. Minnow's approach on the Caribbean island invades her core of self-protection when he asks Rennie to write about the political and economic situation of the isle. Trying to avoid involvement, she answers that her specialty is lifestyles, not political messages:

> "Lifestyles?" says Dr. Minnow. He's puzzled. "You know, what people wear, what they eat, where they go for their vacations, what they've got in their livingrooms, things like that," says Rennie, as lightly as she can (136).

Dr. Minnow answers that he also is "concerned with lifestyles.... It is our duty, to be concerned with lifestyles. What the people eat, what they wear, this is what I want you to write about" (136). What he means is that he is interested in how politics or economy can affect people's lifestyles, how poor people starve, why children go around barefoot, why some people can not even think of vacations, and how some are deprived of decent furniture. Rennie is well aware of the shallowness of her interpretation and treatment of lifestyles; she knows how deep she could, and perhaps should, go by following Dr. Minnow's angle on

lifestyles. At present, however, she can not make such a leap in her commitment to the world. Since she was taught to remain silent in her childhood, she now practices another, more deceiving kind of silence on these matters; she disguises her uneasiness over political issues by talking about superficial matters. She is "as much a tourist in Canada... as she is in the Caribbean"[44] in that she looks at things on their surface only. This avoidance, on principle, of involvement or commitment will continue until she gets physically caught up in a "massive involvement" (296) and is forced to face the reality under all surface.

Her preoccupation with appearance is reflected in Rennie's choice of her lover, Jake, who is a professional packager:

> He decided how things would look and what contexts they would be placed in, which meant what people would feel about them. He knew the importance of style (103).

Sharing Rennie's concern with surfaces, Jake does not "sneer at Rennie for doing pieces on the return of the open-toed spike-heel sandal" (103-4). He is professionally and personally concerned with what Rennie wears and how she looks. He presents her with underwear items and tells her to wear nothing except a white jump suit which presently fascinates him. He even dictates what kind of pose she should take in bed to look atttractive as a sexual object. Jake is a successful packager for he conforms to society's most conventional, most popular images of things, including sex and women. The two pictures he has hung in Rennie's bedroom, one of a "brown-skinned woman wound up in a piece of material that held her arms to her side but left her breasts and thighs and buttocks exposed" (105) who significantly has no expression on her face, and the other of a woman on a sofa feet-first, her head looking tiny and a bull in the foreground, show his stereotyped ideas of women. Rennie realizes later that "she was one of the things Jake was packaging" (104). He has painted her apartment and brought in new furniture. Rennie has been his woman, his possession to dress up and show off. The way he calls his new lover "lady" suggests that she, like Rennie, is consumable, disposable, and exchangeable. Women are for him objects to mirror his concepts.

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[44] From Diana Brydon's comment in her article that "Rennie is just as much a tourist in Canada, writing lifestyle pieces about trends, as she is in the Caribbean, writing about resorts." Diana Brydon, "Caribbean Revolution and Literary Convention," *CanL* 95 (1982): 183.

His superficial ideas go hand in hand with his concern with surfaces and appearances. His commitment to Rennie is as superficial. Rennie, missing one breast, is no longer an ideal mannequin to enact his sexual fantasies.

Rennie starts to feel threatened by Jake's projection of his ideas of women on herself after she has seen the police collection of pornographic scenes of women being tortured. Thus alerted, she becomes conscious of the meaning of the underwear given by Jake and starts to feel uncomfortable in it. Other Atwood heroines feel similar anxiety about their costumes. The epitome of the uneasiness or rebellion against the pressure of the stereotyped images clothes represent is *Surfacing*' s narrator, who discards her clothes in an attempt to resume a harmonious relationship with nature, with her bush homeland and with her body.

Civilization in the form of clothes seems to the narrator to distort and destroy nature. On entering the village in Quebec where she spent her childhood, she encounters animals dressed in human clothes:

> three stuffed moose on a platform near the pumps; they're dressed in human clothes and wired standing up on their hind legs, a father moose with a trench-coat and a pipe in his mouth, a mother moose in a print dress and flowered hat and a little boy moose in short pants, a striped jersey and a baseball cap, waving an American flag (14).

This family portrait disturbs the narrator, who reads in it the invasion of the animal world by human society whose order and restraint are repeated in the smaller pattern of families. The position of the "little girl moose in a frilly skirt and a pigtailed blonde wig, holding a red parasol in one hoof" (14) on the roof, singularly alienated from the rest of the family, reflects young women's position in the family.[45] The girl moose's coquettish costume is reminiscent of the narrator's party dress; the narrator's position as a daughter may have been the same as the little animal's. Though the narrator's family was not conventional, both the daughter and the son felt alienated from their parents; rather, the eccentricity of the father and the mother made it difficult for the children to define and understand them in reference

[45] Peter Klovan in his "'They Are Out Of Reach Now'" comments that the position of the girl moose and the rest of the family is an image of "estrangement, which seems to have characterized the children's attitude towards their parents and towards each other" (10). See also Davidsons' article, "The Anatomy of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* ," *Ariel* 10 iii (1979): 41.

to the popular concepts of parental figures.

This moose affair is the more upsetting for it takes place in the narrator's homeland, near the wild bush she equates to unspoiled nature. Though villagers symbolize another form of civilization, the narrator emphasizes the bush side of this area. The clothed moose are, therefore, threatening to her, showing how mistaken she is in belittling the evil force of civilization which the local inhabitants, unsophisticated as they are, help to inflict on the world of nature.

Human beings not only dream of civilizing wild animals but also kill them as game. At first the narrator, ashamed of this human cruelty, tries to solve the problem by blaming Americans (as opposed to Canadians who she thinks are lovers and protectors of wild life) as the evil agents of civilization. Since the key to distinguishing Americans, the killers, from other species of humankind is their clothing--"Their checked shirts are their flags" (198)--, Evans the American's clothes are described in detail: "a bulky laconic American in checked shirt and peaked cap and a thick knitted jacket with an eagle on the back" (32). Almost in the end of the book the narrator realizes her mistake. Those hunters whom she thought Americans turn out to be Canadians. Disconcerted by this discovery, she condemns the Canadians as well; "they are all Americans now" (181):

> It doesn't matter what country they're from.... they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into (139).

Canada as a country "is founded on the bodies of dead animals" (43), which means that the Canadians have been killers, too. Everyone who wears clothes, every human being, is now seen as an agency of civilization and enemy of nature.

Her increasing attachment to nature and alienation from culture is also marked by a change in her ideas about gods and clothing as offerings to them. Getting an idea from an article, she at first tries to give her sweatshirt as an offering to the gods she imagines to reside in nature. "Clothing was better [than candles], it was closer and more essential" (156). But later she realizes that clothes are closer to civilization than to nature. Clothes can be an obstacle in the communication between a human being and nature, like "shoes [which] are a barrier between touch and the earth" (172). She reaches the conclusion that offering clothes

to the gods of nature therefore is not desirable. "They offered clothing as a token, formerly; that was partial but the gods are demanding, absolute, they want all" (191). After this realization, to prove her allegiance to nature, she detroys her clothes along with every other item that represents civilization: blankets, beds, sheets, and the pictures of women. She calls her discarded clothes "my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy" (191). She believes that this way she can regain her close ties with nature as well as her integrity, the sense of unity between body and mind, for clothes have put her mind out of touch with her body just as they have cut off the communication between her body and nature.

However, she does not achieve her goal. At the end of the book, she is about to come back to the world of civilization where her lover, Joe, awaits her. One reason for this return, or rather, the reason for her inability to live without clothes is implied by the equation of skin and clothes in *Surfacing*.

As we have briefly seen in Chapter One, clothes are skin in *The Edible Woman*. When Duncan coaxes Marian into letting him iron the blouse she is wearing, she feels being scorched herself, for "the cloth had been so recently next to her skin" (146). Her clothes are her second skin. Duncan's clothing is also seen to be skin-like, and he is compared to an animal seeking for a petting hand and warmth. Marian also refers to his surface in terms of cloth; she feels a desire "to break through the white cloth surface of his absorption" (142).

The identification of clothes and skin is made by the narrator of *Surfacing* more often and more clearly. Americans' shirts are their skins as well as their flags; "their skins are red, green in squares, blue in lines, and it's a minute before I remember that these are fake skins, flags" (198). The destructive nature of civilization which is symbolized by American checked shirts is here so completely assimilated by the Canadian wearers that to separate the meaning of clothes from the personality of the wearer is virtually impossible. Just as Anna is not Anna without her make-up, her disguise, people are not people without clothing, at least in social terms. Clothes are as innate to them as their skin. If you peel their skin off, as social beings they will be dead.

The narrator is so obsessed with the idea that equates skin to clothes that she imagines animals shedding skins as clothing; "the animals are human inside and they take their fur skins off as easily as getting undressed" (61). Joe, her animal lover, "unzips his human skin" (171) before he tries to make love to her, but we are not told what she sees underneath his "human skin," except for her later remark that "He needs to grow more fur" (172). Probably he looks like a vulnerable animal, unprotected, exposed.

Since a human being disappears socially when robbed of her/his clothing, or at least the unnamed narrator thinks so,[46] she decides to go back to the society where she will again assume her human skin, her clothes. A negative interpretation of her return to society is that she cannot accomplish her return to nature and that, in sartorial terms as well as in linguistic terms, once a human being is educated by society, it is impossible for her/him to live except in the terms defined by society; social death is as final as physical death. A more positive interpretation will be that since she has come to terms with her father's death, her past, her true personality and society's demands on her, the narrator's life will now be different even under the same circumstances as before. Both negative and positive interpretations, however, suggest that the restrictions of society, here discussed in the terms of clothing, are far too strong for an individual to escape. The following chapter will look at the most oppressive manipulation of clothes by society, namely, the imposition of uniforms.

[46] In her interview with Linda Sandler, Atwood makes an interesting comment that the narrator of *Surfacing* "concludes that she can't stay on the island, because that will mean death... which isn't necessarily so." Linda Sandler, "Interview with Margaret Atwood," *The Malahat Review* 13 (1970): 12.

Chapter Three

Since one is so often evaluated and one's role or position in society so often defined on the basis of one's clothes, what one wears can decide what s/he is and limit his/her activities at least socially. The discussion in Chapter Three will focus on the restricting side of clothing, which is best demonstrated by uniforms, the species of clothing often chosen for, or imposed on, a group of people by the authorities.[47] Uniforms make it possible for a society to enforce its restrictions on individuals, for what people wear immediately shows what privileges and restrictions apply to them. Uniforms which represent power are worn by the agents of the authorities such as policemen and soldiers. They confer a sense of responsibility on their wearers as servants or protectors of the citizens. But uniforms as badges of power also easily brutalize the wearers by letting the wearers think that they have an absolute freedom to bully or victimize others, a pattern which becomes the reality in politically confused countries or in war. Atwood also represents the other kind of uniforms, those for menial service, in *The Handmaid's Tale*. People in servants' uniforms have little freedom of activity and they are easily victimized; their uniforms proclaim their low social position. Uniforms are thus symbols of controlling and victimization. This power structure, however, has some subversive element. Or rather, it allows some subversive people to exist because they can be used as excuses to restrict the general population's activities and ideologies. The nature of uniforms is clearly ambivalent. Policemen and soldiers are at once controlled and controlling. Even servants can boss servants in lower positions or people who need to flatter them to get access to their masters. This double nature of uniforms evokes opposing attitudes. Some people choose to wear them to gain power; others hate to put uniforms on because they greatly restrict the wearers. But the result is frequently the reverse; willing wearers can find themselves controlled by the uniforms, while the latter group find some consolation in unexpected privileges their uniforms confer.

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[47] For a discussion of the function of uniforms, see Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* 17-21 where she focuses on the wearer's feeling of discomfort, and Lawrence Langner, "Clothes and Government," in *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order* 124-27, where he interprets uniforms from the enforcer's viewpoint.

Many non-uniform garments are imposed on men and women by social demands. People formerly wore black to a funeral by obligation, whether or not they were principal mourners. A business man who wears sombre colors in his office may happily put on a tie of hideous red which has been a present from his seven-year-old daughter on Father's Day. A woman will willingly wear a sexy piece of underwear if it is her lover's favorite item (or merely put up with it to improve a relationship). Presents of garments do not always suit a wearer's self-image; they more often represent the giver's image of the wearer, so "to wear clothes chosen by someone else is to accept and project their donor's image of [oneself]."[48] S/he may be even putting on the giver's ideal of wo/men in general. By giving clothes as gifts, the giver imposes, mentally and physically, his/her image of the wearer or his/her ideal of wo/men on the wearer. The wearer may feel proud of his/her capacity to indulge the giver's desire, or of his/her ability to transform him/herself so easily, or even of his/her attractiveness which has solicited this gift. As long as s/he has an intact sense of self, this new image, however imposed, is an acquisition. Problems start to occur, however, when s/he finds him/herself reduced to nothing more than the image the given/imposed garment evokes.

This chapter will first examine the oppressive nature of uniforms of policemen, soldiers and doctors in Atwood's fiction. Atwood's female narrators offer a female perspective on uniforms, usually worn by males. Doctors' uniforms, white lab coats, are included, because Atwood's fiction presents doctors as sinister, if not clearly violent, symbols of patriarchal society. Then clothes imposed on women by men who think of the women as sexual toys or ornaments will be discussed as a variation of uniforms; the discussion will be from the wearer's viewpoint. The last part of the chapter will explore the function of uniforms--menial ones--in *The Handmaid's Tale* where the distopian setting allows the writer to push her analysis of uniforms and imposed garments to a satiric extreme.[49]

Imposed dresses psychologically and physically confine and restrict. The narrator of *Surfacing* recollects the stiff dresses she was forced into as a girl, forced by society's demand

[48] Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, 22.

[49] Amin Malak, in his article, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition," *CanL* 112 (1987), points out that "Dystopias dramatize the eternal conflict between individual choice and social necessity" (10).

and by her desire to conform to the social norms. Her friend, Anna, despite criticizing those earlier dresses, wears a thick make-up which looks like "a visor" (175). A visor inhibits the wearer from expressing his/her emotions in their eyes or protects from an investigating gaze. Rennie's island lover, Paul, in *Bodily Harm*, wears glasses to prevent people's scrutiny, especially of his political allegiance. A visor also colors the landscape and distort the wearer's sense of reality. These functions are shared by uniforms of soldiers and policemen who also often wear visors. Their uniforms, which express the power of the regime, are impersonal and obliterate every trace of individuality, since "*By wearing the uniform of a particular group, a man shows by his clothing that he has given up his right to act freely as an individual*" and also "Constant wearing of official costume can so transform someone that it becomes difficult or impossible for him or her to react normally."[50] Visors and uniforms block communication between the wearer and the rest of the world. It is significant that one of the magazines Rennie writes for in *Bodily Harm* is called *Visor*.

Violence could be said to be the only possible means of communication in the confrontation of people in different uniforms and also in that of the uniformed and the non-uniformed. Policemen in *Bodily Harm* are "symbols for institutionalized brutality, sanctioned by the patriarchal powers and by the impersonality of their uniforms"[51] Costumes suggestive of violence abound in Atwood's novels. Peter, in *The Edible Woman* , appears as a fashionable hunter, both as an ideal of masculinity and as a physical threat to female bodies. In Marian's mental image:

> Peter stood with his back to me in a plaid shirt, his rifle slung on his shoulder. A group of friends...were gathered around him, their faces clearly visible in the sunlight that fell in shafts down through the anonymous trees, splashed with blood, the mouth wrenched with laughter (70-71).

Peter's attempt to make love to Marian out on the field shows his view of her, or women in

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[50] Laurence Langner, "Clothes and Government" in *Dress, Adornment and the Social Order* 127. Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* 18. Dorothy Jones furthers the argument and says that "When men obscure their individuality behind a mask of anonymous authority and power, women are stripped of their identity and reduced to so much raw material." Jones, "Waiting for the Rescue;: A Discussion of Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*," *Kunapipi* 6 (3) (1984): 96.

[51] Roberta Rubenstein, "Pandora's Box and Female Survival: Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*." *Rev. d'Etudes Canadiennes* 20 (1) (1985): 122.

general, as animals hunted and devoured by him. "Peter uses camouflage to disguise his violence;"[52] Peter's self-image as hunter is both camouflage for his violent desire to hunt and destroy females and an advertisement of his masculine aggressiveness. In either case, he interprets and presents his violence positively.

In *Bodily Harm*, also, Rennie is disturbed by safari jackets:

> She doesn't want anyone sitting beside her on the plane, especially a man who would wear a safari jacket. She didn't like safari jackets even when they were still possible (22).

The man who offers to help her with her bag wears "tinted glasses" (22), another form of visor, and he is "the only white man in the group" (22): a symbol of white invasion in the Caribbean, and of colonization's exploitation and destruction of nature. Safari jackets are uniforms of exterminators of wild animals of Africa. Another symbol of destructive force on the islands, Marsdon, wears "boots, with raised heels, cowboy boots" (128), which Lora believes he sleeps in, for they are so much part of his personality. The same hunter image is summed up as Americans, destroyers of nature, in *Surfacing*.

In *Bodily Harm*, the general setting of the narrative--a former British colony with corrupt politics and anarchic behavior by the unrestrained authorities--allows unlimited violence; uniformed people have a licence to invade other people's territory physically and mentally. When she is imprisoned, Rennie shudders when she sees, or imagines, policemen executing a group of prisoners. At first they are only cutting the prisoners' hair with bayonets. But they move into a torture when they, through carelessness or on purpose, cut a man's head. Seeing policemen do this, Rennie feels that "She has been turned inside out" (290). She thinks that "She's seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like" (290). He is Everyman, like Marian's Underwear Man; he is simply a symbol of the male power, of the collective force of society, which weighs specifically on women by permitting men to be hunters for sexual pleasure. Uniforms of policemen and soldiers, mostly men, represent the masculine power. The film Rennie sees of men in Nazi uniforms torturing women prisoners summarizes the brutality of male authorities. Atwood does not, however,

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[52] Perry Nodelman, "Trusting the Untrustworthy," *CanL* 95 (1978): 79.

limit her concern with victimization to that of women. She uses the now familiar perspective of women as victims in the North American society as a perspective for the great violence (against everyone) in this Caribbean setting.

Another kind of uniformed male authority occupying an important position in Atwood's novels are doctors. Again typically male, but unlike soldiers and policemen, the doctor stands for life as well as death. Atwood's female characters bear witness both to a sinister side of doctors as agents of the patriarchal society and to their regeneratoive role. For example, Daniel, in *Bodily Harm*, is "a model of male normalcy and decency" but he "has performed a mutilating operation (one generally practiced by men upon women's bodies) to save Rennie from her own disease."[53]

Doctors know the scientific (physical) secret of sexuality and can control death and life. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan Delacourt's father is transformed by his doctor's uniform; "He looked much more impressive than he ever had at home, he looked like someone with power" (137). As a professional anaesthesist he has been killer and life-giver; during the war he was forced to kill captives and now he pulls suicides back into life at the hospital. In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie falls futilely in love with her surgeon, Daniel, believing that he knows something about her which she herself does not know, since he has seen inside her. Disappointed, she discovers that he is yet another human male who has needed something from her. Rennie has compared her doctor to loving and guiding fathers and expected him to give protection and advice. Rennie's disappointment with Daniel is similar to Joan's with her doctor father:

> I wanted him to tell me the truth about life... which he must have known something about, as he was a doctor and had been in the war, he's killed people and raised the dead. I kept wanting for him to give me some advice, warn me, instruct me, but he never did any of these things (74-75).

Atwood depicts her women characters' demands on doctors as unreasonable, but at the same time implies that the authority given to doctors fosters such irrational expectations. The doctor in *The Handmaid's Tale* represents the all-mighty image of doctors; he suggests to the

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[53] Roberta Rubenstein, "Pandora's Box and Female Survival," *Modern Fiction Studies* 22 (1976): 125.

narrator, Offred, quick intercourse in the inspection room, so that she will become pregnant and escape from a possible death sentence. His offer seems full of paternal care and sacrifice:

> It's genuine, genuine sympathy; and yet he's enjoying this, sympathy and all. His eyes are moist with compassion, his hand is moving on me, nervously and with impatience (57).

He is feeling benevolent, superior, like the Commander when he has given Offred something that he regards as a special treat; in this chauvinistic society, everything that a man does for a woman is a treat, a charity. The doctor's advance, in the immaculately white office, is supposedly desexed, but in the barren sexual atmosphere of the text, it looks more like distorted eroticism. The doctor's paternal hand appears almost incestuous between Offred's legs. As this instance suggests, sexual behavior in the doctors who Atwood's women characters believe to epitomize the paternal protection makes the women feel cheated. With their conflicting faces as benefactors and exploiters, doctors are another symbol of male authority and as threatening as soldiers and policemen in their uniforms.

Like doctor's labcoats which reassure patients and give the wearers a sense of control, uniforms may offer different gratification to different social groups: power to their wearers, and in even greater measure, the promise of order to those who ordain their use and to the on-lookers. Daydreaming Lesje, half-Ukrainian and half-Jewish, particularly needs to know her classification. This security is granted by her labcoat, which "makes her feel she belongs here [the ROM]" (283). While one may seek and find order in one's own chosen or authorized clothing, one's perspective looks for order in others' appearances. Uncertain identity can be upsetting for those who value orderliness; a miscellany of national clothes, "an Indian woman, wearing a beautiful red sari with a gold band at the hem" with a white lab coat over it and with "two little girls...wearing Scottish kilts" (84), once disturbed Lesje's grandmother's sense of order.

Joan in *Lady Oracle* wants to join the ballet class and the Brownies probably for the same reason that makes Lesje feel confident in her lab coat. "The desirable feeling of belonging to a group which cherishes courage, honor, patriotism and other virtues, is produced by wearing the uniform of a given regiment whose members are comrades in war

and peace" and Joan "always has longed to love and be loved, to be accepted and supported within a group, whether it be her family, the Brownie pack, her high-school class, or Arthur's anarchist friends."[54] Joan's strong desire to be the same as everybody, to feel that she belongs to some established category, derives from her inferiority complex caused by physical handicap, her obesity. Afraid that she might be termed inferior, she sees some groups and uniforms as reliable shelters. The result is, however, that she is victimized both by the ballet teacher and by the Brownie girls; a uniform is not enough to make one a member of the group. This experience teaches Joan to be "wary of any group composed entirely of women, especially women in uniforms" (85). Belonging to a group means both protection by other members when one conforms to the rules and chastisement when one does not. This knowledge of the danger of groups will haunt Joan in her later life when she adopts various adult female images one after another, sometimes by assuming highly individualistic or conspicuous garments, as if her identity paradoxically relies on her capacity to change her image.

Imposed costumes are like uniforms in that they hinder individual expression. The difference between uniforms imposed by the authorities and costumes chosen for one by one of her/his family or friends is that in personal and family relationships such emotional elements as love or desire to please the other influence the choice of garments and the willingness to put on a dress. Auntie Muriel in *Life Before Man* "love[d] dressing [Elizabeth and her sister, Caroline] like twins" (75). Their appearance reassures their aunt that the world, at least as far as her hands reach, is under control. For Elizabeth, however, this memory recalls her resentment and hatred. The new hat was a sort of torture, "with the elastic that cut into Elizabeth's chin" (75); this physical discomfort embodies the mental oppression, the main characteristic of Elizabeth's relationship to Auntie Muriel. Though they are blood relations, these women are linked by hatred; Auntie Muriel's control of Elizabeth is very much like the regulation by the government of its officials. In return, Elizabeth has no

[54] Lawrence Langner, "Clothes and Government," *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order* 126. Clara Thomas, "*Lady Oracle*: The Narrative of a Fool-Heroine," *The Art of Margaret Atwood* 160.

impulse to gratify her aunt by willingly putting on the dresses.

The narrator of *Surfacing* and other Atwood heroines remember dresses imposed on them in their childhood. These have been selected by older female characters, such as mothers, surrogate mothers, and grandmothers. As girls grow older, influence pass from the mother figures to men--their boyfriends, lovers and husbands--though the standards dictating the choices of clothes for women remain the expression of society's ideals of women. Mothers and men attempt to change women into more marketable and attractive forms, though for different reasons. Mothers, whose lives have been confined within conventional ideas, believe this to be the best way for young girls' survival in society. Atwood's narrators' questioning of or rebellion against older women's attitudes gratifies liberated readers yet at the same time makes the pressure tangible. For men, this is the best means to publicize their ability as hunters and owners of women.

In *Bodily Harm*, Jake presses images of women as sexual prey and/or beautiful ornaments on both Rennie's body and mind; he defines her clothes and her looks, specifically in sexual terms:

> He liked buying her things like that [sexy nightgowns]. Bad taste. Garters, merry widows, red bikini pants with gold spangles, wired half-up hooker brassiers that squeezed and pushed up the breasts. The real you, he'd say, with irony and hope. Who'd ever guess? Black leather and whips, that's next (20).

He likes to play the role of housebreaker and rapist (the latter means intruder both in physical and in psychological terms); "Sometimes he would climb up the fire escape and in through the window instead of coming through the door" (27). Though Rennie feels threatened by this role, she tries to persuade herself that this is only a game. Atwood uses Jake's packaging metaphors about their relationship to imply the power structure between them. "You are so closed, Jake said once. I like that. I want to be the one you open up for" (106). Rennie afterwards thinks, "Perhaps he'd said, I want to be the one who opens you up" (106). This paraphrase stems from Rennie's realization that he regarded her as a doll on whom he could superimpose female images, as a flexible figure he could remake into desirable shapes. Though Rennie uses the same metaphor of opening and being opened in her encounter with Paul on St. Antoine, they do not sound as threatening in this instance. She is not being

forced to open; she opens herself. Although Rennie still needs male approval to feel secure about her identity,[55] her relationships to men have certainly changed. Nate, in *Life Before Man* , is a packager like Jake, but less articulate. He does not overtly dictate women's dresses or make presents of clothes but tacitly lets his woman know what he wants from her. He thus makes women think that they are willingly indulging his fancies. Nate's mode of manipulation is most keenly felt by his new mistress, Lesje. Aware that he has built up an illusion of her, Lesje describes her perceptions in terms of clothes:

> The fact is that she's addicted to Nate's version of her. Sometimes, when he touches her, she feels not naked but clothed, in some long unspecified garment that spreads around her like a shimmering cloud (247).

This dress resembles those she tries on in shops but never buys, and reflects her yearning to become a woman in a long, flowing dress like an ancient goddess. Lesje's apparent bodilessness also is symbolized in this unearthly image; she is "an accomplished fantasist, "[56] and it is as if she were not there even while engaged in the most physical act of sexual intercourse. Her decision to become pregnant without Nate's consent and thereby to materialize her woman's body and her role as woman in society (or more narrowly, in Nate's life), springs from her uncertainty about her own existence. Nate's attempt to package Lesje has been thwarted; she is about to create a substantial body antithetical to his image of ephemerality.

Like these images, costumes imposed or chosen by others are rarely acceptable to the wearer. Marian's red party dress, in *The Edible Woman*, makes her extremely uncomfortable. In the dress shop, "She didn't think it was really her, but the sales lady did. 'It's you, dear'" (214). The sales lady's comment shows how commercial motives create and impose ideals of femininity. At the party for which she has purchased the dress Peter's praise of Marian's choise is echoed by all the office people. Peter, like other men (for example, Jake), likes his

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[55] Rowland Smith thinks that Rennie is always in need of male approval. See his article, "Margaret Atwood and the City: Style and Substance in *Bodily Harm* and *Bluebeard's Egg*," *World Literature Written in English* 25 (2) (1985): 262.
[56] Davidsons. "Prospects and Retrospects in *Life Before Man*," *The Art of Margaret Atwood* 213.

woman to look like a prostitute,[57] the consummate form of easily available female sexuality in this consumer society,[58] for it raises her value as his sexual property as long as she is obviously his possession and, simultaneously if paradoxically, "a nice girl," that is, an appropriate corporate wife. Marian in her "festive red dress" (225) and elaborate coiffure is another "finished product," a perfect image of the wife as the property of a promising young professional. But Marian feels that her special make-up, like Lucy's, "look[s] extra [on her body], stuck to her surface like patches or posters" (214); her "sexuality is strangely not inherent in her own person, but rather, in her packaging."[59] She also thinks that it is "impossible in this red dress and this face to behave with the ordinary matter-of-fact politeness that the situation [is] going to require" (229). Used to conforming to Peter's ideas of her and social decor, Marian thinks that the only possible role for her in this party is that of a middle-class [illegible]: the same as that required of the landlady's child, who is seen "in maroon velvet with [illegible]collar...passing cakes" (218) at her mother's tea party.

From the male point of view, a hostess is a female with an aura of sexual availability in exchange for money, though her availability is less explicit than that of a prostitute; she is available only to one person and not to all the other observers. From the female point of view, the hostess combines the roles of professional entertainer and proud owner of the means of accomodating guests. However, the male viewpoint dominates Marian's self-image; the color red suggests Marian's sexual ripeness and presents her as ready prey for Peter's hunting, which act has been described in bloody terms to Len. Now that Peter has exchanged the gun for the camera, Marian feels threatened by his attempt to catch her with it:

> Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change (252).

"What would be 'fixed' is Marion [sic] as Peter wants her to be--his image of her."[60] She

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[57] Ildiko de Papp Carrington, "Another Symbolic Descent," *ECW* 26 (1983): 55.
[58] Robert Lecker comments on Marian as "a cheap prostitute--the female commodity *par excellence*." "Janus through the Looking Glass: Atwood's First Three Novels," *The Art of Margaret Atwood* 182.
[59] Jayne Patterson, "The Taming of Externals: A Linguistic Study of Character Transformation in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*," *SCL* 7 (2) (1982): 155.
[60] Perry Nodelman, "Trusting the Untrustworthy," *CanL* 95 (1978): 77.

would be confined in the role the red dress prescribes for her, "that tiny two-dimensional figure in a red dress, posed like a paper woman in a mail-order catalogue, turning and smiling, fluttering in the empty space" (250). Against this flat image Marian tries to fight, saying, "This couldn't be it; there had to be something more" (250).

The prostitute image becomes dominant when Marian leaves Peter's apartment to go to a hotel with Duncan. At the party she is at worst "Masquerad[ing]" (245) as a prostitute but the image becomes dangerously real on the street. But as soon as she runs away from Peter, the acknowledged owner of her body, she in her red dress becomes a hooker, a commodity for sale. At the hotel reception Marian accepts the clerk's "undisguised though slightly jaded leer" (258), thinking "After all... if I'm dressed like one and acting like one, why on earth shouldn't he think I really am one?" (258). Her behavior with Duncan fits the name of the "Scarlet Woman" (254) for it is near adulterous, Marian being on the verge of marrying a respectable young man. Red dresses are uniforms of prostitutes; Marian merely acts out the image the red dress evokes.

The Handmaid's Tale furthers this regulation of people's behavior by imposed clothes. Margaret Atwood's comment that the phenomenon described in this novel is happening around us everyday is disturbing but convincing. Society has always attempted to suppress opposition movements; today the powerful mass-media offers major help. People tend to have similar feelings and ideas. Mass-media can easily suppress any opposition movement simply by not giving it any opportunity to publicize its opinions and by propagating the majority's ideology. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the suppression of individuals' ideas and feelings are made visible by the uniforms imposed on members of society by the authority; the novel illustrates in sartorial language the control of people's mind by the authorities of society.

The narrator of this female *1984* describes her life as a Handmaid in the chauvinistic regime of Gilead which occupies the former territory of U.S.A. In Gilead women are subservient and their social roles are limited to the procreation and support of an elite population. Handmaids, including the narrator, are kept in centres for the purpose of

progeniture; Marthas do the household chores of these centres, Wives are legal spouses of Commanders, the heads of the centres, and Aunts have the task of educating and controling the Handmaids. All of these women wear uniforms, which prescribes how the wearers should behave, think and feel, regardless of their true feelings and ideas.

The red color of the uniform for a Handmaid defines her sexual maturity and, in the Gilead value system, her productivity or fecundity. However, the cut of the red dress shows that her sexuality is fettered :

> The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen (8).

The shoes and gloves are also red, but the flat heels of the red shoes signify that they are "not for dancing" (8); frivolity is forbidden.

"Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us" (8); red is the color of blood, which evokes death as easily as life. Fecundity is the key attribute of Handmaids and if they fail to conceive children they are exiled. This is a social death. Also, if they commit adultery or treason, they will be executed. The red color stands for their ominous closeness to both death and life.

Red is also the sign of danger. "red is so visible" (274); it is conspicuous and even exciting. There is no way Handmaids can hide themselves or avoid attention. They are to be seen and even to be shown off, especially when they are gloriously pregnant. The Handmaid Ofwarren shops in a store where other Handmaids wait in lines, "vastly pregnant; her belly, under her loose garment, swells triumphantly" (25). The lookers' response is admiration mingled with jealousy; "'Show off' a voice hisses" (25). Their physical unavailability, coupled with their optical obtrusiveness, arouses the looker's curiosity. Handmaids are the favorite photographic objects for the Japanese tourists.

The narrator has no option but to wear this red livery, though she reflects, "I never looked good in red, it's not my colour" (8). This unchosen uniform, however, has effectively changed her ideas and feelings. Her obsession with blood which symbolizes both death and life, makes her think often about her heart and womb. Clothing restrictions have been so

firmly implanted in the Handmaids' minds that when they encounter, on their downtown walk, Japanese tourist women in liberated outfits:

> I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about little things like this (27).

The narrator does not seem to believe these things to be trivial. And she is right, for they are important determinants of our view of life.

The Marthas' green dresses apparently express the nourishing and loving side of women embedded in their domestic activities. But they also represent the jealousy of Marthas who are frustrated by their monotonous work. The blue dresses of Wives proclaim a saintly nature; blue is the color of Virgin Mary.[61] The Wife of the narrator's Commander, whose name, Saint Helena, suggests peacefulness, hardly lives serenely. She is "dried-up and unhappy" (151), jealous and frustrated, for she is legally required to share her husband with his Handmaid even in their monthly ritual of sexual intercourse. She does this with mixed feelings, for her status partly depends on the Handmaid's getting pregnant by her husband. Moreover, she can even show off the baby to other Wives if her Handmaid gives birth; the baby is "something she's won, a tribute" (119). This adoption of an illegitimate heir or heiress by the legal wife has long been a custom in patriarchal society. Saint Helena's former life as a well-known televangelist, whom the narrator recognizes, emphasizes her hypocrisy. The kind of Christianity that televangelists support is as pretentious and as hollow inside as the social system of Gilead; its ideal orderliness is sustained by the oppression of each member's individual desires. The propagators are as unhappy as the deceived and the oppressed; they cannot make the world better even for themselves. Wives' and Marthas' uniforms hide the wearers' frustration and unhappiness behind the appearance of ideal feminine qualities, such as maternal care, peace and harmony, which their colors suggest.

Aunts in their brown uniforms, whose color suggests warmth and stability,[62] most directly force on the younger Handmaids the patriarchal value system of the existing society;

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[61] In classifying blue as the color of "harmony, honesty, and faith," Lurie comments that "in religious art it is associated with the Virgin Mary." *The Language of Clothes* 198.

[62] See Lurie's analysis of the color brown in *The Language of Clothes* 202-3.

they are a good example of Gilbert and Gubar's argument that older female members of the family and of society are the most powerful agents in imposing the chauvinistic ideology on girls.[63] The narrator thinks that the regime of Gilead has created the "woman's culture" (120), which her mother as a woman's lib activist wished for, but in a very different sense. Her mother dreamt of a culture created by women to liberate women; in Gilead women's oppression has been achieved and kept on by women, that is, Aunts and Wives. Once their role is defined by laws and uniforms, women can be as cruel as men towards their sex, both emotionally and physically. The Aunts' dominance and violence are sanctioned by the authorities for whom they work; they are the same as soldiers and policemen, only of a different sex.

Both women's and men's eyes are fixed on Handmaids, whose bodies determine their style of existence and in some cases even their right to exist. But the Handmaids can neither reveal nor acknowledge their own flesh, their clothes minimizing the contact of the Handmaids with their own bodies. The narrator describes her nightgown, a private costume, as "long-sleeved even in summer, to keep us from the temptations of our own flesh, to keep us from hugging ourselves, bare-armed" (179). The white wings of Handmaids' daytime uniforms prevent other people from studying their faces and also the Handmaids from observing the outer world. Their bodies and faces are not only untouchable but unseen. The shape of a Handmaid's wings "geographically announce[s] that its wearer [is] too delicate and sensitive to bear the gaze of multitude."[64] This invisibility is prescribed both for other people and for the Handmaids themselves. They are not allowed to look around or at themselves in the mirror, nor can they touch themselves. They rely on their bodies as a means of survival, they are told to identify with their body, their thoughts concentrate on their flesh, but they

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[63] See Gilbert, S. and S. Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) 575, for the comment that older females have always helped to impose patriarchal values on young girls.

[64] Alison Lurie *The Language of Clothes* 64. Lurie discusses the "inconvenient form of [Victorian] headdress" (64) which resemble Handmaids' wings. One could add that this supposed fragility supplies a good reason to limit women's activities and prevent them from developing their abilities.

are disconnected from their bodies. Moreover, their only possible source of identity is denied by their clothes. Such clothing enforces the sense of deprivation we discussed in *Surfacing*' s narrator. The concealing yet conspicuous uniform reinforces the paradox of the wearer's powerlessness and special status. These contradictory characteristics, which were once the traits of sheltered women of the rich class, have been, like their social role and uniforms, chosen for and imposed on the Handmaids.

Clothes can obliterate individuality. The identical uniforms of Handmaids make them interchangeable, while the complete absence of physical description of Offred emphasizes the unimportance of individuality in Handmaids. When the narrator's companion for her walk has been replaced with a new person, she does not notice the difference until the other person comes really close:

> I see her coming, a red and white shape of cloth, like a kite, walking at the steady pace we've all learned to keep. I see her and notice nothing at first. Then, as she comes nearer, I think that there must be something wrong about her. She looks wrong. She is altered in some indefinable way (264-65).

From a distance Offred cannot define the way she has changed, for though the person is different from the former Ofglen in her face and body, she has the same name and wears the same clothes. Although the narrator, on a closer inspection, immediately knows that her partner has been changed, there is no official language to assert the difference; the new person placidly states, "I am Ofglen" (265), against the narrator's anxious question about the former Ofglen's whereabouts. In this regime a uniform and a name, a name which signifies who a Handmaid belongs to, are the only sanctioned evidence of her identity. Although the narrator establishes a subversive confederacy with both Ofglens, their silent allegiance does not prevent them from being wiped out of existence. The narrator realizes that she herself could disappear and be replaced with another Offred as easily and as completely as Ofglen has been. There is no permanent self for Handmaids. It could be even said that Offred and Ofglen are identical and exchangeable since they are given the same role and the same uniform. The Handmaids only have a collective identity; they are not individuals and do not have separate identities. And once they get beyond the rules that define them, as the narrator's friend, Moira, does when she runs away from the centre, they become nobody; no record remains of

their existence.

Interchangeability and obliteration of individuality apply also to men. Uniforms both repress the individuality of a member of a group and emphasize the collective nature of the group. The Commanders in their black uniforms are exchangeable and disposable, for the Gilead they have created makes them symbols of male authority and male fecundity. They are studs, needed to impregnate Handmaids. Their black uniforms, like Handmaids' red uniforms, at once underscore and conceal the wearer's sexuality, of which everybody is overconscious in the puritanical society of Gilead. The narrator sees her Commander as an item of clothing women try on and off:

> It must be entirely strange.... To have women thinking, he can't do it, he won't do, he'll have to do, this last as if he were a garment, out of style or shoddy, which must nevertheless be put on because there's nothing else available. To have them putting him on, trying him out, while he himself puts them on... (83).

Commanders and Handmaids try each other on; they are each other's limited choice, uniforms they are forced to wear. However, the imposition is more fatal on women; the infertility of Commanders can exile their Handmaids but not themselves. The passage quoted above suggests that men and women are both replaceable items, whose sexuality is the only social value that counts, but the fact that men are the governers of this regime should not be forgotten. The patriarchate of the Christian society is symbolized by the priest-like uniforms of the Commanders.

Uniforms exist in various forms in our modern society, not necessarily identical among members of a group. The narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* recollects the costumes of her feminist mother and her comrades. For them jeans and T-shirts were symbols of women's liberation and also of anti-materialism. In a film which is shown to Handmaids during the training the narrator sees her mother in her young days:

> She's wearing the kind of outfit Aunt Lydia told us was typical of Unwomen in those days, over-all jeans with a green and mauve plaid shirt underneath; the sort of thing Moira once wore, the sort of thing I can remember wearing, long ago, myself.... She's in a group of other women, dressed in the same fashion; she's holding a stick, no, it's part of a banner, the handle (113).

This threatening image of the imagined stick is repeated in the scene of the burning of pornographic magazines the narrator remembers participating in; the "women's culture" in

Gilead now revives the frightening vision. The burning books are reminiscent of the executions of witches in the Middle Ages which have been recreated by the Reign of Terror of the present regime. Jeans and T-shirts, which formerly represented emancipation of women, are given an ominous image now, for they are self-chosen uniforms of Unwomen who are to be shot if found.

Imposed costumes, however subtle the process of coercion is, restrict the wearer physically and mentally.[65] Whether they have been guardians' or lovers' presents or they have been chosen in conformity to society's unvoiced expectations, they deprive the wearer of freedom of self-expression and of thoughts and set the rules of her behavior. Uniforms are the most manifest form of this restriction; they represent the power of the ruling class of society and the obedience of the rest of population.

Oppressed by the uniform of a Handmaid, deprived of freedom to think or feel, and threatened by a total loss of individual identity, the narrator recollects her old wardrobe with nostalgia. She also realizes the basis of the appeal of fashion magazines:

> What was in them was promise. They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica, to the vanishing point. They suggested one adventure after another, one man after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality (146-47).

Whether this promise of transformation, "a new [woman] each day" (222), a new self for each occcasion, can be a viable solution for woman's identity question or not, the old situation seems to be far better than the present quandary of Offred with no choice of clothes. The options provoked by a free and wide-ranging wardrobe is the subject of the final chapter.

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[65] For discussion of restriction by imposed clothes, see Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* 22.

Chapter Four

While most of Atwood's main women characters keep to the safely conservative line in choosing their outfits, some women go for the bizarre to make them stand out in any homogeneous group of properly dressed women. This chapter will look at Atwood's women characters who favor strange clothes as a means of expressing themselves, asserting their individuality, and transforming their new images. The discussion will then focus on the heroine-narrator of *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster, whose changing wardrobe epitomizes "Women's attempts to become something other, to take on a wholly new appearance or [themes which] haunt much of Atwood's work."[66] The goals for these deviations, which are generated by women's dissatisfaction with their present lifestyles, are several. Or rather, the ultimate aim would be to discover or reinforce a sense of self, but there are a number of routes or stages women can go through to reach that point. Women can begin by assuming eccentric clothes to prevent manipulation by others or by society. Ainsley in *The Edible Woman* and Jocasta in *Bodily Harm* represent this type. They put on dresses which proclaim that they will not conform to the conventional images of good women. Rebellion against the authorities can be even more clearly expressed by such garments as mottoed T-shirts in *Bodily Harm*. More positive use of clothes is seen in the attempt to establish the right relationship between oneself and one's social and/or personal setting. Joan Foster of *Lady Oracle* tries to create new selves to fit the environment by changing her wardrobe. Marian and Rennie also adjust their appearances to their social setting, as has been discussed in the previous chapters. Women also attempt to create and express harmony between mind and body; Joan wants images that prove her to be a happy and fresh housewife or a sexually experienced woman and Lesje dreams of herself draped in long, elegant dresses. The narrator of *Surfacing* thinks that she can put her body in harmony with her mind not by putting new garments but by wearing no clothes. All these attempts by Atwood's characters aim at the final goal of discovering or reinforcing their sense of self and then finding more congenial ways of thinking and living.

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[66] Carolyn Allen, "Margaret Atwood: Power of Transformation, Power of Knowledge," *ECW* 6 (1977): 5.

The women discussed in this chapter all try to express their feelings, ideas and ideals and to create new selves by assuming new sets of outfits. These women use clothes, whose restricting side has been discussed in Chapter Three, to liberate themselves and to further their quest for identity. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how, and how effectively, Atwood's characters utilise their clothes.

Some minor characters in Atwood's fiction offset the central characters with their taste in eccentric clothing and lifestyle. Ainsley, the seemingly radical feminist in *The Edible Woman*, always wears conspicuous colors and has unconventional ideas about life. She "goes in for neon pink" (12), wears "an orange and pink sleeveless dress" (12), and prefers "a shade of green that border[s] on turquoise" (243) that makes her look magnificent in pregnancy "with eyelids and shoes to match" (243). She is far from being neat in her private life; she has hangovers, never takes the empty bottles of alcohol out and makes Marian do her laundry. Though her marriage at the end of the novel to Fischer, the stereotype of father image, makes her hitherto consistent behavior as a convinced feminist, which has been treated sarcastically enough, look even more like a caricature,[67] she also helps the reader to notice the equally stereotyped viewpoints of Marian. Ainsley's psychology is an easy case for an amatuer analysis and her personality is described as eccentric in the terms of her clothes and catchword statements by Marian the narrator, whose opinions at first are as conservative and as antifeminist as her outfits. Ainsley wears and changes her ideas as easily as she selects and changes clothes. Ainsley's final settlement into the role of conventional bride, which is emphasized by her plan to go on a honeymoon to Niagara Falls, sets off Marian's final isolation or independence; Marian's final position is neither to be summed up in the popular terminology of feminism or to be classified as antifeminist and conventional. Marian's change in the course of the narrative is so subtle that the reader hardly expects an obvious change in her wardrobe to embody her transformation.

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[67] T.D. MacLulich thinks that "Like Peter, Ainsley is 'well-packaged,' and her conduct--particularly her pregnancy--is derived from the notions of fashionable psychological gurus." MacLulich, "Atwood's Adult Fairy Tale: Levi Strauss, Bettelheim, and *The Edible Woman*," *ECW* 11 (1978): 122.

Another advocate of conspicuous clothes is Jocasta, Rennie's friend in ***Bodily Harm***, who owns Ripped Off, a second-hand clothes store, and herself wears items from her store:

> [The store] specialize[s] in violently ugly clothes from the fifties, springolator pumps, tiger-striped pedal pushers, formals with jutting tits and layers of spangles and tulle (24).

Jocasta's former name was Joanne, which she forsook as being "Too *nice* " (24):

> what can you do with a name like Joanne?... She didn't dye her hair green or wear a safety pin in her ear but calling herself Jocasta was the equivalent. Good taste kills, said Jocasta (24).

Her bad taste in clothes signifies rebellion against a society which values good taste as a symbol of conformity to social rules. Her adopted name, that of Oedipus' mother, suggests sexual distortion,[61] which would be compatible with her outfits:

> At first [Rennie] thought Jocasta was a lesbian, because of the way she dressed, but later decided Jocasta was merely bizarre (25).

The way Jocasta dresses challenges social conventions, including traditional sexual roles, therefore it is easily mistaken as a sign of homosexuality.

Rennie hardly can decide whether Jocasta is admirable or not:

> Rennie liked Jocasta because Jocasta was much more bizarre than Rennie felt she herself could ever be. Partly she admired this quality, partly she felt it was dangerous, and partly, being from Griswold after all, she had a certain contempt for it (25).

Herself locked by her family's principles of decency and silence and her relationship with Jake, Rennie envies Jocasta's freedom. However, coming from Griswold, where individuality in dress is never praised as it is in big cities, Rennie cannot fully accept eccentric costumes. Just as Ainsley's feminist ideas are a foil to Marian's conventionally proper attitude, Jocasta's bizarre habits underscore Rennie's fundamentally conservative values. Atwood's description of Jocasta is as perfunctory as was that of Ainsley; no explanation is given about why she prefers eccentric clothes and her friendship with Rennie is superficial. When Rennie has lost one breast through cancer, Jocasta's way of consoling her is to stand her lunch:

> Jocasta paid for Rennie's lunch. That meant she thought Rennie was in terrible shape, on the blink of death in fact.... I'm hardly dead yet, Rennie wanted to say.

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[61] I owe this knowledge to Roberta Rubenstein, who argues that the name of "Jocasta alludes to unnatural sexual acts." Rubenstein, "Pandora's Box and Female Survival" 128.

> But she was touched by this gesture, it was support after all, Jocasta had done what she could. She had paid for lunch, which was a big thing, and she's been as amusing as possible (167-168).

Jocasta's attitude highlights Rennie's superficial concern with life, which is a fatal epidemic of the modern times. The truth is that everybody is afraid of going deeper, because it can hurt; to acknowledge and understand somebody's pain can be very painful. The best way to avoid unnecessary pain is to ignore people's suffering; "Talk about your own life, life after all goes on, shun morbid subjects (168). This is what Rennie and Jocasta consider "A positive attitude" (168) but is in fact easy escapism. Jocasta's bizarre clothes and nonchalant views, which win the partial admiration of Rennie, are actually a camouflage for her fear of being exposed. Anna's make-up in *Surfacing* is another disguise, a mask behind which she hides her true self;[69] in her case, unlike Jocasta, the mask conforms to society's expectations, just as Marian's proper clothes do. Just as the narrator of *Surfacing* penetrates Anna's mask of make-up to see her mental scar, Rennie's pretense that her only concern is surfaces proves ineffective in her struggle to protect herself from political involvement in the Caribbean resort; superficial concern will not help one in real political crises.

Clothing can express willing involvement in politics. Among the various ways of showing one's political opinions in clothes, the most obvious is to wear T-shirts or sweatshirts with mottoes on them. This is articulation of one's ideas rather than implication of them, which can be done, for example, by wearing red for Communism or by wearing the colors of a nation's flag to express patriotism. In *Bodily Harm*, the extremely politicized situation of the two Caribbean islands is signified by the number of motto wearers among the local residents. Elva, the mother of the opposition candidate, Prince, combines "a red T-shirt with PRINCE OF PEACE on it in white" (183) with the two incongruous items of "a pink cotton skirt with red flamingo on it and a black jockey cap" (183). This strange combination must

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[69] Catherine McLay and Theresia Quigley agree on the meaning of Anna's make-up. McLay says that "Anna's make-up becomes a form of disguise behind which she hides from the world", and Quigley, that "Anna is a woman hiding from her husband, from herself, and from the rest of the world, behind a mask of cosmetics." McLay, "The Divided Self" 84-85. Quigley, "*Surfacing*: A Critical Study," *Antigonish Review* 34 (1978): 79.

jar on the nerves of Rennie, for whom clothes should be fashionably matched and who thinks that T-shirts with mottoes are out of fashion now. "She liked T-shirts with mottoes on them when they first came out, but now she thinks they're jejune" (44). Obsessed with the current fashion, Rennie overlooks the meaning of the motto. In contrast, for Elva, this T-shirt and its motto is far more important than matching items, because the motto shows her desire to change her life, the life of people around her. The slogan has both political and religious meanings; or politics and religion have been closely related throughout history. The words refelct the Catholic background of the isles, the dominance of martyrdom in political movements and the regenerative phase of political leaders. Worn by large numbers such mottoes can be a threatening force, just as uniforms of policemen or soldiers, wearers proclaiming their opinion in the clearest of sartorial languages. When worn by a group of citizens, a motto which opposes the existing regime expresses a strong menace to the government, which is, by the time things reach this state, on the verge of a collapse.

Lesje in *Life Before Man* also wears a mottoed sweatshirt:

> She's wearing her Adidas and a navy-blue sweatshirt that says SMA[illegible]S BEAUTIFUL on it in red. This was once William's idea of a good thing to [illegible] for her birthday; it didn't occur to him that the lettering would run across her chest. She hasn't worn it much (244).

William, beside referring to the environmental policy, may have meant it as a compliment to her slender body, but the fact is that Lesje is far from reassured by the motto. It has not been her choice, she feels that she is wearing William's idea of her, and what is worst, her small breasts are accentuated by the red letters, as if to publicize her physical inferiority. She feels ashamed of her italicized smallness, instead of proudly showing it off.

While Lesje's sweatshirt is chosen for her, some Atwood characters, like Jocasta and Ainsley, select conspicuous clothes for themselves. Joan Delacourt Foster, the narrator-heroine of *Lady Oracle*, no doubt has the strongest inclination for and interest in assertive clothes among Atwood's central characters. She starts to wear strange garments in her adolescence to rebel against her intensely proper mother, whose favorite "navy-blue suit with a white collar and a pair of white gloves" (109) exemplifies her pursuit of propriety in

everything.[70] She "subjugated [Joan] to several years of Sunday school, with white gloves and round navy-blue felt hats held on by elastic bands and patent-leather Mary Janes" (103). Determined to baffle her mother, who "thought [Joan] should buy clothes that would make me less conspicuous, the dark dresses with tiny polka dots and vertical stripes favored by designers for the fat" (85), Joan instead seeks out:

> Clothes of a peculiar and offensive hideousness, violently colored, horizontally striped.... The brighter the colors, the more rotund the effect, the more certain I was to buy. I wasn't going to let myself be diminished, neutralized, by a navy-blue polka dot sack (85).

Joan deliberately chooses assertive clothes. Like her overeating habit, they assert her opposition to her mother's monstrous desire for dominance. Also, early informed that she was an unwanted child, Joan is afraid of disappearing, losing her right to existence, under the pressure of her mother's negation; conspicuous clothes and overeating protect her bodily. Such fear of loss of identity as Joan's childhood experience causes[71] also provides a reason for the desire of Joan and other Atwood characters to transform themselves into definite feminine images.

If it is possible to assert one's existence or beliefs by what one wears, it must also be possible to demonstrate how one feels at a particular moment or what one wants to look like on a particular occasion. In other words, clothes may express one's semi-permanent ideas or feelings or create new images which suit the wearer's present mood or her ideals.

Ainsley in *The Edible Woman*, scheming to seduce Len into fathering her child, transforms herself into an innocent-looking teenager. She easily accomplishes her goal with the help of excellent make-up techniques and a well-chosen set of clothes. She appears in the hotel bar:

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[70] Clara Thomas refers to Joan's mother as "a female cipher, symbolized by the utter conventionality of her clothing, a navy-blue suit and a white hat," Clara Thomas, "*Lady Oracle* : The Narrative of a Fool Heroine," *The Art of Margaret Atwood* 162.

[71] Frank Davey notices the importance given to Joan's childhood in the novel, whereas virtually no information is supplied on Marian's childhood in *The Edible Woman*, although this omission does not limit the usefulness of *The Edible Woman* for my discussion. See Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics* 213-14.

> in a cotton creation... a pink and light-blue gingham check on white with a ruffle around the neck. Her hair was tied behind her head with a pink bow and on one of her wrists she had a tinkly silver charm bracelet. Her make up was understated, her eyes carefully but not noticeably shadowed to make them twice as large and round and blue, and she had sacrificed her long fingernails, biting them neatly to the quick so that they had a jagged schoolgirlish quality (68-69).

The inspired choice of a gingham check suggests both sexual immaturity and countryside simplicity. The pink and pale-blue of the gingham and the hair ribbon often appear on small girls. Big eyes are reminiscent of babies, unexperienced, credulous, and vulnerable. All the other details match to emphasize Ainsley's painstaking masquarade. Ainsley has also changed her behavior to match her outfits. She sits down meekly and speaks little instead of shattering the two male chauvinists with her feminist eloquence. By "blush[ing] a warm and genuine-looking pink" (69), she acts out "her latest version of herself" (69), which Marian thinks is:

> Like one of the large plump dolls in the stores at Christmas-time, with washable rubber-smooth skin and glassy eyes and gleaming artificial hair. Pink and white (69-70).

Ainsley has succeeded in making herself fit the conventional image of a babyish girl, which emphasizes the powerlessness of socially approved femininity. This vulnerability will, she calculates, by stimulating Len's "male instinct" for hunting helpless females, paradoxiacally help realize her worldly wise woman's scheme.

Ainsley, however, soon realizes that she has at first overshot the mark of attracting Len:

> At the first encounter she had made herself into an image of such pink-gingham purity that Len had decided, after her strategic repulse of him that evening, that she would require an extra-long and careful siege (121).

Ainsley has to now maintain the image she has constructed of herself, by wearing "a blouse and jumper outfit set off by earrings in the shape of tiny daisies and an extra good eye-job" (124). But Len is such a credulous audience and so easily taken in by Ainsley's performance that she succeeds before the task becomes too tiresome, partly by employing the male seductive tactics of alcohol. She is a very good actress who knows better than to belittle the power of costumes and setting. Her achievement is the more triumphant because she cleverly

uses men's stereotyped views of women, their conventional "instinct" for chasing and the "male tactics," all of which she fiercely despises.

In contrast to Ainsley's pose of purity and innocence, Martha's clothes in *Life Before Man* express obvious sexual invitation. At the party to which she has invited Nate, her former lover, she purposefully flirts with another man in front of him:

> Martha is wearing a long dress, some synthetic material, red.... The neckline is too wide.... One of her bare arms is hooked through the arm of the man standing beside her (94).

Her red dress, like Marian's in *The Edible Woman*, evokes the image of a prostitute and is cheaply arousing. Red seems to be Martha's favorite color; later in the novel she is seen in "a red wool suit with lipstick to match" (220), which makes her smile "a red gypsy grin" (220) in Lesje's eyes.

Martha's boots are also sexually provocative. Nate, who has tired of her heavy eroticism, "feels a twitch of desire. It can't be the boots, Martha has always had boots" (251). The sensual connotation of boots is more positively presented in *Lady Oracle*, where boots help to realize Joan's sexual fantasies. Joan and her lover, the Royal Porcupine, seek out a pair of antique boots:

> The only pair I could get on were black lace-ups with steel toes, washerwoman boots, but even these were desirable. We bought them, and later a pair of black net stockings to go with them (256).

Though the boots are too tight, Joan manages to wear them for half an hour, long enough for a couple of waltzes with the Royal Porcupine.

In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie remembers that Jake used to call "high-heeled sandals, open-toed with multiple straps, magenta" "fuck-me shoes" (28). Because such sandals, like long boots, have been worn by hookers,[72] they represent cheap eroticism, commercialized sexuality. Violence and sex tend to be connected in our imagination[73] and boots, symbol of sex

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[72] Alison Lurie comments in *The Language of Clothes* on "Thigh-high patent leather boots, first worn by the most obvious variety of rentable female as a sign that she was willing to help act out certain male fantasies" (10); they therefore are sexually arousing.

[73] Greg Ostrander mentions the link between sex and death. See his article "Foucault's Disappearing Body" in *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* No. 11; 1-2 (1987): 130.

elsewhere, are the epitome of violence in Bodily Harm along with soldiers' uniforms.

Since Elizabeth's wardrobe in *Life Before Man* consists mainly of elegant, professional outfits, her clothing, though feminine, is not usually sexually suggestive. However, some clothes in her closet belong to her rendez-vous with Chris and therefore disturb Elizabeth when her small daughter wears them:

> It's a blue dress, dark blue; the last time she wore it was with Chris. His hands were the last hands to undo the hook.. upsetting to see her daughter wearing it, wearing that invitation, that sexual [illegible].

Nate feels a similar anxiety when he sees his children in make-up:

> his children intervene, clumping up the cellar stairs in toeless high heels, wrapped in cut velvet and satin, their mouths reddened with some long-discarded lipstick of his mother's, their eyebrows penciled black.... *Soon they will be women*.... They will demand brassiers (265).

Nate's anxiety partly arises from the foreboding that they will join the group of women who judge him, criticize him; also precocious dressing-up of small children is always upsetting to grown-ups.[74]

Underwear is, because of its direct contact with the body, also sexually exciting. Some of Rennie's collection of underwear, the sexier items, are presents from Jake, who purchased them for his sensual gratification: "Two of her nightgowns, the black one with the see-through red top and the red satin one slit up the sides" (20). Joan Foster's "Weekend Set underpants" (257) are coveted by her lover, who wishes to make them into a work of art, aiming at comical eroticism. Wearing something (not necessarily underwear) is usually more arousing than wearing nothing, so the Royal Porcupine and Joan waltz in his warehouse, "he in his top hat and nothing else, [she] in a lace tablecloth" (256). Generally speaking, in Atwood's novels, sex is either threatening or comical instead of genuinely erotic. Fusing both effects, the underwear salesman's disclosure of women's lingerie to Elizabeth comes as a surprise and then a comic relief:

> The suitcase is full of women's bikini briefs, samples: red, black, white, pink, mauve, trimmed with lace, sheer, embroidered, some with--she can see--split crotches.... He lifts a pair of black briefs with the word STOP embroidered on a

[74] Alison Lurie. "Unless they are clearly a form of play-acting, grown-up party clothes on a child... can be very disturbing, since they suggest precocious sexuality." *The Language of Clothes* 54.

> hexagonal scrap of red satin. "A very popular item," he says, his voice switching to a salesman's insinuating baritone. He sticks his finger through the split crotch, wiggles it (90).

Elizabeth, who was contemplating the desirability of having an affair with this man, now realizing the cheapness and ludicrousness of this idea, withdraws from it. Though Elizabeth's distorted sexual taste finds "His hand, tented in black nylon, clothed like a puppet in some woman's empty groin... at last... exciting" (90), this temptation is also too absurd for both her and the reader to take seriously.

Later, this vision of a hand in underwear becomes a threatening memory in Elizabeth's fumbling with the same man. Elizabeth's love affairs are usually ominous, as is symbolized by Chris' suicide, or at best mechanical and devoid of emotion. Nate's remark, "whatever it was Chris did say to get her to open the LOVE LATCH on her brassier" (7), emphasizes the comic side of the latter quality. Sexuality or sexual acts are translated into the sartorial language and clothes come to suggest, to represent, or even to take over the wearer's sexual life.

Since one can assume a personality or a trait such as sexual provacation along with a set of clothes, one can transform oneself simply by changing costume. Sandwiched between two women, his mistress and his wife, Nate thinks that "He should have two sets of clothes, two identities, one for each house; it's the lack of this extra costume or body that is cracking him apart" (223).

Joan in *Lady Oracle* is the best practitioner of this theory of transformation through clothes. After she has lost all her extra weight and become an attractive woman, she feels at a loss as to what to do with her new self; "I'd spent all my life learning to be one person and now I was a different one" (145). Though she has always been a good actress, inventing plausible roles and convincing plots, she has been hitherto protected by the cover of fat. "Without my magic cloak of blubber and invisibility, I felt naked" (141); now she does not know how to cope with strangers' leering eyes and crawling hands and she has to "develop [female fears] artificially" (140). She also feels that her former self, which she wishes to keep out of sight of other people, still follows and inhabits her slim body. Denying that self, she is

forced to invent stories about her past and create new roles to play. As she enacts these new selves, which suit the settings and the partners, she selects from her changing wardrobe. Everytime she picks a new image to maintain, she begins a whole new set of costumes; her life can be "viewed as a continuous socialization , a series of careers, in which old identities are sacrificed as new identities are appropriated.... Each turning point of life is marked by a change of dress."[75] Women can also acquire new selves without discarding old ones by possessing various types of clothing; the Commander of *The Handmaid's Tale* remarks that women used to buy many different clothes to "trick the men into thinking they [are] several different women. A new one each day" (222). Whereas Joan creates a new self and a new wardrobe to fit each new man, the Commander's comment points to women's attempt to change their images so that they will not bore their lovers. Atwood's writing suggests that this effort for variety, conducted to gratify others, weakens women's sense of identity.

Joan's first role in London after she leaves her homeland, Canada, is that of a sexually ignorant young girl. This is very much her true self, at least much closer to the reality than the art student manquee image which she has presented to Paul. Her "heavy sack-shaped flannel gown... bought at Marks & Spencer's" (149) proves her far from bohemian or sexually well-experienced. Having accepted the position of the Polish count's mistress, she imagines herself to be "fat and content, sitting in his apartment during the day, wearing a flowered negligee, a little mending, reading trashy books and eating chocolates" (151); a image of life with no inhibition or responsibility which she enjoyed in her movie-going sessions with Aunt Lou, though Joan does not analyse its appeal to her. When she meets Arthur Foster, a young political activist, she enacts the role of girlfriend and admirer, acquiring over-night knowledge of Bertrand Russel's writing. For their wedding Joan picks up a mass-produced dress, cheap but properly white with tiny flower embroidery. Later, as Arthur's inefficient wife, she wears something slightly behind the times, in contrast to Marlene's smart-looking jeans wear:

> She [Marlene] was wearing a faded-denim jacket and jeans, with a flower embroidered on the jacket pocket.... She smiled at me, cool and competent. I, of

[75] Gregory P. Stone, "Appearance and the Self" 243.

> course, wearing fringes: a shawl, a dangly necklace, with which I could be easily strangled, a scarf. My hair needed washing, my fingernails were dirty, my shoelaces felt untied, although I wasn't wearing any (230).

The last comment signifies Joan's inferiority complex, here expressed in sartorial terms. Whereas Marlene's modish outfit proclaims both her activism and her feminine attractiveness, Joan's sixties hippy costume represents both her untidiness and dated sense of fashion. This appearance, however, is, like her "liberal" causes, the outcome of Joan's efforts to be what she thinks Arthur wants her to be; the negligent wife image gratifies one part of Arthur, by giving him a sense of male superiority.

As the author of *Lady Oracle*, a collection of mysterious poems, Joan prefers womanly but dramatic dresses such as " a long red gown" (238), which she wears for a TV interview, and an "apricot velvet gown" (289), in which she cheats Fraser Buchanan, a blackmailer. Arthur inhibits Joan from wearing these costumes in public so she locks them away and dons them to enact romantic love fantasies:

> I would close the bedroom door, drape myself in silk or velvet, and get out all the dangly gold earrings and chains and bracelets I could find. I would dab myself with perfume, take off my shoes, and dance in front of the mirror, twirling slowly around, waltzing with an invisible partner (18).

Because of her "costume-oriented life style,"[76] costumes are indispensable to Joan both in her real life and in her fantasies.

Joan's craze for strange costumes culminates in her affairs with the Royal Porcupine, alias Chuck Brewer, who first appears garbed in "a long black cloak and spats... a gold-headed cane, a pair of white gloves, and a top hat embroidered with porcupine quills" (241). Joan finds him "attractive. Him or the cape, I don't know which" (241). He shares Joan's escapism and enthusiasm for bizarre clothes or even surpasses her in both points. They frequent "junk shops, combing them for vests, eight-button gloves, black satin Merry Widows and formal gowns of the fifties" (257) and enjoy acting out roles to disguise their relationship:

> Sometimes we dressed up in middle-aged tourist outfits, bought at Crippled Civilians, and registered under assumed names [at motels on Joan's trans-Canada tour]. In

[76] A phrase from Robert Lecker's essay, "Janus through the Looking Glass," in *The Art of Margaret Atwood* 197.

> Toronto I started going to parties, not exactly with him, but five minutes before or after. We'd get other people to introduce us to each other. These games were childish, but a relief (269).

The Royal Porcupine is concerned only with surfaces: "Everything, for him, was style; nothing was content. Beside him I felt almost profound" (257). Chuck Brewer believes in the power of clothes so strongly that he ends up trying to take over Arthur's place in Joan's life by assuming Arthur's outfit of jeans and a T-shirt. For Joan, "It was horrible. He'd thought that by transforming himself into something more like Arthur he could have Arthur's place" (273). Instead of succeeding, he "murder[s] the part of him that [Joan] loved" (273), the elememt of fantasy symbolized first by his cloak. He more naively trusts transforming power of clothing than Joan. She is also fascinated by this power but is becoming aware of its limits and of the difficulty of acting out many selves in different phases of her life.

Joan's strong interest in costumes and in their power to create personalities shapes also her Costume Gothic Romances, in which characters, especially women characters, appear in such archaic garments as "'fichu' and 'paletot' and 'pelisse'" (156), terms Joan looks up in library encyclopaedias. Joan also studies the stalls of second-hand garments on the Portobello Road "to fix and make plausible the nebulous emotions of my costumed heroines, like diamonds on a sea of dough" (160). Setting and plot determine the characters' personalities and behavior while costumes define and express their feelings. Clothes may act as substitutes for the heroines; "Bad things always happened to the clothes of my heroines" (132) rather than to the wearers themselves. Costumes are so important that Joan thinks if she can "only get the clothes right, everything [will] fall into line. And it [does]" (156). The characters become costumes which the reader as well as the author, Joan, can put on and off as she likes. Charlotte, the chaste virgin heroine of *Stalked by Love*, whose personality increasingly irritates her creator, is described as an uncomfortable garment; "Wearing her was like wearing a hair shirt, she made me itchy" (321).

Joan's fantasies about herself always assume a similar form of costumed romance. In Terremoto, Italy, when she imagines that Arthur is coming to rescue her, she thinks that she

should be standing on the right kind of balcony, wearing the right kind of clothes:

> I'd always been fond of balconies. I felt that if I could only manage to stand on one long enough, the right one, wearing a long white trailing gown... something would happen (3).

Setting and costume are everything. However, Joan's detailed description of outfits, which is caused by her heavy reliance on clothes as a means of fantasizing, sometimes becomes comically realistic. Her fantasy on the Italian balcony is made pathetic when she pictures "Arthur descending towards [her]...in his uncomfortable shoes and well-aged cotton underwear" (4). This realistic description, instead of making her fantasy more plausible, lets the world of reality invade the world of fantasy.

When her real life invades her fantasies, Joan's fantasy world begins to disintegrate despite her power of imagining costumes. Charlotte becomes an "itchy" mental costume for Joan's position in real life is closer to that of Felicia, the deserted wife of *Stalked by Love* than that of Charlotte, the desired virgin. Joan now wants to spare the life of the wife, whose death is essential for a satisfactory core of the romance.

Joan also realizes that fantasies cannot save one's life when they are completely cut off from reality. Fantasies can get as monotonous as real life for they always follow a limited number of stereotyped plots. If fantasies do not change the reality, then how much do clothes, especially eccentric costumes such as Joan wears to perform her fantasies, help women to find out their more desirable selves or to establish new identities in their real life?

The Commander of *The Handmaid's Tale* obligingly presents Offred with an outfit along with cosmetics, which have been long denied her:

> He's holding a handful, it seems of feathers, mauve and pink. Now he shakes this out. It's a garment, apparently, and for a woman: there are the cups for the breasts, covered in purple sequins. The sequins are tiny stars. The feathers are around the thigh holes, and along the top (215-216).

This item must have survived the burning of frivolous clothes which was called "the Manhattan Cleanups" (216) in New York. In contrast to the uniforms women are now forced to wear, these garments were symbols of freedom of sexual expression.

However, this [illegible]ery item is not so much a sign of liberation as another livery. First, it is not to her taste; it is not what she would choose to wear. Second, [illegible]tume

for a particular place and occasion. The Commander takes her to a cabaret for foreign visitors and Commanders where all the women wear similar clothes:

> The women... are tropical, they are dressed in all kinds of bright festive gear. Some of them have on outfits like mine, feathers and glitter, cut high up the thighs, low over the breasts. Some are in olden-days lingerie.... Some are in bathing suits, one-piece or bikini.... Some are in jogging shorts and sun halters, some in exercise costumes.... There are even a few in cheerleaders' outfits... (220).

All these are costumes for women as sexual commodities. These garments are uniforms which have been imposed alike on heterosexual women and on the narrator's friend, Moira, who is gay, regardless of their different taste for sexual behavior and expression. Offred is the Commander's possession, "an evening rental" (219), to be shown off and stared at; "they review my breasts, my legs, as if there's no reason why they shouldn't" (221). While the Gilead uniforms confine women in the extremely limited number of roles, the liberated costumes equally define the wearers within the range of female stereotypes approved by the society which existed before Gilead.

It is extremely difficult to break the mold of one's consciousness shaped over a long period of time and through various means of education. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's relationship to clothes becomes more and more troubled as the story develops. Joan chooses clothes as well as roles to make life run smoothly, or more gratifyingly. She tries to create new self images by assuming new costumes. However, her clothes take over from their wearer. Once they get out of the wearer's control, they start creating new images and develop the rest of the plot.

Clothing seems to have its own life, independent of the wearer's. For Joan, a dead person's clothing always represents the owner. After Aunt Lou's death, Joan resents her mother collecting Aunt Lou's clothes to be donated to charity:

> I saw Aunt Lou disappearing, piece by piece, into the brown paper bag which was swallowing her endlessly, her breezy clothes, her gay scarves and follies, her jokes about herself which my mother took seriously (that magenta blouse, for instance), and I couldn't stand it (118).

When Joan's mother dies, her clothes also disappear quickly; her unloving husband has "already given [her] clothes to the Crippled Civilians" (179) by the time Joan comes home from England. Her house also has lost its former atmosphere of neatness and cleanness, the outer evidence of Joan's mother's obsession with propriety.

Clothes, however, do not so easily die. They disappear on the owner's death but survive elsewhere. Looking around the London second-hand clothes market, Joan is fascinated because so many garments and possessions have survived their wearers: "the flotsam left by those receding centuries" (160). Joan's own clothes, which she was wearing when she pretended to drown in Lake Ontario and which she has buried in the garden of the Italian villa, threaten to assume their own life and to surface:

> Below me, in the foundations of the house, I could hear the clothes I'd buried there growing themselves a body. It was almost completed; it was digging itself out (322).

Joan is afraid that the revived clothes might disclose not only her recent past but her obesity-haunted childhood. They *do* revive, though in a different way; the landlord brings them in, dug out, washed, and ironed, in order to blackmail her. Joan's old self, which she meant to throw away along with its last costume, seems to have survived. Once a personality is established, it cannot be wiped out as long as the garments are there. Just as the characters of her last Costume Gothic Romance have gotten out of Joan's control and begun to choose independent lines of conduct, Joan's own personalities, created for convenience or for fun, get out of Joan's manipulating hands and go their own ways, garbed in their respective costumes.

Joan's fantasies and wishes as well as her Romances have been constructed out of the material everyday life offers and comply to accepted social norms. Though she has seemed to be free in her fantasies and writing, she hasbeen bounded by her society and its culture, like her characters in the convention of Romance. Joan's imagination has been as much molded by the values of her society as her Gothic Romance characters' feelings have been defined and expressed by their stereotyped costumes. She has "internalized" female "stereotypes" society offers as part of her social initiation process,[17] and by assuming different sets of garments to enact her different selves, Joan has merely assimilated the conventional female images.

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[17] Coral Ann Howells writes in her essay, "Worlds Alongside: Contradictory Discourses in the Fiction of Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood" in *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature*, eds. Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1985) that "the stereotypes have been internalized" (124) during a woman's growing-up.

When Joan tries to get out of her fictional world because its plot has reached a deadlock, she is trapped both in the book and in real life; even her escapade from Toronto has taken her only to an already familiar Italian village, whose name, Terremoto, sounds like a twisted version of Toronto. She cannot cast off her internalized masks. As a critic rightly argues, "Joan acts out a series of roles, occasionally stepping out of the role to ponder who she really is. Her masquarade is a parody of freedom itself. She may be free to change roles, but nevertheless remains imprisoned within the role. The danger is...that one of the masks of the self will be internalized. This is...what happens when Joan begins to identify with her fictional characters."[78] The troubled situation of Stalked by Love reflects Joan's reality.

There seems to be no way out for Joan; she perceives the invalidity of her way of living but "she cannot act positively on [her] insight to get out of the cycle that has defined her life."[79] The ending of the novel shows Joan determined to write science fiction, another unrealistic genre,[80] and trying to fit herself into the role of nurse, which reminds one of Marian's self-image as nurse in white in *The Edible Woman*. The nurse image in Mavis Quilp's novels has also fascinated Joan. The reader feels helpless. Has she not learned something? Was her regret false? She seems to have learned a little. She truly regrets what she has done. But that is not enough to rescue her from the vicious circle of plotting, dressing up, acting and getting trapped. Her lapse into a familiar pattern more or less exemplifies the pattern of the other Atwood heroines, who glance at a different world, realize the possibility of new ways of life, and learn the need to reach them but do not achieve this goal. Their powerlessness makes them frustrating to read about.

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[78] Susan Maclean, "*Lady Oracle*: The Art of Reality and the Reality of Art," *JCF* 28-29 (1980): 186.

[79] Like Maclean cited above, Emily Jensen admits Joan's insight but concludes that she does not get out. "she cannot act positively on that insight to get out of the cycle that has defined her life." Jensen, "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*: A Modern Parable," *ECW* 33 (1986): 48.

[80] Many critics agree on the negative evaluation of Joan's writing science fiction. Susan Maclean dismisses science-fiction as "a literary genre which is further removed from reality" than romance, while Robert Lecker argues that "science fiction... is paradoxically built on the same structural principles as romance." Maclean, "*Lady Oracle*: The Art of Reality and the Reality of Art" 195 and Robert Lecker, *The Art of Margaret Atwood* 203.

This chapter has briefly studied how women characters in Atwood's fiction express themselves in their outfits: how they try to "get out" of predicaments and to achieve new selves. Ainsley in *The Edible Woman* and Jocasta in *Bodily Harm* express their disagreement with the female stereotypes approved by society by wearing conspicuous clothes which proclaim them as convinced feminist and possible lesbian, or at least as eccentric. Clothes, like mottoed T-shirts in *Bodily Harm*, can declare the wearer's political opinion, or like Ainsley's girlish outfits in *The Edible Woman* and Martha's sensual dresses in *Life Before Man* , can advertise one's sexual ignorance or maturity and attract the other sex. One can also create new self-images by a whole new set of garments, as Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* does in order to transcend her deadlocked reality. Joan's Costume Gothic Romances show how crucial clothes are in her attempt to create her dream world. The outcome of these women's attempt is, unfortunately, not very encouraging. However bizarre or different a woman's dress may appear, it is different because it operates against a norm. Therefore the women may look different, even assert themselves, but only within the limits of their culture. And very often they end up being trapped in the images they have created with the assistance of clothes, images which reflect, rather than criticize, the values of society.

One positive point about these attempts at transformation, however, is that the women keep trying. They at least show their desire to change themselves, their dissatisfaction with the status quo, and their determination to do something. Though their failures reveal how difficult it is to get out, to break free from the iron grip of their society and its values, it is better, much better, than to remain ignorant of society's control over people and to protect oneself by conforming to the sartorial rules of society.

Conclusion

None of Atwood's women characters lives an easy life. Instead they are threatened, diffident, alienated and lonely. Though there are other components of life, such as food, sexual relationship and concern with time, which communicate the narrators' predicaments to the reader of Atwood's fiction, this thesis has focused on the sartorial device as the basis of Atwood's exploration of women's quest for identity. The first chapter studies how the women characters feel obliged to conform to the sartorial values of their society and how the same women evaluate other people by the same standards. Marian of *The Edible Woman*, Elizabeth of *Life Before Man*, and the narrator-heroine of *Surfacing* are most obsessed by these rules. Marian's fiancé, Peter, though male, owns a wardrobe which symbolizes the conventional values of patriarchal society and Marian reacts against his dominance by rejecting conservative views. The clothing values of the village she visits after a long absence restricts the narrator of *Surfacing* while Elizabeth uses the same kind of, though urban, values concerning clothes to control the world around her and keep her own mental balance.

These women characters have internalized sartorial rules completely. Examination of their chilhood reveals that they have been educated in sartorial terms since birth, at the hand of older female members of the family. Society as distinct from family also influences their views of clothes by showing women's ideal images through mass-media and indicating that conformity to these models is the shortest way to win others' appreciation and admiration. The purpose of this education is to make their survival as women in society easy, by molding them in the approved stereotypes of femininity. Although all the women characters studied here abhorred the selected costumes for little girls they were forced to wear, they were at the same time fascinated by the feminine images presented by society. They have assimilated the clothes values thoroughly by the time they become sexually mature. Only *Surfacing's* narrator has kept or revived her childhood revulsion. She discards her garments in an attempt both to regain ties with nature and cut off herself from cultural restrictions. Her final resuming of clothes, however, suggests how inseparable a human being's existence is from her/his clothes. It is as if there would be no life possible without clothing.

The most obvious form of restricting clothes is uniforms. Uniforms of soldiers, policemen, and doctors represent the oppression of women by a chauvinistic society. Clothes imposed on women by their mothers and lovers also restrict women; their operation is more subtle but no less effective than that of clear forms of uniforms. The last topic of the third chapter, *The Handmaid's Tale's* distopian setting offers the author a suitable stage for exploring the confining power of imposed clothes; like a microscope the story magnifies our vision of sartorial power, but the report is by no means the less true for exaggeration. Uniforms can distort the wearer's way of thinking and feelings; they also define the relationship between the uniformed and the uniformed, and between the uniformed and the non-uniformed.

Women also use dresses to achieve tranformation and create new selves, thereby to liberate themselves. Some Atwood characters indeed establish new selves by assuming new and fitting sets of clothes and attitudes. The heroine of *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster, is a good study, for she changes her wardrobe more than once to change her role in life and succeeds in the attempt. However, her final quandary shows, like that of other women characters, the difficulty of transforming and liberating oneself by assuming new clothes. In their attempt at self-liberation the women do not break from the traditional ideals about women and sex offered by the culture in which they have been brought up; therefore they cannot go beyond the limits of their society's ideology which suppresses them.

In my discussion of women's clothes, women's relationship to men has occupied an important place throughout. Sexual attractiveness, if not availability, is an important factor in women's dressing up. To be a good sexual object, to look attractive, to please men's eyes, are the standards by which women's values are determined. Since women have been long men's possession and ornaments rather than individuals, their appearance has been the major concern of society, not their feelings or ideas. Women's clothes, therefore, have become more colorful and diverse than men's. Women, "naturally," have become more concerned with the topic of clothes and are sensitive to what their dresses can signify.

It may sound as if women's obsessive concern with garments could strengthen their inferior status in society, by focussing their concern on their own appearance as objects, commodities, ornaments. Even the attempts of transformation discussed in Chapter Four may seem pointless and futile struggles by women who unknowingly confine themselves in different female stereotypes.

But their attempts show their dissatisfaction with the present state of women. The narrator of *Surfacing* questions sartorial devices, though she cannot avoid going back to them. Joan Foster of *Lady Oracle* tries to transcend her deadlocked marriage; even though her technique of banal fantasies ends in failure, her persistence and inventiveness deserve the reader's approval. Marian rejects the model of femininity her society and Peter value, though she has not changed much in the end. Rennie realizes how deceived and deceiving she has been in her way of treating clothes.

Many critics despair at the incorrigible blindness of Margaret Atwood's heroines, who do not seem to learn too much from their more or less hard experiences.[81] Other critics, however, have more lenient views.[82] Atwood herself asserts that all her main characters change. If one can believe her words and look at the stories that way, they begin to assume more hopeful significance and positive assertions.

Their life-long education and molding by society have been too effective and too thorough for the women characters to create and assume radically new modes of thinking and living. They are also physically trapped in the society and the culture they were born into. Whatever clothes they choose to put on have been produced by the culture of their society. Bizarre costumes can signify the wearer's need to assert difference but their eccentricity depends on the existent values for its definition. And it is impossible, as the narrator of

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[81] For negative interpretations of the endings of Atwood's novels, see Robert Lecker in *The Art of Margaret Atwood* 193: Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality* 88: Frank Davey, "*Lady Oracle's* Secret: Atwood's Comic Novels," *SCL* 5 (1980) 219.

[82] The following essays offer mainly or partially positive evaluations: Carolyn Allen's "Margaret Atwood: Power of Transformation, Power of Knowledge": Catherine Seldrick Ross, "Nancy Drew As Shaman: Atwood's *Surfacing*," *CanL* 84 (1980): 7-17: McLay, "The Divided Self": Sullivan, "*Surfacing* and *Deliverance*," *CanL* 67 (1976): 6-20:Patterson, "The Taming of Externals": Nodelman, "Trusting the Untrustworthy."

Surfacing thinks, to live outside society, without clothes, for a human being once trained to be a social being by conforming to the rules of society. However much Atwood may have liked to emphasize the conception of clothing as a means of transformation, clothing as a means of coping is far more dominant in reality. In her fiction, therefore, clothes are more important in helping women to discover themselves than in enabling them to fulfill themselves.

It is, therefore, more for the reader than for the characters to attempt to explore new modes of existence Atwood lets the reader glance at with the heroines. The reader, culture-bound as she may be, is free to go beyond the space and time of the novels, to follow the path whose beginning Atwood supplies her with and to create a future much more substantial than that which Joan will invent in her science fiction.

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Abbreviations for Names of Periodicals:

CanL Canadian Literature

ECW Essays on Canadian Writing

JCF Journal of Canadian Fiction

JCSR Journal of Canadian Studies and Research

SCL Studies of Canadian Literature

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