

Risking it all: rising self-awareness in plath, atwood, and wollstonecraft



What is “normal”? We spend enough time, collectively, trying to figure out just that, but if women think it’s complicated now, what about women making their way before us? Expectations were rigid, gender roles carefully defined, and opportunities far more limited. In Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1969), and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), we quickly grasp how great societal pressure was on women, and how this pressure could — and in the case of the three female protagonists examined here, did — lead to significant emotional distress.

It’s not as if the three characters in Atwood, Plath, and Wollstonecraft aren’t aware of their struggles and the uphill battles they face, merely due to their gender — quite the contrary. It is this awareness, paired with each character’s drive to buck gender-specific expectations, that leads to a degree of instability, whether that’s paranoia, depression, or simply heightened awareness. Each of these characters tests the boundaries, but not without consequences. As they question their roles and push for independence, their struggles result in a host of insecurities and the development of significant emotional issues.

The first indications of insecurity occurs with a “triggering incident” that inspires each of the characters to question her identity, including her role as a woman and wife (or future wife). This turning point inspires a period of self-reflection that results in a major change in professional and personal motivation, personality, and even establishment of self-worth. All of these periods of self-reflection are related to men and the protagonists’ relationships with these men. The most apparent emotional distress fueled

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by a man is Marian McAlpin's in *The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood. Atwood's character is a typical mid-century modern woman, caught between career and relationship. She doesn't adore her job, but she's on the career girl-track nonetheless: "At times I'm certain I'm being groomed for something higher up, but as I have only hazy notions of the organizational structure of Seymour Surveys I can't imagine what" (p. 13). Atwood demonstrates that, while Marian is responsible, she struggles with her direction. She has a steady job that pays well, but one gets the sense that she's unsure of her next step, and not entirely satisfied with her options. She knows that she appears more put-together than she seems, commenting that when she met her fiancé, Peter, "He had been quite formal and had asked me what I planned to do. I had talked about a career, making it sound much less vague than it was in my own mind, and he told me later that it was my aura of independence and common sense he had liked," (Atwood p. 61).

Marian's confusion about herself — how she seems and how she truly is — is enhanced by those around her. They are an exceptionally undecided lot, both male and female, single and married. Through Marian's eyes, we witness her fiancé's distress at his last bachelor-friend getting engaged, the determination of her unwed roommate to get pregnant, the desperation of the three "office virgins" to meet men, and her college friend's ambivalence to a steadily growing, chaotic family. Some look for love, others look for personal fulfillment, and others don't know where to look at all. Marian's interaction with these individuals is far from useless, however. She contrasts her experience with others' and hears anecdotes that spur on self-

examination. Everyone's going in a different direction. From Marian, to her roommate Ainsley, we get the impression that each character struggles with self-fulfillment and meeting others' expectations. For example, Marian's college friend's husband, Joe, comments that every woman needs to proceed with caution when getting married, saying "' I think it's harder for any woman who's been to university. She gets the idea she has a mind, her professors pay attention to what she has to say [...] when she gets married, her core gets invaded [...] The centre of her personality, the thing she's built up; her image of herself, if you like'" (p. 259). Marian's on the crux of marriage herself, and is at first pleased, saying to her fiancé, "' I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you,'" (p. 94) and then transitioning into a nervous wreck: " All at once she was afraid she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle [...] She was afraid of losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer" (p. 240).

Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, making her way through her bachelor's degree at a prestigious college, also claims to be losing what defines her. She states, " The one thing I was good at was winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end" (Plath p. 73). Esther laments the conclusion of her college career, and she knows that one of her options is " a husband and a happy home and children" (p. 72). She sounds confused by the prospect of it all, as well as vulnerable, and she views her life as a series of mutually exclusive choices. Like Marian, she wonders what path to take and realizes that many women are pushed out of jobs post-marriage — or remain spinsters if they refuse to give up what they love. Greenwood is

equally troubled by her interactions with her boyfriend Buddy, including those related to sex. When Esther asks Buddy if he's had an affair, he tells her that he has plenty of experience in the bedroom. Esther thinks " After that something in me just froze up. [...] Actually it wasn't the idea of Buddy sleeping with someone that bothered me [...] What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending that I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress" (Plath ch. VI, para. 67-71). Esther has a similar period of doubt brought about by an experience with Constantin. When she contemplates sleeping with him, she begins to question the expectations and implications of her choice: " This woman lawyer said [...] Of course they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say that they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would all lose respect for her" (Plath ch. VII, para. 45). Before that pivotal moment, Greenwood considered her future: " I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story [...] One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another was a brilliant professor" (ch. VII, para. 20-21). She concludes " I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest" (para. 22).

Both Marian McAlpin and Esther find snags in their relationships based on how men see them sexually, and how their experience differs from their partners'. McAlpin feels unsettled as early as her first meeting with Peter in *The Edible Woman*. In his apartment after he expresses remorse over his friend's recent engagement and they make love, she wonders how he views her: " Or maybe — and the thought was chilling — he has intended [making love in the bathroom] as an expression of my personality. A new corridor of

possibilities extended itself before me: [...] what kind of girl did he think I was?" (Atwood p. 63).

While Esther Greenwood and Marian McAlpin question their futures, Maria in *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* knows what she wants, and she understands the expectations foisted onto women. She's socially aware, and in many ways, she's more confident in her role than Esther or Marian. Perhaps, as a woman of a certain standing (arguably in a more socially elevated class than the other two), she's simply more confident. Perhaps it's also because she has so much more time to think, imprisoned in an asylum. Nevertheless, Maria is comfortable with her voice and her opinions — comfortable enough to become intimately involved in a legal case. As Wollstonecraft notes in chapter 17, " Maria took the task of conducting Darnford's defence upon herself. She instructed his counsel to plead guilty to the charge of adultery; but to deny that of seduction" (para. 1). Maria is not only taking part in what Colleen Fenno in " Testimony, Trauma, and a Space for Victims: Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria: Or the Wrongs of Woman*" calls a " participatory justice system," but she is taking part in a new movement of legal reforms, including a refinement of criminal justice (para. 6). And yet, in Wollstonecraft, Maria opens with questions. As early as chapter one, Maria " endeavoured to brace her mind to fortitude, and to ask herself what was to be her employment in her dreary cell? Was it not to effect her escape, to fly to the succour of her child, and to baffle the selfish schemes of her tyrant — her husband?" (ch. 1, para. 5). Despite her supreme confidence shown through her appeal to the courts at the end of the unfinished book, Maria wasn't always so confident.

Characters in Plath, Atwood, and Wollstonecraft speak out against the status quo. Each woman is introspective, aware, and highly intelligent: Marian in *The Edible Woman* has a bachelor's degree (only approximately 138, 000 women had bachelors degrees in 1960, in contrast to 254, 000 men in the United States, as noted on Statista. com). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood is finishing her degree in the late 1950s, while Wollstonecraft's Maria is multilingual and self-educated. These women are trained to question and to examine — and they do. Part of this questioning is whether or not they are “normal,” one that ultimately causes serious concerns in their own minds about their sanity. In *The Edible Woman* and *The Bell Jar*, the female protagonists question their stability after going through a period of self-exploration. For one, Marian, it's brought on by an engagement; for the other, Esther, it's sparked by new relationships and change. While both characters aren't viewed as unusual by the general public, they question whether or not they “deserve” this description. One gets the sense that the two characters believe they are hiding their deep flaws, almost as if they are “tricking” the general public. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian becomes preoccupied with her faults and continues to ask her peers whether or not they view her as unusual. In it, she perceives others to be steady, healthy individuals, while seeing herself as flawed in a deep and unchangeable manner. In the book, Marian asks Ainsley, her roommate, Peter, her fiancé, Clara, her college friend, and Duncan, her unstable acquaintance, whether or not she is “normal” — and when nobody states that she isn't, she becomes convinced that they are, in some way, mistaken: “She had gone over in her mind the other people she might talk to. The office virgins would be intrigued

and would want to hear all about it, but she didn't think she would be able to give her any constructive advice" (Atwood p. 224).

Marian is further disturbed when she discovers that, even when describing her problems to Clara, she is unable to feel entirely satisfied with the answer: " Though she was sure Clara's explanation [of bridal nerves] wasn't the right one, she had felt better" (Atwood p. 226). In Jinal Sanghavi's piece, " Madness In The Edible Woman," the author asserts that Marian's struggles are actually caused by her " struggle to assert her identity and identify her role in society" (Sanghavi, Abstract, para. 3).

This is not only the case in *The Edible Woman*, but in *The Bell Jar* and *Maria*. In each of the novels, the female character, is battling an internal change. That internal change is viewed as abnormal by the characters themselves, while the resulting " normality" and equilibrium experienced during their transformative period is seen as abnormal by their friends and family. Marian realizes that her relationship with Peter is unhealthy, but after telling him " " You've been trying to destroy me [...] you've been trying to assimilate me" " (p. 299), he retreats in fear — and Marian feels better than she has in some time. Esther Greenwood comes to terms with " cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig-tree" (Plath p. 226) and, instead of forgetting, finds an inner peace despite Dr. Nolan telling her that " a lot of people would treat me gingerly, or even avoid me, like a leper" (p. 226). Maria's court involvement would have seemed highly unusual, and yet it appears to be cathartic.

In each of the books, the characters question their sanity further as the books continue and interactions with men become more numerous. Each of

the novel's protagonists wavers through a trigger event and then becomes more unsure after unfulfilling relationships continue. For Marian, her relationship with Peter, and her engagement, continues to affect her negatively. Instead of her feeling the "normal" excitement over the engagement, Marian begins to question her relationship, Peter's intentions, and if what the future holds in store for them is what she truly wants: "If that's who Peter really is, she thought, walking along one of the corridors, will he have a pot-belly at forty-five?" (Atwood p. 267).

Maria's relationship with Darnford also provokes certain questions. The young woman has been abandoned by her husband, and despite hearing Jemima's horrific tales of mistreatment and anguish at the hands of men, still finds herself drawn to her companion at the asylum. Wollstonecraft writes: "To Darnford she had not shown a decided affection; the fear of outrunning his, a sure proof of love, made her often assume a coldness and indifference foreign from her character" (ch. 4, para. 5). Maria struggles with her wants as a woman, to marry Darnford, and her urge to live with him in what individuals of that period would consider "sin." In chapter 16, Wollstonecraft reflects: "She wished to avow her affection to Darnford, by becoming his wife according to established rules; not to be confounded with women who act from very different motives, though her conduct would be just the same without the ceremony as with it, and her expectations from him not less firm" (para. 20).

Both authors Plath and Atwood are said to have based their books on their lives, and it is interesting to imagine how their struggles with men's sexual freedom (and women's lack thereof) impacted their views of themselves. In <https://assignbuster.com/risking-it-all-rising-self-awareness-in-plath-atwood-and-wollstonecraft/>

Margaret Atwood: *A Critical Companion*, the author asserts that the character of Peter is based on Atwood's boyfriend (and fiancé), Jay Ford (Cooke p. 50). While she told him not to “take this personally,” part of Atwood's appeal is her ability to identify discomfort in a relationship where power and equality shifts and change as the relationship matures.

Plath's real-life relationship with Dick Norton, who inspired the character of Buddy Willard in *The Bell Jar*, is a fascinating look into the writer's real-life relationships. She was both drawn to and repelled by Norton, a medical student with an eerie insistence on accuracy and a lack of the emotion necessary for a stable relationship. Harold Bloom notes in his guide to *The Bell Jar* that “The eligible woman is recognized by her education, accepted as a professional for the equal-partners companionate marriage. [...] Her sexual identity is denied before marriage, accepted after. Now you see her; now you don't” (p. 118).

Wollstonecraft may have also used her life as inspiration for some of the background in *Maria*. The author was incredibly independent for her time and sought to support herself as a writer. Her struggle for independence led her to pen *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1798, and she received a good deal of criticism for her work — interestingly, from women. Critics included Hannah More and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who disagreed with Wollstonecraft's view on education. In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, Wollstonecraft laments the fate of well-educated women sans independent means, titling her chapter “Unfortunate Situation of Females, Fashionably Educated, and Left Without a Fortune” (Wadewitz).

While each character experiences some sort of “break” — Marian leaving her own engagement party, Esther attempting suicide, and Maria despairing over her husband’s mistreatment — they do find a way to go on. All three authors remind us that all is not lost, no matter how far our lives seem to go off track. Marian breaks off her engagement and begins to eat again; Esther finalizes her relationship with Dick Norton and prepares to “graduate” from her program. While Maria was never completed, we see Maria gathering strength as the novel goes on, making efforts to change her present circumstances and the lives of those around her. All three protagonists are motivated, and despite their issues, we know that they have learned a great deal about themselves. We can all relate to that, and ultimately, each novel concludes with a bittersweet, resonating strength.

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