

# **The Edible Woman Study Guide**

## **The Edible Woman by Margaret Atwood**

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## Plot Summary

“The Edible Woman” was first published in 1969 and was written by the Booker Prize-Winning author Margaret Atwood. Due to the book’s exploration of gender stereotypes and when it was released, many have associated it with the feminist movement in North America. Margaret Atwood insists that the book should actually be considered “proto-feminist” because she completed writing it in 1965. Switching between the first-person and third-person narrative and painting an accurate picture of the typical issues a young professional woman dealt with in the 1960s, *The Edible Woman* is a study in the evolution of women’s roles in the mid-20th century.

The book opens with a typical day in the life of Marian McAlpin. She is a college graduate in her mid-20s who works writing questionnaires for a survey company. She types up the questionnaires on the products that the company is testing and goes door-to-door asking questions of consumers. She lives with her roommate Ainsley in a small apartment, that is a converted servant’s quarters and part of a larger home. The woman who owns the home lives downstairs with her teenage daughter and is very strict about what her tenants do so that it will not corrupt “the child.” Marian and Ainsley have only known each other for a few months but have an amiable roommate agreement where each cleans and is busy with her own job and life.

Marian has been dating Peter for several months and only sees him on weekends. He is a handsome young lawyer who lives in a nice apartment and Marian believes that their relationship is exclusive, but casual. When Peter’s last college friend gets married, he is deeply troubled. When Marian sees him a few days later, however, his mood seems to have changed. Peter asks her why the two of them “shouldn’t get married” and Marian is surprised at the proposal, but accepts. She tells Ainsley who thinks it is a bad idea and decides not to tell anyone at work for fear of losing her job. Ainsley also confides in Marian that she has decided to have a baby, but not bother with getting married. Marian disapproves but can see that Ainsley is determined.

One of Marian’s old college pals arrives in town and Ainsley shows up at a dinner date with Marian and Peter, dressed much younger than her age. She plans to seduce Len and make him the father of her baby and Marian is torn as to whether to warn her friend or let the cards fall where they may. Marian becomes overwhelmed when she feels like an accessory to Peter at the dinner and she runs away from the group. Len chases her and Peter and Ainsley try to head her off with the car. She cannot explain her erratic behavior and the group writes it off as her simply being drunk.

Two months later, Ainsley successfully seduces Len and discovers that she is pregnant. Len is furious but Ainsley maintains that she does not need him to be involved. After hearing a lecture at the Prenatal Clinic about the importance of a “father figure,” Ainsley changes her mind and tries to get Len to marry her. He refuses and she ends up marrying a willing man on the night that they meet.



As Peter begins treating Marian more like his wife and less like an individual, she develops an aversion to certain foods. It begins with a piece of steak, and then it extends to eggs, rice pudding and some vegetables. As she begins to wonder if she has a mental problem, Marian starts secretly seeing an English graduate student named Duncan. He is the extreme opposite of Peter but Marian finds that she is drawn to his neurotic ironing and co-dependence.

Despite the fact that Marian is getting married, Duncan suggests that the two sleep together. Marian becomes overwhelmed playing “wife” at a party at Peter’s apartment and agrees to Duncan’s proposition. The two spend the night in a seedy hotel and the next day, Marian goes to the grocery store and gets all of the ingredients needed to make and decorate a sponge cake. She shapes it to look like a woman and when an angry Peter arrives, she places it in front of him, accusing him of trying to destroy her. She insists that he devour the cake instead and their engagement is effectively ended. With Peter gone, Marian sits down and begins to ravenously eat the cake. Ainsley arrives to announce that she has gotten married and is leaving. Marian cleans the apartment for two days and eats a steak. Her relationship with food is back to normal. When Duncan arrives, looking for attention, she gives him the rest of the cake to eat.



# Chapters 1-6

## Summary

Chapter 1: Marian McAlpin is a woman in her mid-twenties with a college degree, living in an apartment in Toronto, and working for a marketing research company. Marian's job consists of typing up questionnaires on new products and going door-to-door to ask people for their opinions. She lives with Ainsley, another young woman with a degree, who has a temporary job working at an office that handles defective toothbrush claims. The apartment they share is located on the top of a larger residence and the owner of the home is conservative, often complaining if the girls do anything that could "corrupt" her teenage daughter. Marian leaves for work and is stopped by the "woman down below" who complains about smoke from the apartment the night before when Ainsley was cooking. Marian misses the bus and ends up riding the next one with Ainsley. The women go their separate ways to work at the bus stop and Marian ends up being forty-five minutes late.

Chapter 2: The atmosphere of Marian's office is described. Her desk is located on the second floor, surrounded by several other women in various roles. The third floor houses the all-male executives of the company and the lower floor has all of the mechanical equipment and computers. Marian is asked to help taste-test three types of pudding and then she is forced to begin contributing to the company pension, though she does not want to, because she is told that it is "obligatory." She meets for coffee with three other women from her office, "the office virgins," and Ainsley joins them. The office virgins discuss office problems and Ainsley tries to insert her own deep, psychological thoughts.

Chapter 3: Marian's boss, Mrs. Bogue, approaches her and asks her to work over the weekend surveying men about a new type of beer. Marian is annoyed, especially since it is a long holiday weekend, but she agrees. Marian's boyfriend Peter calls to cancel their dinner plans and is very upset because his college friend Trigger is getting married. Lucy brings Marian a complaint from one of the survey respondents and asks her to help write an apology letter because Lucy has a headache. Marian's college friend Clara calls to invite her to dinner and not wanting to deal with the complaints of her overly-pregnant friend alone, Marian asks if she can bring Ainsley along.

Chapter 4: Marian and Ainsley go to visit Clara and her family in the suburbs and find Clara sitting uncomfortably in the backyard while her husband Joe tends to the other children and housework. The three find it difficult to make conversation and Ainsley offers to hold the baby to give Clara some rest. Clara tells Marian that their old college pal Len Slank has returned from London and that she thinks it was because he got in trouble for messing around with a young girl. Ainsley shows interest in hearing about Len but both women insist that she would not want to date him.



Clara's oldest son Arthur comes near the women and Clara explains that he has been pooping and hiding it places. Joe comes outside to take care of Arthur. A few minutes later, dinner is ready and everyone goes inside to eat what Joe has prepared. Ainsley asks Joe what he thinks about Len Slank, and Joe is also very disapproving. Marian feels guilty that there is not more she can do to improve the mood and circumstances of Clara's life. As they are leaving, Joe thanks both women for coming and encourages them to come back soon since Clara has so few people that she can talk to.

Chapter 5: On the way to the subway, Ainsley criticizes Clara and Joe and their relationship. She disagrees with the way that Clara allows Joe to do everything and how she lets herself be treated like a "thing." Marian disagrees and tries to defend Clara, though Ainsley makes good points. Back at the apartment, Marian calls Len Slack and makes arrangements to go to dinner the next night, along with Peter. He accepts and does not directly answer Marian's questions about why he left London so quickly. Ainsley approaches Marian a few minutes later and tells her about her plan to get pregnant, but not to get married. Ainsley explains that it is in a woman's nature to have a child and that having a man around is not a necessity. Marian argues with Ainsley and warns her about the foolishness of the idea but Ainsley is determined and says she has already started looking for the right man to impregnate her. Marian gives up trying to reason with Ainsley and goes to bed.

Chapter 6: On Saturday morning, Marian sets out to do her survey of men for a new brand of ruggedly marketed beer, Moose Beer. She decides on a residential neighborhood with a large apartment building at the end. The first house she approaches refuses to take the survey and gives her religious tracts about abstaining from alcohol instead. The next man takes the survey and then tries to make an inappropriate move on Marian, who leaves quickly. When she makes it to the apartment building, she goes to the first door, marked with a "6" and a young man she assumes to be about fifteen years old answers the door. He says that he is 26 and agrees to do the survey.

His apartment is a mess of food containers and papers and the only suitable place for the two to sit down is in his bedroom, though Marian is uncomfortable. He gives vague and contradictory answers to the survey questions. He tells Marian that he does not actually drink beer and she is annoyed that she has wasted time on the survey. His roommates return home and offer him a beer, which he accepts, and Marian is aggravated that he cannot give a straight answer.

## Analysis

The everyday life of Marian McAlpin is described in the opening chapters of the book. She is educated but spends her days doing menial work at a survey company. When people seem surprised that she has such a job, she remarks "what else can you do with a B.A. these days?" This is the author providing commentary on the state of women in the workplace in the early 1960s. Though many young women were earning college degrees, they were still not able to secure jobs that required the degree. In Marian's



office, she remarks that all of the executives on the top floor are men and the bottom floor houses the computers and other machines of the company. This is an allusion to the “glass ceiling” effect that women have struggled to overcome in the workplace for decades – the women of Marian’s office are considered just above the machines but not worthy to break through the ceiling and become active executives on the top level. Marian acknowledges that she will never make it to the top floor and that there is really no future for her at the company, unless she plans to stay in the same job for the duration of her career.

The introduction of Marian’s landlady is representative of an old-school, conservative approach to being a woman. The “woman down below” symbolizes the traditional ideals of how a woman should behave and she watches over the young women as if they are sinners that need to be converted to the proper religion. The landlady is never named and is written to represent an ideal and not a specific person. Marian and Ainsley view her as a brooding symbol. Though they clearly disagree with her stance, the young women realize that there is nothing that they can do to change her attitude so they just try to avoid her. This was the mentality for many young women in the early days of the feminist movement in North America – to live their lives quietly in their own way, not trying to stir up trouble. Ainsley overcomes this fear later in the book and Marian wonders why she was ever afraid of the woman who was so easily “deflated.” This is symbolic of the momentum of the feminist movement that started quietly but roared loudly once it gained momentum.

The book is not simply a metaphor for the feminist movement, however. This is too simple of an analysis. It is also a story about easing into adulthood and learning from experiences. Marian is already aware that she is better than her job but she also realizes that there is no room for growth at the company. Like many young people, even in contemporary times, Marian feels trapped by her independence. She knows that she needs a job in order to survive on her own and that she is expected to take care of herself now that she is a college educated, working adult. As a result, she does things against her better judgment like signing up for the pension plan and working over a holiday weekend to simply keep her job. She is also very passive when it comes to her interactions with her landlady. Marian is not yet sure how to stand up for herself at work and in her personal life, and she is too afraid to rock the boat and risk losing her job or apartment.

## Vocabulary

magnanimous, penance, cretinism, chignon, symbiotic, languidly, convoluted, obligatory, gaiety, furtive, invalid, harried, dubiously, portentously, limpets, mundane, furtively, entangled, vehemence, chesterfield



# Chapters 7-12

## Summary

Chapter 7: Marian returns home from doing the surveys and begins to get ready for a night out with Peter. She stops to pick up some food on her way over since she is unsure if Peter will want to go out or eat at her place. Peter's apartment building is described in detail and he is the only tenant as the rest of the building is still being finished. Marian is not sure what sort of mood Peter will be in since he seemed so upset on the phone the day before about his friend getting married. When she arrives, he is in the shower and has made her a drink. He comes out of the bathroom in a towel and tells her that he wants to show her something. She follows him into the bathroom and the two make love in the bathtub. Marian recalls the other two odd places that Peter wanted to have sex when two of his other friends got married and she is happy that Trigger is the last friend on the list.

Chapter 8: Marian and Peter head to meet Len Slank for drinks at the Park Plaza, a popular bar. At first, Peter is annoyed that they are spending the evening with Len but he ends up enjoying his conversation with the other man. Marian does not say a word as the two men talk about photography and their careers. Ainsley arrives unexpectedly, dressed like an innocent, young schoolgirl and Len immediately takes an interest. Ainsley does not order a drink, wanting to perpetuate her innocent image. Marian can see that Ainsley is trying to seduce Len for the purpose of getting pregnant and she is irritated. Marian becomes overwhelmed with her role in the gathering, and excuses herself once to get some fresh air and again to the bathroom after she begins crying at the table. She manages to compose herself enough to make it through the rest of the meeting but once on the street, Marian lets go of Peter's arm and starts to run.

Chapter 9: Marian runs through the streets near Park Plaza and Len chases after her on foot. Peter and Ainsley try to head her off with the car. Marian darts into the large yard of a private property and scales the brick wall. Peter and Ainsley are waiting for her on the other side and they convince her to get in the car. Marian appears to be back to her senses and no one makes a big deal out of her strange actions. All four drive to Len's house for another drink, though Ainsley continues to keep up the appearance that she does not drink and has a soda instead. Marian again feels left out of the conversations and crawls underneath Len's bed, where she becomes stuck. The others do not notice that she is gone for some time and are alarmed when she is found to be stuck under the bed. Peter and Len lift the bed and let her out and Peter decides it is time for them to go home. Marian refuses to get in the car with Peter and says that she will walk home instead. He finds her ten minutes later and coaxes her into the car. They argue in the car and Marian expresses her feelings that she was left out. Outside Marian's house, the two hold each other in his car for a few minutes while waiting out a downpour and Peter asks Marian to marry him.





Chapter 10: The next morning, Marian tells Ainsley about the engagement and her roommate is less than thrilled. Ainsley is busy looking at a calendar and plotting the best days in the coming months for her to get pregnant by Len. She explains her strategy and that it will take time since Len believes that she is so innocent. Marian calls Clara and tells her the engagement news and Clara seems pleased, saying that Joe will be happy because he thinks it is time for Marian to settle down. Peter arrives unannounced and wants to talk about wedding plans. Marian tells him that she would feel better if he made all of the big decisions.

Chapter 11: Peter leaves and Marian decides to go to the Laundromat. She packs a bag of clothing and Ainsley stops her and asks if she can wash some of her “necessities,” which end up being several pieces of lingerie. Marian takes the bus with her laundry bag and when she arrives, she discovers that she forgot soap. A man at a machine next to her offers to let her use his and it turns out the man is Duncan, though Marian does not recognize him at first. The two talk while the wash and dry cycles run and Marian learns more about Duncan, his roommates and his studies in graduate school. Duncan and Marian leave the Laundromat at the same time and share a brief and awkward kiss outside before going their separate ways.

Chapter 12: The next morning is Labor Day and Marian does not need to go to work. She spends most of the day sitting in silence on her bed, staring at the ceiling. She thinks about all of the cleaning she should do and how she should not waste the day, but feels no motivation. She looks at two dolls she has had since childhood and considers getting rid of them because they are so beat up. Marian wonders what came over her at the Laundromat the night before and decides it must have been a temporary form of insanity or amnesia. She thinks about the wedding and all that she needs to do and decides that it is time to get organized.

## Analysis

Marian begins to resent her role in Peter’s life in these chapters of the book. When she is not included in the conversation between Peter and Len at Park Plaza, Marian becomes unhappy, even to the point of tears. She cannot figure out why she is so emotional but the writing indicates that she has a revelation during that meeting about her place in Peter’s life and what her place will be if she remains in a relationship with him. Though Len seems to be having a good time, Marian believes that he is giving her disapproving glances regarding the way that she is just sitting there and not contributing to the conversation. The feeling of being “crushed” and confused that Marian has in Park Place is symbolic of the way that Peter is crushing her independent spirit.

Readers also get a glimpse at the passive nature of Marian in relationship to Peter. She stops at the grocery store to pick up food, not knowing whether Peter will want to go out or not. She wants to be prepared so that she does not upset him. Though she is not particularly turned on at the idea of having sex in a bathtub, she is too nervous to irritate Peter and speak up to him. The assumption on Marian’s part is that if she caters to Peter, he will treat her respectfully and the relationship will flourish. She sees the hole



that she is digging for herself when they are all at Park Plaza and feels trapped by her own doing. Despite this, she accepts Peter's marriage proposal on the very same night, perhaps believing that her feelings and his treatment of her will change now that she is his wife-to-be.

Ainsley's antics to try to seduce Len are paradoxical. On one hand, she believes that in order to get Len's attention she has to conform to a certain look and innocent disposition. This would seem to go against feminist thought. However, Ainsley only wants Len for his sperm and could care less about a long-term relationship or getting married. This indicates a highly-developed independent ideal, though there seem to be flaws in her line of thinking. Ainsley's scheme to get pregnant represents the extreme of feminism and the author tries to shed light on how silly the extreme thought can be.

## Vocabulary

reproachfully, oblong, lugubrious, dolefully, cadaverously, propagation, abominable, conspicuous, daguerreotyped, petulantly, luminous, bulbous, gallantry, killjoy, patronizing, nubile, unassailable, misanthropist, misogynist, solicitously, lecherous, impromptu, dissipate, forages, plebian, aphrodisiac, sulkily, spoilage, morosely, febrility, coagulating



# Chapters 13-18

## Summary

Chapter 13: The book shifts from a first-person narrative to a third-person account in this chapter. It is as if Marian is writing as though she is no longer actually the same person. Some time has passed since Marian became engaged to Peter and she has no motivation at work and has already begun to exclude herself from office drama and separate herself from the other women who work there. Marian and the three “office virgins” go out to lunch at a more expensive place than usual at Lucy’s suggestion. Marian soon sees that Lucy has dressed up for the occasion and is trying to catch the eyes of businessmen on their lunch breaks. Marian uses the lunch to tell the other three that she is engaged. She tells them to keep it secret from the others at work, as she does not want to lose her job.

Back in the office, Joe Bates calls to tell Marian that Clara has had the baby. Marian says that she will come by the next afternoon to see her friend at the hospital. Peter also calls to cancel dinner plans because something has come up at work. Mrs. Bogue gets the attention of all the women to tell them that “Underwear Man” is back. Lucy explains to Marian that Underwear Man phones women and says that he is from the survey company and starts by asking normal questions about their household purchases. His questions quickly turn more personal as he asks about their undergarment use. Marian fantasizes that Peter might be Underwear Man.

Chapter 14: Marian returns home and Ainsley is irritated to see her. She explains that since she thought that Marian was going out with Peter, she has arranged a date with Len. Ainsley adds that if she wants to get pregnant, she must have sex with Len that night, possibly in Marian’s room because it is cleaner. Marian reluctantly agrees to leave and go see a movie. She picks an old Western and sits in the nearly deserted theatre. She can hear someone popping something behind her and she turns to see that it is Duncan. He leans forward and tells her that he is eating pumpkin seeds and then disappears. Marian does not see him when the movie ends and she heads home. Her landlord stops her when she returns and accuses Ainsley of having a man upstairs. Marian lies and says that surely there is no man in the apartment at this hour but when she goes inside, she can see that Ainsley and Len are in her room with the door closed.

Chapter 15: Marian leaves work early the next day to go see Clara and the baby at the hospital. She takes Clara some flowers and can see that her friend is already in better spirits than she has been in months. Clara tells Marian about all of the ills of the three other women who share her hospital room and then tells Marian that she “should try” having a baby sometime. Marian does not actually see the baby who is in the nursery and heads out at the end of visiting hours to get some items from home for Duncan to iron. He called her earlier at work and pleaded with her to bring over some laundry later for him to iron, telling her that he had run out of things at his apartment and was



desperate. As Marian reflects on the strange phone call from Duncan, she gets lost in the hospital trying to find her way out.

Chapter 16: Marian runs into Ainsley when she stops at home for ironing items and Ainsley tells her that her plan to seduce Len the night before worked. Marian asks how Ainsley managed to get Len out without the lady below noticing, and Ainsley said that the lady left the house unexpectedly and Len was able to slip out. Marian again expresses her disapproval of Ainsley's scheme and then leaves with an armful of items for Duncan's house. Duncan is disappointed that Marian did not bring more things for him to iron, but his mood seems to even out as he irons. He asks Marian for the shirt that she is wearing and gives her his long nightshirt to wear instead. Duncan explains more about his roommates and how they treat him like they are his parents and he likes the attention. He sits down next to Marian on the bed and the two start to make out. The front door shuts, Duncan sits up abruptly, and tells his roommates that they were just playing chess.

Chapter 17: Marian and Peter go out for a steak dinner and Marian admires how attractive Peter is from across the table. They get into a discussion about the proper way to discipline children and Marian disagrees with Peter's view that corporal punishment should be used. Peter tells Marian that he knows more about those things than she does and sees kids from homes where parents are too lax in the courtroom all the time. Marian feels her own opinions being swallowed up and she looks down at her steak and becomes disgusted by it. She tries to rationalize with herself and eat the meat but cannot bring herself to doing it. Marian tells Peter that she is simply not hungry.

Chapter 18: Len Slank calls Marian and asks if she is alone at her apartment. She tells him that she is and he says he must come over to discuss something urgent. Marian agrees to have him over and she realizes that Ainsley must have told him the news that she is pregnant. When Len arrives, he is first upset with himself for seducing such an innocent girl and he clearly feels guilty. Marian's own guilt gets the best of her and she tells Len that Ainsley wanted to get pregnant and that she trapped Len. He is furious and Ainsley arrives home. She tells Len that he does not need to be involved with the baby and that she plans to have it. Len panics and tells the women a story about how he opened a soft-boiled egg once as a child and could see the baby chicken's form inside. He says that his mother forced him to eat it anyway. The next morning, Marian cracks her soft-boiled egg and thinks about the fact that it is a chicken. She is no longer able to eat eggs.

## Analysis

Marian's rejection of food begins in this section of the book. She can no longer look at food as a neutral source of nutrition, but begins to see it for what it truly is. Marian describes her piece of rare steak as being "muscle" instead of something dead that is intended for consumption. After hearing Len's story about the baby chicken in his soft-boiled egg, Marian sees the egg as a living entity and her body refuses to ingest it. Marian's rejection of food, and the specific types of food, can be interpreted in several



ways. The first is simply that she is anxious about the next phase of her life and uneasy about marrying Peter, which affects her appetite. The second is that she is unable to make a true assessment about herself because she is afraid of the answer, so she is analyzing food instead.

She remarks that maybe she should go see a shrink but makes no further attempt to go through with it. Later in the book, she avoids telling Ainsley about her food aversion, probably because she knows that Ainsley will give a straightforward, accurate answer. Marian tells Clara about the problem instead, knowing that Clara is desperate to have Marian be miserably married like she is and will tell her not to worry about it. Marian knows that something is skewed in her life but she is not yet ready to face the truth.

Len's reaction to hearing that Ainsley is pregnant is both sympathetic and ridiculous. Readers can understand his anger at being duped by the fake version of Ainsley for the sole purpose of impregnating her. Knowing Len's background, however, and the fact that he planned to take advantage of Ainsley when he thought that she truly was young and innocent makes him less sympathetic. Though his intentions were never to get her pregnant, he did intend to have sex with her eventually and not follow up with a relationship. Ainsley tries to let him off the hook by telling him that she does not need him to be involved but this seems to upset Len even more. He does not want to be a father but resents the fact that Ainsley feels that she can handle the situation without him.

Clara's improved mood when Marian visits her at the hospital after delivering the baby speaks to the female desire to own her body. When Clara was in a very pregnant state, she seemed depressed and listless. She was unable to do even minor things around the house and had no joy in the thought of having another child. Once she gives birth, however, Clara's mood improves and she feels in control of her own body and choices again. She tells Marian that it feels good just to sit in the hospital bed all alone and do nothing. The newborn baby is in the nursery being cared for by the hospital staff instead of Clara as she enjoys her first moments of freedom after the nine-month responsibility of pregnancy.

## **Vocabulary**

solicitude, anemia, philodendrons, blandishments, viyella, sepulcher, diaphanously, philatelist, prehensile, tepid, Raphaelite, gorging, disconsolately, piquant, dourly, anthropology, grub, calloused



# Chapters 19-22

## Summary

Chapter 19: Marian attends the office Christmas party and it is a luncheon for just the women during the workday. She sits with the three office virgins and listens as they discuss a woman who refused to shower or change her clothing for months. At the end of the party, Mrs. Bogue announces Marian's engagement – much to Marian's surprise and dislike. She assumes that one of the office virgins must have told her boss as she is congratulated by all of the gushing women in the department. After work, Marian takes the subway to the park near the university. She walks through the snow and meets Duncan on a park bench. The two say little to each other but embrace quietly in the cold darkness.

Chapter 20: The chapter opens with Marian at the grocery store, carefully placing items in her cart from her list. She has invited Joe and Clara over for dinner, along with Peter, and is trying to decide what to cook. Marian wants to please her guests but also knows that her own palette of food choices is becoming increasingly narrow. As she places items in her cart, she thinks about wedding details that seem to be important to everyone else. She decides to make a mushroom and meatball casserole.

Joe and Clara are unable to find a babysitter and arrive with their three children. None of the children are comfortable going to sleep and they stink from bowel movements. Peter opens a window to let out the stench and it makes the apartment very cold. When the Bates family finally leaves, Peter tells Marian that they will “never be like that.” Ainsley had not been at the dinner because she spent Friday evenings at the Prenatal Clinic. Ainsley is very upset when she gets home because she has just heard a lecture about the importance of a father figure in the lives of children. She weeps at the thought of her possible son becoming a homosexual and tells Marian that there must be a way to find a father for her baby.

Chapter 21: Marian and Duncan go together to visit the campus museum. He takes her through the museum to see all of his favorite places and then the two go to have a coffee. Duncan tells Marian that the two of them should sleep together. She reminds him that she is getting married and he says that is even more reason to do it. Duncan says that since there is no future and no deep feelings between them, it would be a perfect arrangement. Marian notices someone watching them and figures out that it is one of Duncan's roommates. Duncan goes over to talk to Trevor and returns to invite Marian to come over for dinner. She accepts and then worries that she will offend Trevor if she cannot bring herself to eat the things that he cooks.

Chapter 22: Marian and Duncan arrive at his apartment for dinner and Marian places her engagement ring in her coin purse. Trevor is busily finishing the meal and Fish is working frantically on a term paper that he describes at length to Marian. Once the card tables are set, the four begin eating. Marian is able to eat most of the food, but knows



that she will not be able to eat a skewer of meat. As Trevor comes in and out of the room delivering more food, Marian starts tossing pieces of the meat to Duncan. Fish, lost in his own speech, stands up and leans his weight onto the card table. It topples and Trevor walks back in the room to see the crash and Marian tossing a piece of the meat.

Duncan walks with Marian towards the subway stop. They pause near a baseball field and Duncan again brings up the idea of the two of them having sex. Marian asks where they would even do it if they did and the only answer the two can come up with is at a hotel. Marian walks the rest of the way to the subway stop alone and retrieves her engagement ring from her coin purse.

## Analysis

Marian begins her first outward rejection of her engagement in this section of the book. She starts to see Duncan more and more in secret and in many ways, it is like the two are dating. Even Duncan's roommates seem to think so and they want to know more about the woman in Duncan's life. When Marian is invited for dinner by Duncan's roommate, the normal reaction would be to decline out of respect for her engagement. Marian is elated to go along with the charade however and even removes her engagement ring before arriving at the dinner.

She is anxious to please Duncan's roommates, much in the way that a young woman or man would want to make a good first impression on the parents of the person that they were dating. Marian listens to Fish ramble on about his term paper on sexual stereotypes in "Alice in Wonderland" and even pretends to eat the meat that Trevor serves. This is all an attempt to make them like her and trust her which is not necessary since she is marrying another man in a few months. Similar to the food rejection, Marian finds that it is easier to escape to a fake reality than to face her real life.

Duncan's proposition that he and Marian have sex is grounded in rationalization. It is clear that Duncan is attracted to Marian though he has an interesting way of showing it. His reasoning for wanting to have sex with her does not appear to be rooted in that attraction though. He feels comfortable with Marian and wants to experiment with an awkward act on her instead of with someone else that is more of a stranger. Duncan also knows that Marian is committed to getting married and this makes her less of a threat to want him to commit to her after a sexual encounter. Marian's entertainment of the idea shows that she too feels comfortable with Duncan and is unsatisfied with her sexual relationship with Peter. She is drawn to Duncan, possible for the same reasons that she is retreating from Peter – Duncan needs her but Peter does not. This dynamic is what draws Marian to Duncan though Peter seems to be the more obvious choice for a mate.



## Vocabulary

assemblage, corsetry, musculature, assiduously, frieze, somnambulist, recalcitrant, embalming, turnstile, balustrade, labyrinth, Spenserian, mutability, infinitesimal, strident, coup de grace, latent, skewering, orthodox, burgeoning, vestibule, crossfire, shishkebob, flambé, cataclysm, sardonic, amoeba





# Chapters 23-27

## Summary

Chapter 23: Marian's aversion to food extends to rice pudding and she begins to wonder if she might really have a mental problem. She asks Ainsley if she is "normal" and Ainsley says that normal is not the same as average. Marian decides to not tell Ainsley about her food issue. She goes to visit Clara instead and Clara says that her aversion is probably just pre-wedding jitters. At Peter's apartment, Marian cuts into a heart-shaped cake that she bought for Peter. She carefully takes a bite and has to spit it in the trash immediately. She delivers Peter his piece and watches to see if he has a negative reaction to the cake. He devours the piece without any concern and Marian is upset that the issue is clearly her and not the food.

Chapter 24: Marian goes to a salon to get her hair done for a big party that Peter is throwing at his apartment in honor of their upcoming wedding. The hairdo is a little bit eccentric in Marian's taste but she leaves it alone. As she is walking through the department store, she stops to watch a man giving a kitchen wares demonstration and determines that she will have no use for such things once Peter makes more money. She goes home and can hear yelling from the stairwell. Len and Ainsley are fighting about the unborn baby and his potential role in the child's life. Len is flabbergasted that Ainsley has changed her tune and now thinks that Len should marry her. He leaves angrily. On his way out of the house, several women that are attending a tea with the woman down below crowd the hallway to see what the commotion is. Len cusses at all of them and flees onto the street. Ainsley tells Marian that she does not think that Len is going to come around and that she will simply have to find a different father for her child.

Chapter 25: Marian has several hours until the party but decides to start getting ready. In the bathtub she begins to panic. She realizes that none of her friends will be at the party. She calls Clara and Joe and invites them. She then calls Duncan and convinces him to try to come with his roommates. She also asks Ainsley who says that she will try to make it. Ainsley helps Marian with her makeup and loans her a pair of dangling gold earrings to go with the tight red dress that Marian bought for the occasion. The lady below is waiting for Marian when she emerges and is horrified at her appearance. She begins to yell at Ainsley instead, telling her that she knows about the man who spent the night and that she wants Ainsley to move out of the apartment. Ainsley angrily tells the woman about her pregnancy and says that she would not want her baby to live around someone like the judgmental woman anyway. Peter arrives to pick up Marian and she takes an extra vitamin before heading out the door.

Chapter 26: Marian and Peter arrive at his apartment building and she notices that the building is almost complete. Marian tells Peter that she has invited a few of her own friends and he seems surprised that there are people in her life that he has not met. He likes the way that she has dolled herself up for the party, commenting on the scent of



her perfume that she borrowed from Ainsley. Marian helps Peter get snacks and refreshments ready for the guests. He calls her into the bedroom to show her his new camera and asks her to pose for him. Marian feels awkward and not sure how to pose for the camera. Peter tells her to just relax but there is a knock at the door. He goes to answer it without taking her picture and she tries to calm herself reminding herself that it is “just a camera.”

Chapter 27: Guests begin to arrive at the party, beginning with the three “office virgins” who seem annoyed at the presence of the other two. Clara and Joe show up and they have Len with them. Marian is worried that Ainsley and Len will make a scene at the party and she also begins to worry about inviting Duncan and his roommates. Peter’s colleagues and their wives arrive. Ainsley shows up and Marian warns her about Len. Ainsley says that she will simply ignore him. Marian answers the door and finds Fish, Trevor, Duncan and another girl with them. Duncan refuses to come inside and she goes into the hallway to speak with him but he decides to leave. Back inside, Ainsley and Len have found each other and are arguing. She smashes a wine glass on the floor and once the room is silent, announces that she is having a baby with Len. He pours his beer over her head and calls her a “rotten bitch.” Several people at the party are appalled, including Fish who gives Ainsley his turtleneck to dry off.

Peter surprises Marian by taking a picture with his camera and she suddenly panics. She knows that she has to get out of the apartment. While everyone is assembling in the living room for a group picture, Marian slips out the door. She begins running through the cold, snowy streets towards the subway.

## Analysis

As Marian’s domesticity begins to close in around her, she can no longer take the pressure and flees. She tries very hard to be the woman that she is expected to be for Peter’s party but even with her hair done, a tight red dress and fancy gold earrings, she realizes that she cannot keep pulling off the charade. While Peter is thrilled to see Marian made up and decked out, looking nothing like her normal self, Duncan tells her that she looks “weird.” Duncan is not moved by her new appearance and believes that it is a mismatch with her true identity. Peter, on the other hand, likes that Marian is choosing to appear as something that she is not. He wants to take pictures of Marian but she panics, knowing that the woman in the photographs would not be representative of her true self. With no real way to explain her feelings and feeling overwhelmed by the party, Marian simply leaves. She feels that she has no other choice but to run away.

Ainsley’s arrival at the party causes a stir. Marian points out that Ainsley looks beautiful and that there is no way to tell that she is pregnant. Len takes a second look at the woman that he has cast off, but so do some of the other men at the party. Instead of a cloistered single mom, Ainsley is a glowing woman, independent of her maternal circumstances. By announcing her pregnancy to the partygoers, Ainsley liberates herself from the shame that others believe should accompany her state and makes Len



look like a fool in the process. This act of bravery attracts the attention of Duncan's friend Fish who is drawn to Ainsley and her fertile womb.

The description of Peter's apartment building being nearly completed is symbolic of the surface changes in Marian since the beginning of the book. When she first visited Peter, the building was skeletal and everything that would later be covered up was out in the open with no apology. This represented Marian in many ways. As the building continued towards completion, the imperfections and true nature of the structure became covered up and made to look the way that other tenants in the building would expect it to look. In the same way, Marian has been changing her own identity to conform to the way that Peter, her co-workers and even Duncan want her to behave. Though she may look different on the outside, she is still the same woman underneath and begins to resent having to cover up her true self for the sake of others.

## Vocabulary

Behaviorism, iridescent, talons, roguishly, shrewd, blasphemous, insolence, etherized, waterlogged, improbable, deflated, transmuted, assimilation, flashbulbs



# Chapters 28-31

## Summary

Chapter 28: Marian takes the subway to the Laundromat. She finds Duncan inside by the dryers, smoking a cigarette. She tells him that she is ready to sleep with him and they debate a place to go. Duncan has a little bit of money but Marian has none. They take the subway to a seedy part of town and look for a hotel that will be cheap enough and let them stay there. The first place refuses to give them a room, mistaking Marian for a prostitute. The next place takes Duncan's money and they go to the small room. Duncan makes her take off her makeup and even then, is unable to get aroused. He tells her that he needs to take his time and begins to nuzzle her neck.

Chapter 29: The next morning, Marian and Duncan go to breakfast with the last of Duncan's money. Marian is not able to order or eat anything and realizes that her body has finally cut her off completely. She watches Duncan eat and feels like she might be sick. Outside the restaurant, she begs him not to leave her alone. She asks if he will come with her to talk to Peter and Duncan refuses, telling Marian that it is her problem. He agrees to stay with her for a while longer though and takes her to a park-like area that is covered in snow. They sit on the edge of a deep pit for some time before Marian decides that she should leave.

Chapter 30: Marian arrives home and receives an angry call from Peter. He tells her that he has been worried sick and demands answers as to why she disappeared from the party. She tells him to come over in a few hours to discuss it. Marian goes to the grocery store and gets all of the ingredients to make and decorate a sponge cake. She forms the baked cake into the shape of a woman and uses icing to give her a dress, face and hair. When Peter arrives, Marian puts the cake in front of him and demands that he eat it. She tells Peter that he has been trying to destroy her and that he should just eat the cake instead. Alarmed, Peter leaves, presumably forever. Marian sits down and starts to eat the cake. Ainsley and Fish show up and Marian offers them some cake. Ainsley seems pleased with the cake, telling Marian that she is "rejecting" her femininity. Marian says that it's "only a cake" and continues to devour it, separating the head from the body.

Chapter 31: The story switches back to a first-person narrative for the last chapter. With Peter out of her life, Marian is able to eat again and be herself. She begins cleaning out the apartment and boxing up all of the things that Ainsley left behind when she eloped with Fish. Duncan calls and is upset that Fish has abandoned him for Ainsley. Clara also calls and says that Len seems more depressed than before at the prospect that Ainsley has married another man. Duncan comes over and Marian offers him the leftover cake. Duncan tells her that she looks well and he can tell that she is eating again. Marian watches him eat the last bit of the frosting on the cake pan and push it away, declaring that "it was delicious."



## Analysis

After Marian runs away from Peter's party, she seeks out the company of Duncan. She believes that this will make her feel better, perhaps even back to her normal self again. After finally having sex with Duncan and waking up with him the next morning, Marian discovers that her aversion to food has become even worse. She is not able to eat anything at all. She begs Duncan to stay with her but seems to let go of her ties to him when she finally walks away. She realizes that Duncan should not be considered a replacement for Peter and that if she wants to feel whole again, she must do it on her own.

The act of baking a cake is therapeutic for Marian. She attacks the grocery store with no signs of the anxiety that she experienced in previous chapters. She ignores the mess in her apartment and focuses on baking the cake, shaping it and decorating it to look like a woman. In baking the cake, Marian discovers where her true angst lies – she is angry with Peter for trying to change her and destroy her individuality. She successfully separates herself from Peter and is able to eat what she wants again. The book changes back to a first-person account for the last few pages and readers see a healthy, confident Marian who is content to be alone in her apartment. When Duncan calls, she is surprised as she hadn't given him much thought since she walked away a few days earlier. He finishes the cake for her and their relationship also seems to be at an end when Duncan thanks her and tell her that "it was delicious." Marian rejects both versions of the woman that the men in her life wanted and finds equilibrium within her.

## Vocabulary

alacrity, arborize, inexorably, ballast, pollywogs, fissured, oracle, cul-de-sac, ravine, sponge cake, prosaically, nostalgia, haggard, jaunty, cellophane, shroud



# Characters

## Marian McAlpin

Marian McAlpin is the main character and principal protagonist of the story. She is a college graduate in her mid-twenties who has settled at a low-paying, boring job working for a survey company. She has a stable, predictable boyfriend named Peter who is an up-and-coming lawyer and the two become engaged shortly after Peter's last college guy pal gets married. As Peter begins to treat Marian more like his wife and less like an independent woman, Marian develops an aversion to certain foods. Soon she cannot eat meat, eggs, rice pudding and certain vegetables. She becomes increasingly disconnected from her own self and begins to act erratically, spending time with an emaciated graduate student named Duncan who has co-dependent tendencies.

Marian soon discovers that she is just as dependent on Duncan as he is on her and she flees a party at Peter's house meant to celebrate their upcoming wedding. She decides that she "cannot go back" and returns to her apartment the next morning and begins baking a cake. Marian shapes the sponge cake in to the form of a woman and decorates it with frosting. When an angry Peter arrives demanding an explanation for the night before, Marian tells him to devour the cake like he has been trying to devour her. Peter leaves and Marian eats the cake herself, thus reclaiming her individuality and ability to eat.

## Peter Wollander

Peter Wollander is Marian's boyfriend turned fiancé. He is a young lawyer who lives in a nice apartment where he can pay a fraction of the rent since the building is still in development. He enjoys hunting and photography. When the last of his college friends gets married, Peter decides that it is time for him too to get married and he proposes to Marian.

Consciously or not, Peter treats Marian like an object and not like the woman in which he is in love. He makes comments about the way that she cooks and tells her that she should wear something less "mousy" to his final party. On several occasions he cancels plans with Marian at the last minute and seems irritated when she is not happy about it. Peter tries to understand Marian's erratic behavior but sees that she is a lost cause when he arrives at her apartment and she accuses him of trying to destroy her.

## Ainsley Tewce

Ainsley Tewce is Marian's roommate and is a college graduate in her mid-20s who works at a defective toothbrush office. Ainsley is messy and more outspoken than Marian. She has a degree in psychology, has strong views about rejecting femininity and does not like Marian's boyfriend because she says that he is "monopolizing" her.



Ainsley has auburn-red hair, big blue eyes and the ability to look innocent if she tries. She uses these traits to manipulate the people around her and it leads to her seducing a man for the sole purpose of getting pregnant. She does not want the man to be involved with the baby, but after hearing a psychologist lecture on the importance of the role of a father, Ainsley becomes afraid that her baby will be damaged without a father figure. At the end of the book, Ainsley elopes with a man she meets at a party who is willing to be the father figure to her unborn child.

## Duncan

Duncan is a twenty-six-year-old graduate student in English that lacks motivation and is neurotic about ironing things. Marian meets him when she is out doing a beer survey for her company and mistakes him for being a fifteen-year-old because he is so thin and emaciated. She runs into him at the Laundromat and he admits that he enjoys visiting there and watching his clothing spin in the washing machines. Duncan constantly contradicts himself and does many things simply to get attention. He refers to his roommates as his “parents” because of the way that they worry about him and take care of him. As he and Marian begin seeing more of each other, he suggests that they have sex – especially since he claims to be a virgin and has no deep emotional feelings for Marian. He admits that the story of being a virgin was a lie after the two have had sex and he is upset when one of his roommates gets married and moves out, wondering who will take care of him.

## Leonard Slank

Len Slank is a college friend of Marian’s who works as a television producer. He has just returned to Toronto after being forced out of London when he had an inappropriate relationship with a young woman. Len is a womanizer and makes no qualms about that fact. Ainsley decides that Len will be the perfect man to be the father of her baby, especially since he will not want a relationship with her or the child. Len believes Ainsley to be younger and more innocent than she is and Ainsley has to resort to a lot of alcohol in order to get him to have sex with her. The planning works and Ainsley becomes pregnant, much to the horror of Len who insists that she have an abortion. Despite his anger, when Len hears that Ainsley has married another man, he becomes depressed.

## Clara Bates

Marian’s college friend Clara Bates is married with two small children and another one on the way. Clara is depressed during her pregnancy and has trouble getting motivated to do even menial tasks around the house. Marian sympathizes with Clara but feels like she increasingly has nothing in common with her friend. Clara is skinny and Marian describes her as looking like a snake that has swallowed a watermelon when she is pregnant. Clara’s mood seems to improve when her baby is born and she tells Marian that she should “try it sometime.”





## Joe Bates

Joe Bates is Clara's husband and is a professor at the university. He fills much of the domestic roles in the home that Clara seems unable to handle. He worries openly about his wife's mentality and encourages Marian to come and visit often, saying that his wife has no one to talk to anymore. Joe confides in Marian that he thinks Clara has some resentment for her role as wife and mother, especially after experiencing the individuality and respect of college life.

## The Office Virgins

Emmy: Emmy is a typist at the survey company who is a hypochondriac. She is constantly complaining about weather, food and other circumstances that could make her sick and make her pop pills. She is blonde, like the others.

Millie: Millie is the boss' assistant and from Australia. She says that she is still a virgin because she believes it a good idea to wait until marriage. She is also blonde.

Lucy: Lucy handles public relations at the survey company and is very concerned about social statuses and "what people will say." She makes a pass at Marian's boyfriend at a party and seems more desperate to find a husband than the other virgins. She is also blonde.

## Trevor

Trevor is one of Duncan's roommates who is a good cook and also in graduate school. He is a T.S. Eliot fan and the most outgoing of the roommates. He likes Marian and invites her over for dinner.

## Fish

Fish is one of Duncan's roommates who is incredibly intellectual and often rambles about the subjects of his research papers, which usually involve womb symbols and sex. Fish meets Ainsley at Peter's party and he is attracted to her once he realizes that she is pregnant. The two get married that night.

## The Landlady

The unnamed landlady that "lives down below" is a conservative middle-aged woman with a teenage daughter. She is very disapproving of the way that Marian and Ainsley behave and tells Ainsley that she must move out after she has a man spend the night. She does not want any of their antics to "corrupt" her daughter.



## **Mrs. Bogue**

Mrs. Bogue is Marian's boss at the survey office. She is a gruff lady who does not like it when her employees get married or pregnant because she claims that they become "distracted." When she hears that Marian is engaged, she assumes that Marian will leave the job.



# Objects/Places

## Toronto

Toronto is the city where the book is set. Different portions of the city, such as the university, park and specific neighborhoods are mentioned as the plot progresses. There is an urban, spread-out feel to the setting.

## Marian/Ainsley's apartment

Marian and Ainsley live in an apartment that is just the upper floor of a larger house. Marian describes it as a transformed "servants' quarters" in the genteel part of town. The apartment is cluttered and becomes increasingly messy as the book progresses.

## Peter's apartment

Peter lives in a brand new apartment in a fancy building. He is able to afford the rent on his entry-level lawyer's salary because he is the only tenant in the unfinished building and allows his unit to be shown as a model. Everything in Peter's apartment is new, clean and organized.

## Duncan's apartment

Marian stumbles upon Duncan's apartment when she is out doing random surveys for a new beer. The apartment is shared by three English graduate students and littered with papers and garbage. Duncan's room is bare, with nothing more than a bed, chess set and an iron and ironing board.

## Seymour Surveys

The office building where Marian works is a metaphoric description for the state of women in the workplace. Marian works on the second floor with all women, sandwiched between the important male executives on the top floor and the non-human machines on the floor below.

## Laundromat

Marian runs into Duncan at the Laundromat and he allows her to borrow some detergent. It becomes a favorite spot for both of them and Marian knows that she will find Duncan there when she runs away from Peter's party.



## The Park

The Park is located adjacent to the university and Marian meets Duncan there on a snowy night. She realizes how far removed she is from her former college life as she walks through the Park and feels resentment towards it.

## Questionnaires

A big part of Marian's job is helping write effective questionnaires for the participants in her company's projects. She adjusts the words to make them more appealing to the people responding and often recalls the questions asked about certain products as she walks through the grocery store.

## Moose Beer

Moose Beer is a new brand of beer for which Marian's company is doing market research. The angle is that the beer is for "any real man" and uses images of men fishing and hunting in its advertisements. Marian asks male respondents to react to the commercial jingle and the images of the ads.

## Armadillo

Duncan refers a few times to a frenzied armadillo that he once saw in a cage at the zoo, running around in a figure-eight pattern. He says that it is typical of caged animals and that even if they are released back into the wild, they continue in the same pattern they had perfected in captivity.

## Dolls

Marian owns two dolls from her childhood that she considers throwing away but never does. One is eroding and has no fingertips and is missing teeth. The other is a newer, rubber doll that can go in the bath that she asked for specifically for that purpose. The dolls represent two sides to Marian and like the dolls, Marian finds neither side "attractive."

## Steak

While she is out to eat with Peter after the engagement, Marian becomes disgusted by a rare piece of Filet Mignon. Instead of viewing it as food, she suddenly saw it as a "hunk of muscle" and a part of a cow. From then on until after breaking off her engagement to Peter, Marian cannot eat meat.



## Eggs

Len Slank tells Ainsley and Marian a story about how his mother made him eat a soft-boiled egg that had the form of the baby chicken in it when he was a kid. Marian tries to eat a soft-boiled egg after hearing the story but is unable to make it happen. She cannot eat eggs again until after breaking off her engagement to Peter.

## Woman cake

After running away from Peter's party and spending the night with Duncan, Marian decides to make a cake in the shape of a woman. She decorates it with icing and gives it a skirt, hair and a discernible face. Peter refuses to eat any of it and Marian digs in instead. Ainsley declares that the act of eating the cake is Marian's way of rejecting her own femininity. After eating the cake, Marian is able to eat all of the foods that she had been struggling with in the past.



# Themes

## The Maternal Instinct

The role of women as mothers is challenged in the novel, "The Edible Woman". Clara is "traditional" mother in the sense that she is married and stays at home with her young children while her husband goes to work. She is clearly unhappy with the arrangement, however, and depends on her husband to do most of the domestic work in addition to making money for the family. Clara refers to her children as "leaches" and "barnacles" and wonders aloud how anyone can love their children before they are actually human beings. Clara dropped out of college to marry Joe and feels resentment towards the loss of her identity and places this unhappiness on the shoulders of her children.

Ainsley's desire to be a mother is different from Clara in that she desires the role. Whereas Clara depends on her husband to help with the children, Ainsley believes that she will be able to parent her child sufficiently without a father figure. Becoming a mother is a rite of womanhood in Ainsley's opinion and she does not see the importance of a man in the process, beyond what is scientifically necessary. Once Ainsley actually becomes pregnant she realizes the implications of what she has done and becomes terrified that her child will be traumatized without a father figure in his or her life. She forsakes her original theories out of fear and marries the first man who is willing.

Marian also plays the role of a figurative mother in her relationship with Duncan. Whereas Peter does not need Marian to take care of him, Duncan is desperate for care and attention. When Duncan is frantic because he has run out of things to iron, Marian provides him with the items he needs to feel better. Marian represents stability to Duncan, in much of the same way that Peter represents stability to Marian. She rejects this role at the end of the book after discovering that she does not want to be treated like a child by Peter or a mother by Duncan.

## Gender

Gender proves to be a major theme in the novel "The Edible Woman". Many different gender stereotypes are explored and challenged within the pages of the book. The author does not offer up her opinions outright. Instead, she writes her thoughts seamlessly into the dialogue and plot of the book. The first gender role she attacks is that of women in the workplace, specifically in 1960s North America. Though Marian has an education and believes that she is capable of doing the same job as many of the male executives at her company, she is stuck on the floor where all the other women work. Marian is literally positioned just above the non-human machines but below the men and she is aware that her spot will likely never change. When it is discovered that she is engaged, Marian's boss assumes that she will quit her job instead of stay on as a distracted worker who no longer needs the income. Marian decides to quit, not because



she really wants to leave but more likely because she feels that it is an unwritten requirement.

The role of men in society and culture in North America is also examined in depth. Peter and Duncan represent two very different versions of the male species and challenge stereotypes with their own actions. While Peter may appear to be chauvinistic at some points, he also seems to truly care for Marian and want her to be happy. Duncan seems weak and more like a boy than a man in many parts of the book, but he does not subscribe to the typical male views on what women should look like or how they should act. He challenges Marian when she does not act or look like her true self. Even Len Slank is a complicated characterization of men. At first glance, he is a petty womanizer with no respect for women but his emotional reaction to being rejected as a father before being given a choice in the matter shows that there are more layers to his personality. None of the men or the women are exactly what they appear on the outside and the author chooses to round out the personalities rather than settle on prescribed gender roles.

## Symbolism of Food

The role that food plays in the book is paramount to the understanding of the text. When Marian begins to reject food, she is rejecting a human instinct brought on by emotional issues. Much like people who suffer from eating disorders, Marian feels like she is losing control of her life. The only thing that she can control is what she puts in her body and so she subconsciously makes the choice to rule out certain foods. She is not simply deciding to cut out meat or eggs for vanity's sake, however. Marian is physically averse to the food and even when she tries to rationalize reasons for eating it, her body wins out and will not allow it.

The specific foods that are chosen are symbolic. The first item that Marian rejects is a bloody piece of steak. Though she relates it to a cow, her reaction is actually toward her association with the piece of "muscle" to herself. She feels incapacitated in many ways, just as the dead piece of flesh on her plate, and cannot support the fact by eating it. The rejection of eggs is similar in that she relates the trapped baby chicken to her own feelings of being stuck in a shell, waiting to be devoured by others. The rice pudding aversion is a rejection of her job and the implications her role there has on her life. When she finally reaches the point of being unable to eat anything, she is acknowledging that nothing is right in her life anymore and she needs to make a change before she literally and figuratively dies.

# Style

## Point of View

The book is written in both the first-person and third-person points of view. In both cases, the thoughts and opinions of Marian McAlpin are explored. In the opening part of the book, Marian talks to readers directly about her life and challenges in the present tense. Once she has decided to marry Peter and conform to the person she is expected to be, the book becomes an outsider's look into her life. When Marian later rejects the proposal and takes back her individuality, the book goes back to narrating from the first-person viewpoint.

The difference between the viewpoints demonstrates the changes that are taking place in Marian's life and personality as the book progresses. After accepting Peter's proposal, Marian feels that she is losing control of her own voice and readers feel that loss too when she stops narrating in the first-person. Readers are also able to feel triumphant at the close of the book when Marian's voice returns, stronger and healthier than before her engagement.

## Setting

The story is set in Toronto, Canada in the early 1960s. Parts of the story are said to be autobiographical as Margaret Atwood resides in Toronto, went to the university there and worked for a survey company in the city. Her descriptions of the public transportation, layouts of the neighborhood and culture are so detailed that they seem to be based, at least in part, on first-hand information. Her descriptions of the hot, sticky summer days and blustery snowy nights of Toronto are realistic to the actual climate of the region.

Some of the specific settings for action are the apartments of Marian and Ainsley, Peter, and Duncan and his roommates. The characters also visit their workplaces, the movie theater, a Laundromat and public parks. The homes of some of the people included in Marian's surveys are also described, as well as the residential neighborhoods where they are located.

## Language and Meaning

The book is written in a contemporary, conversational style that is easy to read. The complicated subject matters are written in easily readable terms and take some dissection in order to decipher their meaning. The author does not make it overly difficult for an average reader to follow along in the book and enjoy the storyline. She allows readers to make their own inferences based on the behavior and words of the characters.



There is a heavy presence of symbolism in the writing and it draws its strength from the use of everyday objects and normal situations. The author reaches readers by drawing on their knowledge of workplace dynamics, sexual relationships and interaction with food. Marian is very normal in many ways, though she is facing a confusing time in her life. This makes her a sympathetic protagonist and the book easier to read and interpret.

## Structure

The book is structured in three parts that span 31 chapters. The first 12 chapters are written through the first-person narrative of Marian. Chapters 13 – 30 switch to a third-person narrative and delve into the complicated issues surrounding Marian's circumstances. The final chapter is back in the first-person and briefly shows that Marian is back to feeling like an individual again.

The main plot of the book is Marian's journey of self-discovery as it relates to being a young professional woman and becoming engaged. She struggles with a bizarre food aversion, dealing with feelings towards Duncan and trying to adjust to being Peter's wife-to-be during the course of the book. Subplots include Ainsley's decision to get pregnant by seducing Len, Clara's pregnancy and the birth of her third child, and Duncan's parent/child relationship with his roommates.





## Quotes

Mrs. Bogue frowned slightly: she regards pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to the company. (Chapter 3)

Never believe what they tell you about maternal instinct... I don't see how anyone can love their children till they start to be human beings. (Chapter 4)

Peter's abstraction on these occasions gave me the feeling that he liked doing them because he had read about them somewhere, but I could never locate the quotations. (Chapter 7)

He was treating me as a stage prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline. (Chapter 8)

I was astounded at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it. (Chapter 10)

I've never been silly about marriage the way Ainsley is. She's against it on principle, and life isn't by principles but by adjustments. (Chapter 11)

So I'm finally going mad,' she thought, 'like everybody else. What a nuisance. Though I suppose it will be a change. (Chapter 14)

More and more, Clara's life seemed cut off from her, set apart, something she could only gaze at through a window. (Chapter 15)

I got so tired of being afraid I'd walk in there some morning and wouldn't be able to see my own reflection in it. So I went and grabbed the frying-pan out of the kitchen and gave it a whack. (Chapter 16)

Ever since her own relation to food had become ambiguous she found she took a perverse delight in watching other people eat. (Chapter 16)

It was archaic, sadly ornate, kept for some obscure nostalgic reason, like the photograph of a dead person. (Chapter 19)

Maybe I'm a latent homosexual... Or maybe I'm a latent heterosexual. Anyway I'm pretty latent. (Chapter 21)

Whatever was going to happen to Clara had already happened: she had turned into what she was going to be. It wasn't that she wanted to change places with Clara; she only wanted to know what she was becoming, what direction she was taking, so she could be prepared. (Chapter 23)



You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you? ... You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork. (Chapter 30)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Who is Marian McAlpin? Where does she work? Describe her apartment. Who is her roommate? How does Marian feel about her job? What types of food does Marian begin to reject once she has become engaged? What reason does she rationalize for each rejected food? Why do you believe Marian developed such an aversion to food? Explain why the first and third parts of the book are written in the first-person, but the second part is written in third-person.

## Topic 2

Describe Ainsley Twece. What was Ainsley's major in college? Why does she say that she wants to have a baby? Why does she choose Len Slank to be the potential father? How does Ainsley dress and act when she meets Len? After she is pregnant, what changes her mind about her baby needing a father figure? Compare and contrast Ainsley's character and Marian's character. Why doesn't Ainsley like Marian's boyfriend? Who does Ainsley marry at the end of the book?

## Topic 3

Describe Peter Wollander. In your opinion – is Peter chauvinistic? Why or why not? What are some of Peter's hobbies? What is his profession? What is the name of the last of Peter's friends to get married? Who is Duncan? How does Marian meet Duncan? Describe Duncan's personality. What neurotic thing does Duncan like to do, and why? Contrast Peter and Duncan's apartments. Why does Duncan tell Marian that they should sleep together? What is Duncan's reaction to his roommate getting married?

## Topic 4

Who is Clara Bates? Why does Clara's husband say that he worries about her? How does Clara's mood change from when she is pregnant to after she delivers? Describe each of the "office virgins." How do they respond to the news that Marian is getting married? Which one hits on Peter at his party? What are some of the other women like in Marian's office? Describe the landlady. Why does the landlady disapprove of most of the things that the Ainsley and Marian do? Why does she kick Ainsley out of the apartment at the end of the book? Who are the "soap wives?" How did they earn this nickname? In what ways is Marian like the soap wives?



## Topic 5

Explain the influence of feminism in North America in the 1960s. What traits of feminism does *The Edible Woman* portray? Describe the difference between Ainsley and the landlady in regards to women's role in society. What type of woman is the landlady supposed to represent? What type of woman does Ainsley represent? What is the significance of the cake that Marian makes, and eats, at the end of the book? Why does Ainsley say that Marian is "rejecting" her femininity?