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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Contemporary Siren's" Bird Suit": Negotiating Belonging in *The Year of the Flood*

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| ABSTRACT

This article reads Ren as a contemporary Siren by examining the "bird suit" in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* alongside its appearance in her poem "Siren Song." Drawing on Entwistle's account of dress as embodied practice and Gill's analysis of neoliberal individualism, it traces Ren's changing experiences of clothing across different communities and examines how she negotiates recognition and belonging. The analysis reveals a persistent gap between visible membership and emotional acceptance. At Scales and Tails, costume and performance enable Ren to claim bodily space, manage personal disclosure, and gain recognition. These forms of situational agency nevertheless operate within an institutional hierarchy that distributes protection according to commercial value. Read alongside the Siren's plea to escape her costume, Ren's attempts to use the bird suit reveal how promises of independent self-creation mobilize women's desires for recognition while making acceptance conditional on a marketable appearance. The recurring costume thus materializes the tension between personal choice and conditional belonging. Atwood's mythic rewriting exposes how women's active self-fashioning can remain entangled with bodily commodification, complicating a linear narrative of movement from oppression to liberation.

| KEYWORDS

Margaret Atwood, bird suit, mythic intertextuality, belonging, neoliberalism

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's representations of women, particularly her rewriting of myths to foreground marginalized female voices, have long attracted critical attention. Whether drawing on myth criticism, ecofeminism, or posthumanism, studies of Atwood's early poetry, *The Penelopiad*, and her *MaddAddam* speculative fiction trilogy tend to focus on women's experiences and changing subject positions. Hummel (2019), for example, emphasizes Toby's role in rebuilding ethical relations across species, while Ciobanu (2014) argues that redefining the human after the apocalypse requires challenging male domination of both nature and women. The trilogy's narrative focus likewise shifts from Jimmy's "last man" narrative to Toby's and Ren's accounts of survival. Such readings often emphasize women's movement from oppressed margins to positions as narrators and ethical agents. The passage from oppression to voice and agency thus constitutes a recurrent interpretive trajectory in Atwood criticism.

While Toby frequently figures in discussions of feminist ethics, Ren, the younger narrator of *The Year of the Flood*, has received a different assessment. Bouson (2011) observes that Ren "views herself solely as a sexual commodity" (p. 14). At the narrators' post-Flood reunion, Ren first enters Toby's field of vision as a grotesque figure blurring the boundary between person and object: a man emerges from the shadows, leading a huge bird on a rope. "But this bird has the head of a woman" (Atwood, 2009, p. 350). Only as they draw closer does Toby recognize the feathers as a costume and the figure being led as a woman (Atwood, 2009, pp. 350-351). This sequence of recognition makes the "bird suit" an important clue to Ren's predicament. Why does Atwood present Ren in a costume with such mythic resonances? How does this image relate to her experiences and self-understanding?

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Ren's narrative traces a circuitous path in this novel: she is taken from a corporate Compound to God's Gardeners, returns to the Compound, chooses to work at the sex club Scales and Tails as an adult, and eventually reunites with the Gardeners after the catastrophe. Her movement among these groups entails changes in clothing and bodily experience, raising questions about the relationship between dress, identity, and belonging. Understanding the post-flood bird figure therefore requires attention to her earlier experiences of dress. This article traces those experiences across different groups and stages of life, examining how Ren wears and uses the bird suit and how clothing mediates her self-understanding and interactions with others. It thus reconsiders Bouson's (2011) assessment and examines how Atwood uses mythically resonant clothing to portray women's pursuit of recognition and belonging under social constraints.

2. Literature Review

Scholars have examined dress in Atwood's fiction as a medium linking the body to power relations. Laflen (2007) situates clothing in *The Handmaid's Tale* within Gilead's visual politics, showing how the regime draws on religious, artistic, and literary imagery to mark women's assigned social roles through prescribed clothing and colors (p. 92). Her analysis establishes a connection between dress and identity regulation. Other studies relate clothing to literary traditions and its changing meanings across texts. Labudová (2025), for example, compares women's clothing in *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, examining its roles in self-expression, social status, and patriarchal control (pp. 108-110). She further connects descriptions of dress with Atwood's layered use of historical, religious, and literary materials, showing how clothing and intertextuality jointly construct female identity (pp. 111-112). Her analysis of Moira's escape from the Red Center in an Aunt's uniform, alongside characters' use of uniforms to conceal their actions in *The Testaments*, also demonstrates how prescribed dress can become a resource for resistance (pp. 117-118). Together, these studies suggest that dress can both render socially assigned identities visible and enable characters to reposition themselves within established relations.

Within scholarship on the *MaddAddam* trilogy, Flanagan (2021) observes that Ren's childhood changes of name, dress, and social identity are largely arranged by her mother. She also connects Ren's discomfort in new clothes after returning to the Compound with her sense of alienation (pp. 64-66). Ecological and gender-oriented readings have examined the significance of Ren's bird costume. Grimbeek (2017) argues that this image reinforces the patriarchal association of women with nature (p. 205), while Wieczorek (2018) interprets it as an expression of the shared subordination of women and animals (p. 121). Wieczorek also acknowledges Ren's desire to escape maternal control and gain independence as a motivation for working at Scales and Tails (pp. 120-121). Postfeminist readings offer differing interpretations of this "choice." Bouson (2011) sees Ren as apparently accepting, if not choosing, her own sexual commodification and humiliation (p. 14). Rowland (2015) challenges this assessment, emphasizing Ren's restricted options and noting that pre-flood society encourages women to understand individual consumer choices as empowerment (pp. 50-51).

These studies address external influences on Ren's identity, the gendered meanings of her bird costume, and the contradictions of choice and empowerment. Further examination of her successive experiences of dress can clarify how clothing relates to her identification with different groups and her pursuit of recognition and acceptance. Taking the "bird suit" as its central thread, this article traces its mythic associations and examines Ren's practices of choosing, wearing, and using the costume. By connecting mythic imagery with the wearer's experiences, it explores the interrelations among Ren's self-fashioning, pursuit of belonging, and bodily commodification within a neoliberal context.

3. Methodology

This article draws primarily on Entwistle's (2000) account of dress as embodied practice. Entwistle understands dress as a medium linking individual identity and social belonging, shaped by social norms yet also involving bodily sensations, choices, and actions. This perspective informs the analysis of Ren's responses to different groups' clothing requirements and the gap between the membership her dress signals and the belonging she experiences. Gill's (2008) discussion of individual choice and personal responsibility in neoliberal culture further helps explain how Ren's desire to refashion herself intersects with the standards of value governing corporate society. Combining these perspectives with an intertextual close reading of "Siren Song" and *The Year of the Flood*, this paper addresses three related questions: first, how Atwood invests the "bird suit" with mythic meaning; second, why Ren chooses to wear it; and third, how she seeks recognition and belonging in dress and performance.

4. Findings

4.1 From the Siren to Ren: The "Bird Suit" as a Mythic Intertext

In Atwood's writing, the "bird suit" functions as a sartorial symbol of the identities assigned to women. In "Siren Song," she presents the Siren's seductive avian appearance as a covering that the speaker asks her listener to help remove: "Shall I tell you the secret / and if I do, will you get me / out of this bird suit?" (Atwood, 1974, p. 38).

The request subjects the mythic figure's appearance to the wearer's own judgment. "Suit" creates a distance between the Siren and the image displayed to others, while "out of" expresses a desire to leave both the costume and its associated role. The covering thus carries an established mythic identity alongside the speaker's expressed dissatisfaction, revealing her threatening, seductive appearance as a performed role. The final reversal also reveals the plea as a lure, intertwining dissatisfaction with the role and its strategic use. This detail resonates with Ostriker's (1982) observation that the Siren "sings a libretto of confinement turned vicious" (p. 78), linking her dangerous powers to her inability to change her circumstances. The bird suit therefore provides a material clue to how this identity is constructed and how its wearer uses it.

The bird-woman figure also carries broader mythic associations. Gimbutas (1989) states, "The Bird Goddess was the Source and Dispenser of life-giving moisture, an early and enduring human preoccupation" (p. 29). She further associates waterbirds with the connection between earth and sky, migration, and the renewal of life. Campbell (2013) interprets the half-human, half-bird image as an expression of the goddess's spiritual function (p. 37). By contrast, the Sirens' song in Homer's *Odyssey* links female power to fatal allure. Atwood has also discussed the long history of bird mythologies, connecting human fascination with birds to singing, flight, and divinity (Bresge, 2021). Across these traditions, bird imagery carries divergent meanings, including spiritual freedom and dangerous female allure. In Atwood's poem, however, the wearer asks to escape the very form that carries these associations. The costume's tension lies in the gap between the powers attributed to its image and the wearer's freedom to choose whether and how to perform the associated role.

The reappearance of the "bird suit" in *The Year of the Flood* gives this tension a contemporary setting. Ren's childhood acquaintance Oates asks her, "Please keep your bird suit on" (Atwood, 2009, p. 336). Whereas the wearer in the poem asks to remove the suit, the viewer in the novel wants her to keep it on. The repeated phrase and contrasting demands make the costume a point of negotiation between personal wishes and social expectations. Ren can thus be read as a contemporary Siren: her experiences of dress provide this mythic figure with a speculative life history, showing why she puts on the suit and how she uses the image to seek recognition and belonging.

4.2 Before the "Bird Suit": Dress and Unsettled Belonging

Existing scholarship has emphasized the shelter and mutual support that God's Gardeners provide within corporate society. Labudová (2013) describes the rooftop garden as a utopian island within a dystopian environment while acknowledging the community's limitations (p. 32). Ren's experiences of dress, however, reveal a tension between collective shelter and individual belonging. At the Tree of Life, a cross-community natural-materials market, she recalls, "We looked down on these others because their clothes were nicer than ours" (Atwood, 2009, p. 141). "These others" refers to other environmental groups participating in the market. "We" and "their" mark boundaries between groups, while "because" turns an aesthetic advantage into grounds for moral disdain. Yet "nicer" retains a positive judgment of the others' appearance. The sentence thus accommodates two divergent standards, aesthetic and ethical: the Gardeners distinguish themselves morally through their rejection of attractive clothing, yet cannot entirely erase its appeal to their members.

These conflicting judgments become sharper when wealthy customers arrive with their children. The adults value the ethical qualities of Gardener products, but their children laugh at the Bioneer neckscarves and drab clothing. Ren describes this experience as "humiliating," as though she and her companions were "freaks" on display (Atwood, 2009, pp. 141-142). The same collective appearance signifies a trustworthy ethical commitment to adult consumers but invites ridicule among peers. Entwistle's (2000) account of situated dress helps explain this discrepancy: what counts as "right" clothing depends on the people and circumstances the wearer encounters (p. 326). Gardener clothing consolidates a distinctive collective identity while exposing Ren to the peer pressure associated with that visible affiliation. Her shame registers the distance between the community's opposition to consumption and her desire for acceptance.

Ren's responses to Gardener clothing also change with the social situation: she downplays the affiliation her clothes display while drawing on the community's resources to establish new relationships. Her earlier encounter with Amanda already connects sartorial desire with peer acceptance. She envies the street girls' appearance of possessing every conceivable commodity while remaining indifferent to their possessions (Atwood, 2009, p. 72). Her envy concerns their ease of self-presentation as well as their clothes. When Amanda identifies her as a Gardener based on her drab clothing, Ren responds, "I only live with them," insisting, "I'm not really like them at all" (Atwood, 2009, p. 74). "Only" reduces shared life to a provisional living arrangement, while "really" separates her self-understanding from the identity her clothes convey. She wants Amanda to recognize her differently. Yet upon learning that Amanda has no fixed home, she immediately invites her to live with her (Atwood, 2009, p. 76). The community from which she verbally distances herself supplies the resources through which she can shelter a friend. Her attitude toward membership consequently varies with the relationship at stake: she minimizes her affiliation when seeking Amanda's acceptance, then draws on the relationships it supports to offer accommodation. Gardener shelter, visible membership, and the recognition she desires do not fully coincide. Her subsequent return to the Compound does not resolve this discrepancy simply by changing her clothes.

Returning to the Compound clarifies the connection between Ren's expectations of clothing and her desire for familial recognition. While living with the Gardeners, she misses her room, pink bed curtains, and wardrobe of different clothes. These

material details join her hopes that her father still loves her and that her mother will resume her former life, together constituting her imagined homecoming (Atwood, 2009, p. 65). Yet familiar furnishings seem unreal when she returns. Against the white bathtub and towels, she becomes conscious of her body as dirty and unpleasant-smelling, while the blue dye from her Gardener clothes resists repeated washing (Atwood, 2009, p. 209). Entwistle's (2000) description of familiar dress as a bodily extension, "like a second skin" (p. 334), illuminates the persistence of this embodied history. Gardener clothing has become part of Ren's accustomed bodily experience; the Compound's standards of cleanliness make its previously familiar traces conspicuous. Relocation does not immediately replace the bodily familiarity formed through her earlier life. Meanwhile, she expects her father to rejoice at their safe return, only to find that "his face fell." His chemical smell contrasts with her drab Gardener clothes, intensifying the estrangement of their reunion (Atwood, 2009, p. 210). As Sviland (2011) observes, Ren, like the orphaned Amanda, needs "someone to belong to" (p. 55). Her earlier investment in Zeb as a substitute father similarly reflects this unmet need for familial belonging. Returning home and changing her appearance fail to secure the intimacy and acceptance she imagines.

Her change of clothes before entering school further presents adaptation as a process directed by others. Ren notes that "adjusted" is their word, comparing herself to an item of clothing: "as if I was a bra strap" (Atwood, 2009, p. 214). The simile reduces personal adaptation to a mechanical adjustment, casting her as an object to be repositioned according to external requirements. The strap's proximity to the body also locates this abstract demand within everyday bodily experience. The image corresponds to the arrangements imposed on her: Lucerne burns her Gardener clothes, requires her to cut her hair and resume the name Brenda, and locks away the identification documents she needs to pass through the Compound gates (Atwood, 2009, pp. 210-215). Maternal control over private life and the Compound's surveillance and regulation of movement thus collude to constrain her free choices and agency. Ren experiences her mother's chosen clothes as a "disguise," while their tightness and her exposed limbs repeatedly draw attention to the external imposition on her body (Atwood, 2009, pp. 214-215). Entwistle (2000) observes that uncomfortable dress makes people conscious of "the limits and boundaries of our body" (p. 334). Through tightness and exposure, Ren's prescribed appearance similarly becomes a persistent source of bodily constraints. The judgment that these clothes are appropriate remains qualified by "according to Lucerne" (Atwood, 2009, p. 215). What appears to be maternal care also reveals her mother's authority to prescribe an acceptable appearance in the Compound. Both her loose Gardener dresses and her bright Compound clothes have been dependent on her mother's choices; her ironic references to the bra strap and disguise expose the difference between her experience and these external arrangements. Clothing gives her a recognizable group appearance without securing her identification with it or granting her control over where she belongs.

4.3 Wearing the "Bird Suit": Negotiating Belonging and the Limits of Agency

Ren's experience at AnooYoo further exposes the gap between the institutional role signaled by her clothing and the emotional belonging she seeks. After financial difficulties force her to leave college, Toby helps her find work at AnooYoo, where she puts on a pink uniform expecting safety, welcome, and a sense of being needed (Atwood, 2009, p. 296). The uniform identifies her as an employee and helps her maintain private relationships: visiting Amanda, she wears company clothing and carries a product basket, presenting the trip as a delivery and describing herself as "Little Pink Riding Hood" (Atwood, 2009, p. 299). The visit, however, reveals Amanda's relationship with Jimmy–the very man to whom Ren remains deeply attached. During their time in the HelthWyzer Compound, Jimmy had been a source of emotional solace for Ren, their bond having grown out of a shared sense of family rupture. Returning to work in distress, Ren encounters her mother, who has come as a customer. She believes Lucerne recognizes her, yet is brushed aside like "lint" (Atwood, 2009, p. 301). The uniform makes her employee status visible, while her mother's indifference again exposes her lack of emotional belonging as a daughter. Illouz's (2007) account of the mutual shaping of economic and emotional relations illuminates how this service hierarchy echoes their earlier estrangement. Citing the financial arrangements of her new household, Lucerne has already required Ren to leave college and support herself; Ren describes herself as lingering at the edge of her mother's nest (Atwood, 2009, p. 294). She subsequently characterizes this treatment as "Like firing the maid," expressing her exclusion from family life through the figure of a dismissed servant (Atwood, 2009, p. 295). That metaphor now coincides with her actual position as a uniformed worker facing her mother as a customer. She can earn her living but still cannot secure the care she expects as a daughter. From being compared to a maid to actually occupying a service role, occupational identity fails to compensate for familial exclusion. Her feeling that she might never have been born presents maternal indifference as an emotional erasure of her existence as a daughter (Atwood, 2009, p. 301).

These successive withdrawals of support connect Ren's unsettled belonging to the Compounds' capitalist organization of value and responsibility. Through a "cost-benefit analysis," HelthWyzer abandons Frank, Ren's father, valuing its technical formulas above an employee's life. Ren's mother Lucerne subsequently loses her housing and status and reorganizes her family life; for Ren, the resulting demand is to "take responsibility for myself" (Atwood, 2009, pp. 293-294). Neither corporate membership nor kinship guarantees continuing care, and responsibility for managing the resulting risks ultimately falls on Ren. Gill (2008) describes a neoliberal subject expected to take full responsibility for life outcomes regardless of constraints on action

(p. 436). The narrative can be read as a speculative intensification of this demand in North American neoliberal culture. Ren's subsequent desire both to escape existing relational obligations and to gain recognition through a new occupational appearance therefore acquires significance beyond personal disappointment.

The costumes and performances at Scales and Tails consequently become resources for Ren to present herself anew and seek belonging. After repeated disappointments, she wants to sever existing ties, even with Toby, asking for "no strings, no past, and no questions asked" (Atwood, 2009, p. 301). Yet this wish to leave the past behind remains intertwined with a need for appreciation: if she must work somewhere unsafe, she wants it to be somewhere she is appreciated (Atwood, 2009, p. 302). Mordis's earlier recruitment promise, "You can be whoever you want," directly addresses this desire (Atwood, 2009, p. 295). "Whoever" opens the possibility of escaping an established identity, while "you want" places personal desire at the center of identity choice. For Ren, whose name, clothing, and residence have repeatedly been determined by her mother, the invitation promises an opportunity to decide how she will be seen. Gill (2008) observes that advertising presents consumer choices as expressions of female individuality and empowerment. A similar logic operates here in recruitment: accepting occupational demands is presented as creating an identity of one's own.

Ren attempts to refashion herself through bird costumes and performance, claiming greater control over her self-presentation. Entwistle (2000) identifies dress as both the "raw material" for performing identity and an important link between "individual identity and social belonging" (p. 337). On entering the club, Ren chooses to use her Gardener name rather than Brenda, the name Lucerne claims is her real one (Atwood, 2009, pp. 215, 302). She also retains personal preferences within the occupational role, distinguishing between what she "didn't like" and what she "did like." She particularly enjoys trapeze dancing, where her costumed body attracts the audience's attention while height keeps it beyond immediate reach, giving her a temporary bodily space of her own. Her observation that "nobody could touch you then" identifies this physical distance as part of the performance's appeal (Atwood, 2009, p. 303). Her acquired skill enables her to use the elevated space actively, displaying her body while limiting others' access to it. Bird suit, technique, and spatial arrangements thus become resources she can use to shape her self-presentation and maintain a bodily boundary, sustaining a form of situational agency.

By altering the conditions of interaction, dress also enables Ren to manage the disclosure of her identity. Green scales foreground an animal appearance while concealing her face, making her body visible without making her personal identity recognizable. She finds that customers disclose more when they cannot see her "real face," as though "talking to a fish" (Atwood, 2009, p. 131). She nevertheless continues to listen, remember, and judge. When Glenn visits, "I recognized him" and "he didn't recognize me" establish an asymmetry of recognition, while "and I didn't let on" records her decision to maintain the concealment produced by the costume (Atwood, 2009, p. 307). Dress displays an animal image available for consumption while providing a practical resource for preserving privacy and observing others. These practices of identity management and self-protection complicate Bouson's (2011) use of "solely" to characterize Ren's self-understanding (p. 14).

Yet the situational agency Ren gains through dress and performance remains within a hierarchy that distributes protection according to commercial value. Healthcare, security, and Mordis's paternal concern provide tangible support, but "If you were talent, that is" qualifies the club's provision of protection (Atwood, 2009, p. 7). The bird costume gives her skill and sexual appeal a marketable appearance, admitting her to the category of members worth maintaining. Gill's (2008) account of particular forms of beauty and sexiness becoming prerequisites for female subjecthood clarifies these conditions of acceptance (p. 440): receiving appreciation also requires Ren to demonstrate her value through an appearance suited to commercial demand. This classification enters her judgments of herself and other women. Mordis describes the performers as a "valuable asset," while they dismiss older, sick women outside the organization as "hazardous waste." Ren's retrospective reflection on their contempt exposes the exclusions within this shared belonging (Atwood, 2009, p. 7). During the crisis, she reassures herself: "I wasn't only a disposable, I was talent" (Atwood, 2009, p. 282). Her expectation of protection depends on distinguishing herself from those who can be discarded. The club gives her both a position and a scale of value through which she confirms her entitlement to remain while identifying others as expendable.

These conditions of recognition persist when familiar relationships return. Encountering Ren after the catastrophe, Oates recognizes her but still calls her "so pretty" and asks, "Please keep your bird suit on" (Atwood, 2009, p. 336). Personal recognition and sexual expectation coexist: "keep" asks her to preserve the costume that makes her pleasing to look at. Their shared past does not remove desire for the bird image from his approach. Ren can choose to avoid him, but being recognized does not ensure acceptance on the terms she desires. The bird suit attracts attention while confronting her with a continuing question: how far does others' interest depend on her maintaining this appealing appearance? The resource she uses to seek belonging also becomes grounds for others' expectations of her.

The ensuing violence forcibly removes her capacity to regulate bodily access. While fleeing, Ren already wants "some real clothes," but danger prevents her from returning to the shops, leaving her in the peagret costume (Atwood, 2009, p. 340). When she enters Toby's field of vision, the feathers remain conspicuous, but a rope controls her body: "No wings. A noose around her neck" (Atwood, 2009, p. 351). "Noose" ironically echoes her earlier desire for "no strings": she sought freedom from relational obligations but now cannot control even her movements. Freedom from touch during trapeze dancing depended

on specific arrangements; feathers alone cannot preserve that bodily boundary. Post-flood violence does not erase her earlier skills, judgments, or active choices. It exposes the conditions of survival those capacities cannot independently secure. The novel thereby sharpens its critique of the protective order underlying promises of free choice: Ren is encouraged to create herself through costume and performance, while eligibility for care remains tied to her body's commercial value. Her repeated pursuit of belonging reveals the club's alignment of commercial worth with entitlement to protection.

Fuller and Miller's (2025) critique of "postfeminist moralism" offers a perspective on Ren's unresolved predicament. Requiring female characters to achieve successful self-liberation through personal choice risks making individuals responsible for overcoming structural constraints. From this perspective, Ren's continuing search for belonging cannot be judged a failure merely because she does not independently escape domination. Toby's rescue further demonstrates that survival requires care within concrete relationships, conditions that personal skill and judgment cannot replace. The novel does not arrange Ren's active choices into an inevitable progression toward complete independence; it sustains the entanglement of autonomous desire and relational dependence. The bird suit gives this tension material form: she uses it to claim bodily space, privacy, and recognition, but must do so within existing conditions of labor and interaction. Her unfinished pursuit of belonging thus exposes a contradiction in corporate society: women are required to take responsibility for their circumstances, while protection and acceptance remain conditional on their continuing commercial value.

5. Conclusion

This paper therefore argues that Ren can be read as a contemporary Siren. In mythic traditions centered on male heroes such as Odysseus, the Siren's strange appearance and dangerous allure are always foregrounded, leaving her life history and the forces that shape her role largely unexplored. By tracing Ren's use of dress to seek recognition and belonging, Atwood gives this figure a life history rooted in contemporary society. Reading the expressed dissatisfaction with the bird suit in "Siren Song" alongside Ren's story reveals how the novel's neoliberal society repeatedly produces such Sirens: it promises women independence through personal choice while turning their desires for self-worth and belonging into incentives to manage their bodies and sexual images. Atwood's critique of capitalism lies in exposing how women's active choices can themselves be absorbed into this order. The novel thus interrupts the expectation of a linear progression from female oppression to liberation, presenting an ongoing dilemma: women can use prescribed images to influence others and seek recognition, but individual action alone offers limited means of transforming the power relations that govern how they are viewed and accepted.

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