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Margaret Atwood is a Canadian poet and novelist, best known for her female-driven content and exploration of female issues. English scholar Christine C. Keating of Assumption College describes Atwood's work as a critique of patriarchal controls that restrain women and hinder their ability to realize their true identities (484). Keating's description illustrates the magnitude to which Atwood has written about womanhood and the deep-rooted societal pressures that attempt to mold women into controllable beings and strip them of their agency. Atwood's poems "A Red Shirt," an untitled entry from *Two-Headed Poems*, and "Half Hanged Mary" all address these topics directly, but from differing perspectives. These three poems act as Margaret Atwood's female survival guide, as she aims to free women from the pressures of conformity.

Born in 1939, Atwood is well versed in society's ever-changing expectations of women, as she bore witness to the rise of "working women" during World War Two, only to see them be ushered back into the home post war (Stein 2). These swift shifts in the public's perception of women had a strong impact on how a young Atwood viewed the world and a woman's place in it. With much of her childhood spent traveling for her father's job, Atwood found refuge in writing and reading, taking pleasure in everything from traditional literature to comic books (Stein 2). Upon graduating from high-school, Atwood attended the University of Toronto, where

she earned an English degree and published articles and poems in the school's literary journal (Stein 2). She later won a fellowship to Radcliffe College, received her master's degree, and promptly began publishing her poetry in 1961 (Stein 3). The poetry that Atwood published during this decade cemented her as a "feminist author", who was passionate about discussing the negative connotations associated with the perpetuation of female gender roles, a niche that continues to make her work unique. With her reputation established, Atwood released a plethora of work, a majority of which connected to this theme in one way or another.

Atwood has chosen to mainly focus on how gender roles force girls to exist in small, controllable boxes, denying any part of themselves that does not conform to social standards. Jane Lilienfeld, an English Scholar from Assumption College, believes that female gender roles are enforced by a system of indoctrination, where girls are told what they can and cannot do, or what they should and should not be (1). This assessment demonstrates the way that society seeks to control every aspect of girl's lives, depriving them of personal agency. Atwood not only shares Lilienfeld's belief, but masterfully articulates it in "A Red Shirt", a poem inspired by men saying, "Young girls should not wear red" (Atwood, lines 5-7). The poem's speaker is a mother, recalling these statements by men as she sews a shirt for her daughter. The mother's focus on these statements reveals that even things as simple as clothing and colors are weaponized to control girls, a practice that hinders them from exercising self-expression. To make sense of the controversy behind the color red, the mother studies the meanings associated with the color, uncovering that "In some countries it is the color/ of death; in others passion, / in others war, in others anger, / in others the sacrifice // of blood shed" (Atwood, lines 8-12). The imagery of these definitions reveal that the color red is associated with being bold, loud, messy, complicated, and unpredictable, everything a girl is forbidden to be.

However, Atwood does not just use “A Red Shirt” to highlight what girls are demanded not to be, she also uses it to focus on what girls are expected to be, revealing that these expectations are just as confining as their counterparts. If girls are not to be what red represents, then they are to be the opposite of what red represents, which the mother describes as “a veil, a white shadow, bloodless, / as a moon on water” (Atwood, lines 13-14). The simile used by Atwood in these lines is effective, as it exposes that girls are supposed to be timid, quiet, clean, simple, and controllable.

The contents of “A Red Shirt” are elevated by the fact that the narrator is a mother, using poetry to evaluate the pressures of conformity aimed at her daughter. This maternal narration enriches the poem because it showcases the generational effects of societal expectations, as the mother strives to not pass down oppressive ideas to her daughter. In doing so, the mother is recognizing that strict ideas of femininity force young girls to conform into idealized versions of themselves, neglecting their own wants and ambitions, in favor of meeting social standards, a fate she does not want for her daughter.

Atwood explores the implications of young girls succumbing to the pressures of conformity in an untitled poem from her book, *Two-Headed Poems*. The speaker of this poem introduces her concerns by asking, “How can I teach her/ some way of being human/ that won’t destroy her?” (Atwood, lines 1-3). This question utilizes figurative language to acknowledge that the patriarchy demands a girl submit to those in power, effectively making her sacrifice and abandon herself. The speaker emotes great sorrow in this outcome, confiding, “I would like to tell her, Love/ is enough, I would like to say, / Find shelter in another skin. // I would like to say, Dance / and be happy” (Atwood, lines 4-8). In these lines the speaker expresses her wish to allow young girls to remain blissfully ignorant to the dangers of their emerging womanhood.

However, the speaker understands that to do this, would be to do them a disservice so, “Instead I will say, / in my crone’s voice, Be / ruthless when you have to, tell / the truth when you can, / when you can see it” (Atwood, lines 8-12). These lines function as Atwood’s guide to surviving womanhood, as she encourages girls to be honest about who they are, even if that honesty is brutal, something that is characteristic of her work as whole.

Carolyn Allen of the University of Washington suggests that Atwood’s female survival guide is not simply the breaking down of traditional female gender roles, but also the pursuit of “self-definition” (Allen). This interpretation is representative of how Atwood writes women who define themselves based on who they are, not what societal expectations they do or do not meet, a practice that allows her female characters to fully express themselves. An example of this type of women can be found through Mary Webster, a woman who survived being hung for witchcraft circa 1683 (Mead). In “Half-Hanged Mary”, Webster attests that her attempted execution is a result of her “living alone” and having “a weedy farm in my own name / [...] Oh yes, and breasts” (Atwood, lines 10-14). These explanations for Webster’s hanging are used to articulate the violence thrown at women who do not conform and who are, therefore, uncontrollable. Despite this painful truth, Webster fought against conformity before her hanging, through her clothing and living situation, but her survival enabled her to further define herself, without being encumbered by social standards. This continued “self-definition” is highlighted at the end of the poem when Webster states, “Having been hanged for something / I never said, / I can now say anything I can say” (Atwood, lines 199-201). With this statement Webster reclaims her agency and commits to living her life for herself. Webster describes her newfound verbal freedom as being “all fullness, all vacancy” (Atwood, lines 216). This oxymoron is used to illustrate the limitless nature of Webster’s new life, as she is free to be both everything and nothing, if she so

chooses. Webster's freedom operates as the epitome of Atwood's "feminist narrative", which is women realizing their right to define themselves.

With "self-definition" being of utmost importance to Atwood, noting how she defines her own work is vital to understanding the intentions behind her poetry. Acknowledging that the subject matter of much of her writing revolves around "feminist topics", Atwood would not define herself as a "feminist author", but instead as an author interested in discussing female and societal issues (Mead). Atwood's resistance to the title of "feminist author" comes from her belief that women should be allowed to do whatever they please, even if their actions are not deemed "feminist" (Mead). This belief by Atwood is valuable to readers, as it reaffirms Mary Webster as a woman who lived her life on her own terms, enabling one to sympathize more deeply with her ostracization. Upon learning of Atwood's intentions, the young girls of *Two-Headed Poems* can be affirmed as victims, being spoon-fed societal expectations, while the mother of "A Red Shirt" is a woman attempting to save her daughter from those same expectations. These affirmations by Atwood are effective because they stress the importance of female agency, forcing one to confront the truth that women are human beings, not objects to be controlled.

Margaret Atwood has made a career of exploring female hardships and self-discovery, with poetry full of deep insights and profound observations that illuminate the female pressures and effects of conformity. Atwood conveys these themes while offering girls and women a guide to surviving in a male-dominated world. This guide is built on the fact that women deserve to define themselves, independent of social norms and gender roles. With the cornerstone of Atwood's female survival guide being the belief, that women should have agency over every

aspect of their lives, Atwood's writing is an encouragement to girls and women to fight to dictate their own fates.

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