

## Degree Project

Level: Bachelor's  
**Striving for Normality**

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### **The Role of Religion and Patriarchy as Oppressive Power Structures and the Allure of Conformity in Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret***

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## Introduction

American writer Judy Blume's novel *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) illustrates well how young girls are indoctrinated into patriarchal systems of power. Blume's writing and especially *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, seems as relevant as ever as Blume has recently been named in the *Time's* 100 Most Influential People of 2023 (Ringwald). Blume's books have sold more than 90 million copies (Weiss-Meyer) and a film adaptation of the now half-a-century-old novel, directed by Kelly Fremon Craig, came to theaters in April of 2023.

Blume's novel tells the story of eleven-year-old Margaret who is afraid that she is abnormal. Margaret is concerned with her pre-pubescent body developing too slowly and is worried about fitting in. Margaret is an only child of an interfaith marriage between a Jewish father and a Christian mother. Margaret has never seen her estranged Christian grandparents since they disowned their daughter for marrying a Jewish man. This conflict between the two religions made Margaret's parents reject religion and decide to bring Margaret up without any religious affiliation until she is old enough to choose for herself. As the family moves from New York to a suburb in New Jersey, Margaret realizes that her lack of religious affiliation is not perceived as normal. This realization only accentuates her feeling of not fitting in. Margaret is concerned about attaining friendships in a strange environment and is afraid that her family's stance on religion will make blending in with her new milieu difficult.

Blume's writing has not received much scholarly attention and previous research concerning the novel mainly focuses on either menstruation education in literature or Jewish identity representations. Jonathan Krasner and Joellyn Zollman point out in their essay, "Are You There God? Judaism and Jewishness in Judy Blume's Adolescent Fiction," how "Blume's work in general has been all but ignored by scholars, despite her widespread appeal" (24). Because of the lack of scholarly work on Blume's literature, Krasner and

Zollman started to bridge the gap in the research by considering the Jewish side of Margaret's identity as well as topics such as puberty, peer pressure, and body image. Krasner and Zollman point out that Margaret's ambiguous religious status complicates her fitting in with her new social circle in American suburbia where religion is a large part of the resident's identity (29-30). Religion is a highly hierarchical institution and the power it maintains regarding the formation of identity in Blume's novel is significant.

Jennifer Weiss-Wolf and Michelle Martin, on the other hand, focus on period education in schools and literature. Weiss-Wolf writes in her essay, "Menopause and the Menstrual Equity Agenda," about her experience of reading Blume's novel and its positive liberatory powers. Blume enabled "children to be seen [and] respected . . . [Blume] validated the most mundane, yet oddly prolific, questions about periods that were clearly on the minds of many" (Weiss-Wolf 228). Margaret's story was groundbreaking at a time when talking and teaching about menstruation was taboo. From the book, young girls could read about experiences that they were currently going through and could thus identify with the characters in the novel. However, since the novel tends to put forth a negative image of girls as shallow and stereotypical, this thesis regards the celebration of the representation girls receive from the novel as rather questionable. Martin also points out in her essay, "Periods, Parody, and Polyphony: Fifty Years of Menstrual Education through Fiction and Film," that Blume's novel, unlike its predecessors, shows a girl getting her period, which is an emancipatory act in a world where periods are often a source of shame or something that should be kept hidden (26). Both Weiss-Wolf's and Martin's articles mainly focus on the emancipatory forces present in the book through the open discussion on menstruation. Although the book undoubtedly exhibits liberatory forces, they are often superseded by patriarchal oppressive values that hinder the girls' development.

Joseph Sommers takes a different approach in his analysis of the novel and focuses on

the aspect of dialogical narration in the novel. In his essay, “Are You There, Reader? It’s Me, Margaret: A Reconsideration of Judy Blume’s Prose as Sororal Dialogism,” Sommers observes that Margaret addresses the reader directly and that Blume’s “novels [seem] to invite an opportunity for girls, both textual and extratextual, to share difficult feelings surrounding an otherwise vexed and occluded public discourse” (259). Sommers continues that the narrative structure of Blume’s novels allows the creation of sororal bonds between the text and the reader and discusses the way problem novels<sup>1</sup>, such as *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* “operate as surrogates for girls growing into their roles as young women” (260). This thesis builds on the idea of gender performance and the impact of restrictive gender roles within oppressive power structures present in the novel and starts to bridge the gap in the research by bringing light to one aspect that has been largely overlooked: the power structures in the book. As the research on Blume’s writing is very limited, other sources on different primary works will be used in the analysis to explain concepts overlooked by the existing research.

Molly Ringwald writes in the *Time*’s article how Blume’s novels helped her play the role of a teenage girl since through Blume’s writing, she became one. Ringwald continues: “[Blume’s] books have been banned many times in various places over the years since there are always people for whom the thought of an empowered young woman’s autonomy over her mind and body is objectionable” (Ringwald). However, this thesis interprets Blume’s novel quite differently. This thesis regards the novel’s young female protagonist as far from an empowered woman with autonomy. Margaret quickly learns that she must conform to the strict norms and rituals of girlhood and shun anyone who does not in order to feel powerful

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<sup>1</sup> The problem novel tradition dates back to Victorian times and in Anna Maria Jones’s view, these novels bring forth the importance of the novel to the formation of self. Other interpretations of problem novels highlight the tendency to report as well as provoke problematic interpretations of the text within their field of cultural production (Jones).

within patriarchy. Therefore, Blume's novel enforces conformity by pitting the girl characters against each other and making them act as wardens of patriarchy, ensuring that everyone submits to patriarchal norms. The definition of patriarchy, used in this essay, is provided by Carol Christ. In an epigraph for her essay, she states that "Patriarchy is a system of male dominance, rooted in the ethos of war which legitimates violence, sanctified by religious symbols, in which men dominate women through the control of female sexuality" (Christ 214). The young female characters in the novel are under a constant threat of psychological violence and know that one wrong step can lead to being ostracized. They fear drawing negative attention to themselves that would make them appear abnormal and this fear drives many of their decisions and thus their conduct within their social lives is restricted to what is deemed appropriate by their peers.

Indeed, Blume's novel demonstrates the effects of power structures such as patriarchy, religion, and body politics on young girls. Both of Margaret's grandparents assume a position of authority in building Margaret's identity and try to assimilate her into the appropriate religion. This mirrors the way that patriarchy assumes authority over her body through body politics and surveillance power. Therefore, the concept of Othering and Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon will be used in relation to Judith Butler's theories of gender performance to demonstrate the effects surveillance power has in the novel and how it encourages conformity to harmful power structures; a focus that has been largely ignored by previous research concerning the novel. As Susan Sontag puts it: "Although this system of inequality is operated by men, it could not work if women themselves did not acquiesce in it. Women reinforce it powerfully with their complacency, with their anguish, with their lies" (38). Therefore, patriarchy is also upheld by women who try to establish hierarchical systems between themselves and other women to rise higher in the system. The fight over Margaret's religious orientation and identity can be read as a patriarchal struggle over the ownership of

her soul and body, and therefore religion is analyzed alongside patriarchy as a power structure that encourages her to conform and strive for normality. However, Margaret resists religious conditioning since patriarchy already occupies the role of religion in her life. This thesis argues that Blume's novel illustrates how religion encourages conformity to rules and norms through the same mechanisms through which patriarchy indoctrinates young girls into compliance with systems of power by exploiting their insecurities and their need to belong.

Before proceeding with the analysis of this thesis, the structure of the essay is explained. The first section focuses on the theories used in this thesis and the second section focuses on Margaret's struggle to form her religious identity which will be contrasted in the third section with the lens of internalized misogyny through which she evaluates her adolescent body. Lastly, this thesis analyzes the emancipatory forces that could help Margaret choose her path and allow her to break free from the one that is predetermined to her by these oppressive power structures.

### **From the Panopticon to Gender Performativity and Othering**

This thesis uses the concepts of the Panopticon, gender performativity, and Othering in the analysis of Blume's novel. Foucault's Panopticon and Butler's theories of gender performance are used to demonstrate how women themselves contribute to and subsequently uphold their oppression through mutual surveillance. Sara Day's research will be used to bring Foucault's and Butler's theories together, as combining these two frameworks is highly relevant to the analysis of the book. Other related concepts that will be considered in the analysis are those of shame and Othering in relation to conformity and misogyny since the girl characters in the novel conform in order to avoid being Othered and thus ostracized. These frameworks highlight the hierarchical forces and oppressive structures prevalent in the novel and demonstrate how these structures normalize conformity and complacency, amplifying

inequality. All three of these concepts above contribute to upholding oppressive power structures, such as patriarchy, and hinder Margaret's chances of forming her own identity and idea of self since she is under the threat of psychological violence, as stated earlier. The threat of violence is best understood through Foucault's concept of the Panopticon.

The Panopticon is a prison with a central surveillance tower, from where a warden can monitor all the prisoners unseen. Foucault explains the effects of the Panopticon, which is

to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault 201)

This means that people subjected to the Panopticon more readily submit to performing the roles that society expects them to perform. Dianna Taylor writes that "these features render the Panopticon a magnificent machine not only for subjection but also for self-subjection . . . . Notably missing from this ideal process is any reliance on violence or ostentatious displays of force." (34). Indeed, the Panopticon bases its power on the surveilling gaze of the participants. Day explains how Foucault and the Panopticon are highly relevant for the analysis of gender and writes that "Women internalize the feminine ideal so profoundly that they lack the critical distance necessary to contest it and are even fearful of the consequences of 'noncompliance'" (Day 195). Thus, Day's research is relevant for the analysis of Blume's



novel, since the girl characters are acutely aware that if they were to act out of the social order, it would have consequences, and thus submit to upholding the order.

Therefore, Judith Butler's concept of gender performance is highly important to the analysis of the Panopticon in the novel. Butler writes: "The 'appearance' of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power" (Butler, "Performativity, Precarity, Sexual Politics" i). Gender is thus performed through repetitive actions and norms which ties in with the Panopticon since "gender norms have everything to do with how and in what way we can appear in public space; how and in what way the public and private are distinguished, . . . who will be criminalized on the basis of public appearance; . . . Who will be stigmatized" (Butler, "Performativity, Precarity, Sexual Politics" ii). Indeed, flawed assumptions about biology and behavior as well as pervasive ideas about normativity enforce the girls' need to belong.

Another central aspect that both the Panopticon and gender performance are linked to, is the concept of Othering. Janelle Evans writes about the origins of the theory of Othering:

Edmund Husserl began a movement of philosophical study that aimed to understand the world as a reflection of how humans experienced that world, as well as how those same humans conceived of those experiences . . . As his study progressed, Husserl developed his theory of the Self in contrast to the Other. The Self was what a given individual associated with and thought of as being the definition of what created physical and psychological reality—what the person would thereby deem as normal. The Other was all that the same individual considered deviant, abnormal, outside of the real of fathomable, and therefore inhuman. (Evans 150-151)

Therefore, everything that diverges from the norms of a culture is attributed with negative traits. The concept of Othering relates to both the Panopticon and gender performance as all three concepts focus on differences and similarities between certain groups. All three concepts enforce conformity through shame and the fear of being punished. In the novel, the girl characters are performing their girlhood through gender performance and monitoring each other and themselves, thus acting out the Panopticon out of the fear of being Othered and cast out.

### **Religious Indoctrination**

Blume's novel is a curious window into the religious landscape of the post-war American suburb. The suburban context is new for Margaret and the very first lines of the novel allow an illuminating glimpse of her thoughts: "We're moving today. I am so scared God. I've never lived anywhere but here. Suppose I hate my new school? Suppose everyone there hates me? Please help me God" (Blume 1). This passage conveys the common insecurities that Margaret struggles with, such as standing out negatively, resulting in a fear that her peers will hate her. It is also interesting to note, that although Margaret has received an atheist upbringing, she still secretly confides in God. The impact of religion in society is so pervasive that Margaret cannot completely escape it, despite her parents' efforts to raise her separate from religious indoctrination. Historically speaking, this setting was emphasized in the suburbia. Will Herberg explains in a quote by Krasner and Zollman that

the religious revival that occurred in the postwar suburbs as a product of the transformation of America from a land of immigrants, where people identified by ethnic group, to a triple melting pot wherein people identified with one of three great

sub-communities, Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. To find a place in American society, argued Herberg, meant to place oneself in one or another of these communities. (28-29)

This phenomenon is evident in Blume's novel's suburban context. Margaret meets a girl, Nancy, and her mother, who answers with surprised skepticism as Margaret tells her that she does not attend Sunday school. Nancy's other friends all either attend the Hebrew school or the Sunday school as well. They ask Margaret: "But if you aren't any religion, how are you going to know if you should join the Y or the Jewish Community Center" (Blume 40). To which Margaret replies that she has never thought about it and perhaps "won't join either one" (Blume 40). To this, Nancy replies with the telling "But *everybody* belongs to one or the other" (Blume 41). Indeed, Margaret's religious status, or lack thereof, makes her the Other in the suburban context and complicates Margaret's transition from New York to suburbia as Krasner's and Zollman's research has also pointed out. Margaret feels like an outsider and the thought of not belonging makes her deeply dissatisfied with her situation.

Since Margaret feels like the Other in her new milieu due to her ambiguous religious position, it becomes more important than ever for her to fit in and conform in other ways. This is evident in the way Margaret and her friends establish their friendship as the Panopticon and act as wardens to each other, making sure that they are all conforming to societal expectations placed on girls and women. This is done through various ways, such as meetings where the girls must share details about their intimate lives and through following a set of rules that mandate what they are allowed to wear and how they should behave. They follow the rules so as not to be ostracized since following these regulations is a requirement to belong to their club, the pre-teen sensations, or the PTSs.

In Blume's novel, the social power available to the young female characters is

associated with fitting into beauty standards, which is why Margaret prays that God will help her reach puberty faster as her peers develop breasts and begin to menstruate. Indeed, Margaret performs gender in the stereotypical way that she has been taught to do by society. Submitting to gender performance is an avenue for her to feel normal and God is a sort of imaginary friend that Margaret can talk to without fear of judgment about these fears: “I just told my mother I want a bra. Please help me grow God. You know where. I want to be like everyone else” (Blume 42). Margaret’s most profound motivations are often rooted in the fear of being abnormal and the Other, and she is afraid that not having breasts will demote her in the social hierarchy built on young girls’ insecurities about their looks. Margaret associates gender performance, having breasts, and appearing grown with social power and hopes to achieve this power through God’s help, who is the symbol and manifestation of patriarchal power within religion. Religion also encourages conformity to rules and norms in a similar way to patriarchy, which is why the rules that the girls place on themselves are reminiscent of religious doctrines aimed at making the participants feel like devoted and faithful servants of God, but at the same time require submission and conformity. This is evident in the way that Margaret and her friends subscribe to gender roles and norms, and both perform them and ensure that the other girls maintain the performance as well. In this sense, shame plays a crucial role in ensuring that the mechanisms of surveillance, like the Panopticon and gender performativity guide the girls’ behavior and conduct. The girls want to fit in, and the only way they know how is through a socially acceptable performance of gender, and thus they use surveillance power against each other to make sure that no one acts out of line.

Margaret’s atheism has far-reaching consequences regarding her idea of self and the way she strives for normality. Angela Sumegi writes about the idea of self:

The philosopher Charles Taylor explained that the modern western way of describing the essential nature of oneself as a self rather than a 'soul' or 'intelligence' is related to the history of how we regard ourselves within the larger context of our existence. From Plato in the fourth century BCE to Descartes in the seventeenth century, philosophical notions of selfhood and identity have been contingent on the ways in which we reflect on being human and on our capacities for self-control and self-exploration. (Sumegi 14)

Margaret's sense of self is tied to her identity as an atheist and therefore she becomes nothing through the lack of religious affiliation and her sense of self is subsequently lost.

The word 'nothing' is repeated throughout the novel in the context of religious ambiguity and the negative connotations of the word confirm the paradigm that being without a religious affiliation somehow reduces your being and therefore amplifies Margaret's status as the Other. Margaret's teacher gives an assignment that the students are supposed to hand in at the end of the year and Margaret chooses religion as her topic since she wants to understand which religions she belongs to. She tells God: "What would you think of me doing a project on religion? You wouldn't mind, would you God? I'd tell you all about it. And I won't make any decisions without asking you first. I think it's time for me to decide what to be. I can't go on being nothing forever, can I?" (Blume 60). Margaret associates not belonging to a specific religion with being nothing, and so do the people around her. In an interview, quoted by Krasner and Zollman, Blume recognizes this divide saying: "The decision to make Margaret half Jewish grew out of my own early experiences (you had to be either Jewish or Christian)" (Krasner and Zollman 26). Margaret recognizes this societal pressure of belonging to a set group and initiates a quest to find which religion is correct for her.

By the end of the year, Margaret realizes that finding her place is not as easy as she had imagined. In her assignment, she writes: “I have not really enjoyed my religious experiments very much and I don’t think I’ll make up my mind one way or the other for a long time. I don’t think a person can decide to be a certain religion just like that . . . If I should ever have children I will tell them what religion they are so they can start learning about it at an early age” (Blume 164-165). Margaret recognizes the issue of choosing a religion: one must either believe in a religion or be so accustomed to it that they do not question it. Instead of seeing this revelation as emancipatory, she claims that if she should have children herself, she would decide on religion for them to protect them from having to choose or from having to reflect on what religion means for them. At the end of the school year, Margaret still does not value atheism as an option to consider, even though she has grown up in a family that defies religious affiliation. Thus, Margaret feels as if she has failed the assignment as nothing managed to rouse a special closeness to God and she could not choose a religion for herself.

Through Margaret’s grandparents, Blume’s novel continues to articulate the idea that atheism is not an option, and thus Margaret’s relationship with her grandparents is also set up as a Panopticon. Taylor quotes Foucault: “Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used” (35). Both maternal and paternal grandparents try to force Margaret into the appropriate religion, as they are trying to uphold the status quo. The collision of the two religions, Christianity and Jewishness, takes place in the form of the catalytic visit of Margaret’s estranged Christian grandparents. They never accepted their daughter marrying a Jewish man and consequently have not met Margaret. Although both grandparents, Jewish and Christian, know that Margaret’s family does not practice any religion due to past trauma and conflicts regarding both families' different religious practices, they still hope that their

grandchild, Margaret, will settle upon the correct religion in their own view. Margaret's grandparents' conduct is thus a Panopticon, and they try to ensure that the status quo is upheld. In their view, everyone must follow social norms, in this case through religion, and they have taken up the role of the warden, much like Margaret and her friends. Thus, they see it as their responsibility to indoctrinate Margaret to an appropriate religion.

Therefore, as the Christian grandparents find out that Margaret does not attend Sunday school, they are distraught and tell Margaret's parents: "We hoped by now you'd changed your minds about religion . . . Especially for Margaret's sake . . . A person's got to have religion" (Blume 152). They cannot see the value in a life devoid of religion and reveal the true reason behind their visit; to see that Margaret is raised as Christian. This is an act of surveillance and an effect of the Panopticon that they subscribe to. Margaret's mother explains that they are letting Margaret decide for herself once she is old enough to either choose a certain religion or atheism to which the grandparents answer: "Nonsense! . . . A person doesn't choose religion . . . A person's born into it! . . . a child is always the religion of the mother. And you, Barbara, were born a Christian . . . It's that simple" (Blume 153). To this Margaret's father declares that Margaret "is nothing" (Blume 153). Amidst all of this, none of the adults have consulted Margaret or asked for her opinion. Margaret is being ignored while the adults claim that her identity is either this or that. This bears similarities to the way that parents gender their children from the beginning of their life and therefore place expectations of certain types of gender performance and behaviors onto the child without consulting them. The events reach a climax when Margaret's Jewish grandmother arrives and declares that "no matter what they [say] . . . you're a Jewish girl" (Blume 162). Margaret is upset about her favorite grandparent's betrayal and yells that she "[doesn't] even believe in God" (Blume 162). These events create a strain on Margaret's relationship with God and she decides to stop confiding in him.

Indeed, these attempts to claim Margaret to a certain religion ultimately fail, and only manage to drive her further away from religion as Margaret refuses to be assimilated into a religion she does not fully believe in. Margaret's religious self-determination stems from having been raised separate from religion. Although she desperately wants to be assigned a religious affiliation to fit neatly into suburban society, she cannot blindly accept one religion over another, even if atheism makes her the Other in American suburbia, as she has not been conditioned to believe in a certain doctrine since birth. Interestingly, Margaret's identity both as a female and as an atheist makes her twice the Other in the novel. As a girl, she also belongs to the inferior category of female to the dominant category of male. Thus, she is justifiably afraid of not belonging, which makes her desperately strive for normality although she cannot accept religious affiliation merely to belong. Most of Margaret's relationships in the novel are built on surveillance power and act as a Panopticon, which hinders Margaret's chances of forming her own identity and idea of self. The fear of not belonging drives Margaret to conform and perpetuate patriarchy since she fears that she could be even further Othered if she showed non-conformity.

### **Margaret's Submission to Patriarchal Power**

Now that the religious aspects have been analyzed, this thesis will analyze the religion-like rituals and hierarchies that patriarchy subjects women to. Although Blume allows her protagonist to resist religious indoctrination, she must succumb to the expectations that accompany girlhood under patriarchy as Margaret is assigned to patriarchy from birth. Despite her status as an atheist, Margaret is not nothing: she is the Other within patriarchy. As Margaret's Christian grandparents point out, a mother's religion passes on to a child and Margaret's mother plays an important part in Margaret's indoctrination to patriarchy and gender performance. Thus, she cannot escape the assigned gender roles that have been



present in her life from birth: “Margaret is painfully aware of her impending post-pubescence and all the demands that adolescence holds for her . . . a need for better posture, cleaner complexion, and, possibly, deodorant” (Sommers 258). Girls are being trained from a very early age to hide the evidence of aging, even when they are still children. As Margaret turns twelve, she takes her first steps toward anti-aging routines and it is Margaret’s mother who mentors her on her path towards teenagerhood saying: “Stand up straight, Margaret! Good posture now makes for a good figure later. Wash your face with soap, Margaret! Then you won’t get pimples when you’re a teenager” (Blume 29). Margaret notes that based on what her mother keeps telling her, “being a teenager is pretty rotten” (Blume 29). In her mother’s view, the age of eleven is the time for Margaret to start learning about feminine appearance, performance, and upkeep. Margaret accepts this and starts evaluating other girls based on their looks as well. The difference between religious power and patriarchal power is that Margaret has been living under patriarchal power her whole life and thus cannot escape it the same way she manages to escape religious determinism since there is no room in Margaret’s life for religion since maintaining her social status requires so much effort.

The PTS club is set up in the vein of Foucault’s Panopticon: the girls surveil each other and make sure the others comply with patriarchal social norms. Taylor describes the conditions of the Panopticon:

Among the many lessons of panopticism is that the power that seems focused on one individual is in fact ‘distributed’ throughout the structure, so that every individual is at the same time both ‘object’ and ‘subject’ of this power: the prisoner is ‘watched’, but is being trained to watch himself, to be his own inspector. The inspector is by definition the ‘watcher’, and yet he, too, is the object of a gaze: his performance as watcher is ever under scrutiny. (Taylor 58)

The girls act as watchers to both themselves and each other, making sure that they are all conforming which is done through the PTS club. One of the PTS rules is that they have to share their boy books: books where they list all the boys they fancy. Another rule is a strict dress code that the girls must follow as an act of surveillance and submission. They must wear a bra and not wear socks with loafers to school, even if that makes their feet hurt. All the girls follow these rules so they will not be banished from the group since the act of noncompliance would mean being cast out. The girls have internalized this watching gaze and are aware that if they were to act out of the social order, it would have consequences, and thus submit to the rules, even if they seem arbitrary. However, it is important to note that while the rules themselves may be arbitrary, they are mandated by the paradigm of patriarchy, which has serious, negative implications for the girls' lives, and therefore, are everything but arbitrary in practice.

Blume's novel inadvertently demonstrates how women's insecurities are exploited to make them conform to social norms and rules. An example of this is how Nancy, as the unofficial leader of the girls' friend group, exploits the gender roles that women must submit to by offering solutions to problems that do not exist to gain power over the other girls. Butler's gender performativity focuses on the social implications of performing gender and gender norms, and the way that those maintain the oppressive power structures that benefit from the subordination of women. Butler writes:

When a child is 'gendered', that child receives an enigmatic demand or desire from the adult world; the primary helplessness of the child is, in this case, a profound confusion or disorientation about what it is that gender means, or should mean, and a confusion as well about to whose desire the desire for gender belongs. If what "I" want is only produced in relation to what is wanted from me, then the idea of "my

own” desire turns out to be something of a misnomer. (Butler, “Performativity, Precarity, Sexual Politics” xi)

Margaret and her friends are suffering the implications and effects of performing gender in a way that is expected from them by outside sources like society and their parents. This enables the exploitation of the girl’s insecurities, and thus socially constructed problems, usually related to women’s looks, are used as tools of patriarchy to keep women submissive. This conditioning starts young, and Margaret and her friends are already being targeted at the age of eleven. In the novel, this is present in the forms of bust exercises, hair-growing tips, and skin care routines. Nancy convinces the rest of the PTSs that if they want to get out of their training bras, they must start doing bust-growing exercises. She shows the girls how she supposedly grew her breasts by bending her arms and moving back and forth saying “I must increase my bust” (Blume 53). Nancy is not selling a product, but she does gain power over the other girls by showcasing her knowledge, thus positioning her as their superior. Margaret subscribes to these beauty regimes and bust-increasing exercises because she wants to belong and sees this as the only way. As Amber Knight puts Butler’s argument: “We cannot enhance autonomy by freeing individuals from social construction since there is no ‘outside’ of power, and one’s will and options are never simply one’s own. The conditions and capacities needed to reflect, plan actions, and choose what course to take are circumscribed” (183-184). Indeed, Margaret does not question either the ethics of teaching girls of eleven how to mature their bodies or the value of doing so. She simply understands that girls are expected to perform gender this way and thus submits.

Secrets and lies are also used as tools to gain power in the patriarchal system of oppression in the novel. Hawk Chang writes: “Crucially, secrets are often embedded in dominant power relations. They serve as means of resistance for the underprivileged or the

dominated as well as a mechanism of oppression for the powerful” (2). Nancy starts a false rumor about one of their classmates, Laura, because she is more developed than the rest of the girls in their class, making her an easy target. This ties in with Butler’s theories since “gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 34). Gender coherence means something else for Laura who performs gender through her more developed body in a different way than Margaret and her friends, who are more childlike. Laura appears more grown and thus is closer to a woman than a girl and, therefore, possesses more power. The girls are at the same time jealous of Laura and afraid of her because of her sexual power due to her more mature body. Martin writes: “Margaret is both repulsed by and attracted to the manifestations of puberty that she sees in her friends at school, and Laura’s outcast status makes her an easy scapegoat for Margaret’s jealousy” (25). Indeed, Margaret tries through exercise to attain Laura’s body but at the same time is repulsed because Laura could use her body to her advantage. Therefore, Nancy’s lies about Laura letting boys touch her body are dependent on jealousy and fear, which turn the lies into tools of power. If the other girls were not insecure about their bodies and standing in the social hierarchy, the lies would consequently lose their controlling power. Furthermore, Nancy also lies about getting her period which again positions Nancy higher in the girls’ hierarchy where maturity means more power. In the end, when Margaret realizes that Nancy has been lying about Laura letting boys feel her at school, and about getting a period, she recognizes the power games Nancy uses to establish herself at the top of the girls’ internal hierarchy. Thus, Nancy loses her status at the top and Margaret is placed in a position of power because she could use her knowledge to expose Nancy’s secret and destroy her credibility. The girls are still watching each other to maintain the Panopticon and the watchful gaze is used as a tool of power. Therefore, as Margaret finds out the truth, she gains power because she now possesses more knowledge than the others. After Margaret realizes

that her friend has been lying to her, she can break free from the cycle of bullying she has contributed to, in order to conform and fit in. She sees how unfair she has been to Laura and apologizes, taking a step towards emancipation from the system that is built on the oppression of the Other. However, she maintains a supposed friendship with her former group and refuses to upset the order of things by revealing Nancy's secret of not getting her period to the other girls thus again conforming to and upkeeping the patriarchal order.

Another powerful tool for oppressive structures in the novel is shame, and it is used to keep the girls subjected to patriarchal ideas and oppression by exploiting their fear of being Othered. This is evident through the rules the girls must follow, such as the previous example of not wearing socks with loafers. When Margaret inquires Nancy for the reason, her answer is: "Otherwise you'll look like a baby" (Blume 14). Thus, it would be shameful for Margaret to disobey because she would risk being an outcast and embarrassed on her first day in the new school. Martocci explores the need for belongingness in her essay about Margaret Atwood's novel, *Cat's Eye*, and her research is relevant for the analysis of Blume's novel as well. Martocci writes:

belongingness' is . . . a need, which 'takes precedence over esteem and self-actualization' . . . the majority of the social dances which constitute daily interactions are undertaken in the service of belongingness. In other words, much of human motivation is derived from a need to avoid being left (or cast) out, or, in Erving Goffman's construction, to avoid embarrassment and shame. (Martocci 155)

Margaret understands this and her refusal to wear socks to school stems from the fear of being cast out. Furthermore, as Goffman believed, social order is upheld through the fear of embarrassment since fear of embarrassment directs the personal conduct of individuals in everyday life (Martocci 153). Shame in relation to gender performance and surveillance power lays out a depressing path for the girls because these oppressive structures are so pervasive that

they might seem inescapable. This is evident in the way that the Panopticon works to make women more subjectable to conformity to social norms and rules:

While the possibilities of the Panopticon obviously have implications for everyone, young women's relationship with surveillance is particularly pronounced and fraught . . . young women are . . . constantly being watched by almost everyone. Indeed, in accordance with Foucault's assertions regarding the cyclical nature of the Panopticon, young women are both monitored by others and monitoring each other. (Day 196-197)

The girls' fear and shame hold them prisoners to patriarchy and it begs the question of whether complete agency is even possible. Butler's theory of performativity changes the meaning of autonomy and agency. Butler explains:

Norms are acting on us before we have a chance to act at all, and that when we do act, we recapitulate the norms that act upon us, perhaps in new or unexpected ways, but still in relation to norms that precede us and exceed us. In other words, norms act on us, work upon us, and this kind of 'being worked on' makes its way into our own action. (Butler, "Performativity, Precarity, Sexual Politics" xi)

This is evident in the novel through the way Margaret and her friends act towards each other and their peers. The same phenomenon is also evident within religion. However, Margaret is resistant to religious conditioning even though she longs for the sense of belonging that religion could, in her view, grant her. Margaret is both the Other because of her gender and her ambiguous religious identity but unlike with religion, she cannot escape gender norms

and patriarchy as oppressive structures; Not only does she submit to patriarchy but also actively further perpetuates it herself.

### **Emancipatory Forces in the Novel**

Previous research about the book positions Margaret as an emancipatory character who defies the expectations placed on her. Krasner and Zollman write that “Margaret matter-of-factly models an independent, female-centered spirituality” (35). Admittedly, Margaret’s religious emancipation is a notable force in the novel. She does not simply conform to a religion, she wants religion and faith to feel authentic. This strengthens the argument that patriarchy occupies the role of religion in Margaret’s life since she cannot subscribe to a certain religion because it would feel inauthentic to her, and therefore, she genuinely believes in the patriarchal values and roles that keep her subordinate. Krasner and Zollman write about Margaret’s speeches to God as a “gendered activity with theological implications” (30). Margaret addresses God from the perspective of a girl who is struggling with gendered issues, such as breast development or menstruation, and openly shares intimate details about her identity, both spiritual and physical, with God, which is why Krasner and Zollman position Margaret as the first religious feminist in the genre of young adult fiction (30). However, this thesis argues the opposite since Margaret conforms to patriarchal expectations and wishes that her parents had decided on the question of religion for her, for this would have removed the burden of resolution from her shoulders. Margaret is ready to participate in bullying and Othering other girls to make herself feel included. Therefore, this thesis concludes that Margaret cannot really be labeled as a feminist and that her journey of self-discovery is shaped by patriarchal and misogynist values and thus seems incomplete.

Other emancipatory forces in the novel include the positive portrayal of menstruation

and menstrual education. Indeed, Blume openly discusses menstruation in her novel and shows a girl getting her period, thus normalizing the taboo subject of female anatomy. As Sommers argues, this can be immensely important for the young readership coming to terms with these same problems, and the “‘conversation’ allows the reader to come to some ‘control over her own self-representation, allowing her to escape’ the reality of her own situation” (267). Indeed, Blume’s novel is successful in providing helpful and relatable menstrual representation for young readers by creating a sororal bond between the reader and the narrative structure where the reader can feel a sisterly relationship through the narrative. However, as pointed out earlier in this thesis, Margaret does not break free from the patriarchal paradigms that are used to control and oppress girls and women. Moreover, the menstrual representation in the novel is used to attain control and power over the other female characters by Nancy, which greatly hinders the emancipatory possibilities menstruation could represent in Blume’s novel.

In Margaret’s relationship with God, Blume creates a space for her protagonist to experience freedom from surveillance power. Therefore, Margaret’s conversations with God can be analyzed as an emancipatory act through the desert island metaphor. Day writes: “For young people, who are often the objects of surveillance by parents, teachers and other authority figures, the desert island setting thus both challenges and reinforces the relationship between surveillance and power” (194). Margaret’s relationship with God can be read as a desert island of sorts, where she is free from the surveillance of her parents and teachers. During these conversations, she can be more open and honest about her desires and hopes regarding femininity and religion. They are also a place where she is free from outside expectations, enabling her to react more honestly. Thus, perhaps these conversations are the only truly emancipated space within the novel for Margaret to inhabit.

Sommers argues that the extratextual bonds Margaret establishes with the reader



serve the purpose of justifying her dubious conduct towards her friends to keep the reader on her side through the sororal bond between the narrative and the reader. However, this thesis argues that this argument can be taken further as the bonds outside the narrative reinforce patriarchal ideas about female friendships as manipulative and deceitful. This is done by masking Margaret's negative thoughts towards her friends and by only revealing those feelings to the reader. Margaret acts nicely towards her friends but at the same time, talks negatively about them to the reader. The sororal bond that Margaret establishes with the reader acts as another isolated desert island metaphor besides Margaret's conversations with God. Margaret establishes a dialogic alliance with the reader who, like God, is outside the narrative and thus also occupies the role of Other (Sommers 267). These sororal bonds thus occur in isolation, which is reminiscent of the desert island metaphor and mirrors the bond between Margaret and God since God is also outside the narrative. Although Margaret's communication with God can be seen as a conversation, it is one-sided; Margaret never receives a reply. Margaret also uses this open dialogue with the reader to appear "in a better light" in compromising situations (Sommers 263-264). According to Sommers, Margaret's pursuit to seem better than she is to the reader to avoid judgment is evident as the girls pursue Philip Leroy as a dance partner. Margaret includes a new narrative voice that is directed at the reader. This voice is introduced so that Margaret does not seem "catty or manipulative" (Sommers 263) and partly to mask the attempts to acquire Philip as a partner "when her acquisition comes at the expense of Nancy's pain . . . Blume anticipates that the reader has probably had a similar experience herself, an experience one would rarely advertise publicly for the same dubious reasons that Margaret chooses" (Sommers 263-264). However, Sommers' example can be taken a step further. Not only is Margaret attempting to appease the reader, but she is also performing a certain gendered stereotype of a mean girl that is

typical in the media representation of girls and their friendships<sup>2</sup>: a two-faced seemingly nice girl who would only be mean indirectly. Margaret is able to perform this role through her relationship with the reader who, being outside the narrative, cannot expose Margaret's dubiousness to her friends. Thus, in the end, these bonds outside the narrative act as patriarchal tools of manipulation, submissiveness, and deceit, and therefore, are far from emancipatory.

## Conclusion

This thesis concludes that Blume's novel, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, demonstrates the pervasiveness of patriarchal attitudes within our society by allowing her protagonist to escape religious indoctrination but making her succumb to the expectations of patriarchy. Margaret also further perpetuates patriarchal expectations in her own life and expects the same from others. The emancipatory forces evident in the novel are inadequate protection over lifelong conditioning to submit to patriarchal values. Blume downplays the importance of the friendships that the girls have with each other and sets the girls' relationships up as a Panopticon, which amplifies the patriarchal forces evident in the novel and invites young readers to subscribe to these values as well. The novel ends with Margaret finally getting her period, which signals to her that she is developing normally. This is a huge relief to Margaret, who only wants to be normal and belong. Margaret and her friends create their own rules and norms within their group to practice conformity and have a sense of fitting in. Although, all Margaret wants is to be normal, by inspecting the "concept of normality" it can be concluded that it "infinitely eludes definition. Yet perceived abnormality, or a departure from recurrent and accepted codes of behaviour, is seen as the trigger for the physiological manifestation of shame" (Jones 32). Margaret's quest for normality is driven by

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2. Such as the characterizations of teenage girls in the cult classic movie from 2004, *Mean Girls*, directed by Mark Waters. The movie is still widely popular and influential worldwide and has grossed 130.1 million over the years.

shame and the fear of being found out as abnormal, which would lead to her being cast out and ostracized.

Not only are Margaret's friendships built as a Panopticon, but her relationship with her grandparents is also set up as a Panopticon. Indeed, Margaret's grandparents, both Christian and Jewish, are trying to assimilate Margaret into the appropriate religion and are using surveillance power and manipulation tactics to make sure that Margaret and her parents comply. The grandparents do not see atheism as an option, and thus they see Margaret's family's atheism as going against the status quo which they are trying to uphold.

As a novel targeted at young female audiences, the novel seems like a how-to manual for girlhood and womanhood to advise how young women can conform and uphold the status quo: "Annis Pratt makes the contention that 'the supreme goal of these novels of development [for] younger girls [is to be] given tests in submission in a general way . . . their older sisters are provided as models of behavior appropriate for success'" (Sommers 266). Blume's novel belongs to this tradition of how-to manuals for girls that teach them to perform womanhood stereotypically. Unfortunately, these books perpetuate a narrow and harmful view of girlhood as manipulative and shallow by setting up the girls' relationships with one another as a Panopticon with the aim of surveillance. As a movie adaptation of the book came into circulation in the year 2023 it becomes evident that the genre of young adult fiction is still perpetuating these stereotypical depictions of girlhood which is why it is important to critically analyze representations of girls and women in the young adult coming-of-age genre.

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