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Becoming-woman: Deconstructing Adolescent Stereotypes through McManus' Bildungsroman One of Us Is Lying

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Abstract

Karen M. McManus' novel One of Us is Lying is a carefully crafted teenage Bildungsroman that brings together a group of stereotyped adolescents and blenders them with intense triggers such as murder, homosexuality, budding romance, relationship gaslighting, and second-generation immigration. These experiences catalyze their painful yet inevitable breaking free from the stereotypes. This essay examines how McManus' novel resonates with French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's concept of "becoming-woman." The concept refers to a dynamic process of transformation and deterritorialization, where individuals move away from fixed identities and categories. It involves breaking down rigid structures and embracing fluidity and change. Although the term explicitly refers to gender, its implications extend beyond gender, challenging fixed identities and hierarchical structures related to race, class, sexuality, and more. The concept fosters a more fluid and open-ended approach to understanding identity and subjectivity among adolescents.

Keywords

Bildungsroman, stereotypes, identity, becoming-woman

1. Introduction

In *One of Us is Lying*, the Bayview Four starts as archetypical characters. As a character called Simon Kelleher notes in the first chapter, the four main characters' archetypes are respectively "a brain," "a princess," "a jock," and "a criminal" (McManus, 2017). These archetypes reflect the archetype combination created in John Hughes' film *The Breakfast Club*, in which five characters are respectively labeled "the brain, the athlete, the basket case, the princess, and the criminal," with the basket case being left out in *One of Us is Lying* (Hughes, 1985).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Overview of One of Us is Lying

The "brain" in the book is Bronwyn, a stereotypical academic overachiever who has the "most perfect academic record" at her high school and is regularly a leader in extracurricular activities (McManus, 2017). Bronwyn's Yale graduate parents work as a CFO and a dermatologist respectively, and their income allows the Rojas family to live in the wealthier sections of town. By giving Bronwyn this family background, McManus makes Bronwyn's character conform to the correlation between familial income and academic performance (Lv & Lin, 2017). Moreover, Bronwyn is also an older sister. Aligning with the stereotype that older siblings are more responsible, Bronwyn's dependable reputation is implied from the very first chapter by the way teachers trust her to keep other students in check (Sissons, 2024). Moreover, even Brownyn's appearance aligns with her archetype. Bronwyn has brown hair, which befits the stereotype that brown-haired people are more intelligent than their peers (Beddow, 2011). She has grey

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eyes, which are associated with intellect in Greek mythology (Athena, n.d.). She is described as wearing a ponytail, no makeup, and conservative clothing, further reinforcing the stereotype that high-achieving, responsible students dress in simple attire.

Addy is the "princess" in the novel—the popular girl in high school. Addy is described as conventionally beautiful with "blond shampoo-ad hair" that "swirls around her shoulders.". She was also a homecoming princess prior to the beginning of the novel. Addy's explicitly attractive appearance befits the stereotype of the "überpopular," good-looking blonde teenager. Moreover, Addy's habits and behavior, especially toward the start of the novel, reflect a high level of daintyness. When Simon asks who would like water in the first chapter, Addy says "I do" without getting up, indicating that she expects others to do things for her. Addy is also used to drinking coffee with cream, a stereotypically "princess-like" habit. Upon seeing a fellow student collapse, Addy's reaction is also to cry and call her boyfriend for help. This reaction further Addy's initial lack of independence and reliance on others to be in charge of her. Addy's lack of independence allows her to conform to the stereotype that blond, good-looking women are simple-minded. Indeed, Nate repetitively describes Addy as "shallow" and "useless." Finally, McManus also made Jake, the "best running back Bayview High's seen in years," Addy's boyfriend, which further conforms with the trope of an athlete dating an attractive white girl.

Cooper is the "jock" in the book, a star student-athlete in baseball. McManus writes that Cooper "almost [pitched] his middle school team to the Little League World Series." She also gives a detailed description of one of Cooper's pitches in chapter six. McManus writes that Cooper's ball heads "straight for the middle of the plate" before "dropping out of the strike zone and into [his teammate's] glove." Through a combination of direct and indirect descriptions, McManus establishes Cooper as an athlete with rare talent. On top of his athletic prowess, McManus also gives Cooper an attractive physical appearance. He was a homecoming king, is said to look like a superhero with his muscles, and has a "Captain America" complexion. Through this description, readers may infer that Cooper is white and angular-faced. By describing Cooper's athleticism and appearance, McManus aligns Cooper along the archetypical lines of masculinity, creating a character that appears to conform perfectly to the traditional idea of an athlete. Like Addy, McManus also makes Cooper a part of the "athlete-plus-popular-girl" trope by giving him a popular girlfriend described as "sugar all the way through."

The "criminal" of the Bayview Four is Nate, a juvenile drug dealer coming from a troubled family. Nate's father is a disabled alcoholic who relies on compensation and completely neglects Nate. His mother was addicted to cocaine and abandoned him. Mostly, McManus relies on indirect description to imply that Nate lived through many difficult experiences. However, Nate does explicitly recount the night when Nate's mother abandoned him: "I packed a bag, put Stan in his carrier, and waited for her on our front steps. I must have sat there half the night, like a complete fucking loser, before it finally dawned on me she wasn't going to show." This short but saddening story reflects an entire childhood filled with many similar experiences. Nate's character conforms strongly to the stereotype that teenage criminals tend to have gone through trauma (Eaton, 2020). While this stereotype is often true, Nate lies on the tragic end of the spectrum even among other American juvenile criminals. Moreover, his background of substance-abusing parents is also a stereotypical instance of a disadvantaging family, which stands in contrast to families with veiled toxicity. Perhaps even Nate's appearance connects itself to his criminal identity; Nate has black hair, and black is conventionally associated with darkness and evilness in Western cultures.

McManus makes clear use of archetypes in her novel. At first glance, her characters appear to align so completely with established tropes that they appear cliche. Even her use of trope combinations reflects already-established trends, as the "brain, princess, jock, and criminal" combination already recurs in other modern works. McManus herself is aware of her conscious

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trope use; in the first chapter, she points out through her character Simon that the Bayview Four are "walking teen movie stereotypes."

2.2. Background on "Becoming-woman"

Gilles Deleuze, along with Félix Guattari, introduced the concept of "becoming-woman" in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). This idea represents a process of transformation and deterritorialization, where individuals move beyond fixed identities, embracing fluidity and change. "Becoming-woman" is seen as the first step toward "becoming indiscernible," dissolving rigid structures and categories. While the term explicitly refers to gender, its implications extend far beyond gender alone. It challenges any form of fixed identity or hierarchical structure, including those related to race, class, sexuality, and more. It aims to create a more fluid and open-ended approach to understanding identity and subjectivity.

In the 1980s, feminists like Alice Jardine and Luce Irigaray critiqued "becoming-woman" for undermining feminist achievements. Jardine argued that Deleuze and Guattari's idea, which posits that even women must undergo a "becoming-woman," threatens the feminist struggle that established women's subjectivity. Irigaray further contended that the concept, applied universally, amounts to a masculinist appropriation of feminist efforts, desexualizing and diminishing the specific experiences of women (Grosz, 1994).

Despite these critiques, the 1990s and 2000s saw feminists associated with the "corporeal feminism" movement reinterpreting Deleuze's ideas positively (Braidotti, 2003). These feminists emphasize an open and experimental attitude toward bodily potentials and see value in Deleuze's focus on fluidity and transformation. They argue that "becoming-woman" can be rethought to explore the political and personal potentials of the body, aligning with broader notions of the "body politic."

In summary, while Deleuze's "becoming-woman" has been criticized for potentially undermining feminist gains, it has also inspired new feminist interpretations that explore its potential for rethinking identity and the body in political and personal contexts. By challenging fixed identities and hierarchical structures related to race, class, sexuality, and more, "becoming-woman" promotes a more fluid and open-ended approach to understanding identity and subjectivity.

2.3. Concepts of Stereotypes Revisited

Originally referring to a printing process involving metal plates, the word "stereotype" gained its modern meaning in the 1920s when Walter Lippmann described stereotypes as "pictures in the head" (as cited in Marx & Ko, 2019). In the contemporary context, "stereotype" refers to overgeneralizations that people make when judging people from a certain category. For instance, the idea that women are emotional is a stereotype that does not apply to all women.

The act of stereotyping is not inherently an ill-intentioned one. In navigating the complex world, the human brain must learn what to expect in various circumstances (Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2000). Under these conditions, the neocortical system categorizes information to make its tasks manageable, so that certain labels, such as racial or gender labels, trigger certain perceptions, hence creating a stereotype. For instance, in a study, participants tended to assume that a speaker with a feminine voice had gentler qualities, while a speaker with a more masculine voice had more assertive qualities without having sufficient contact with the speakers to make these conclusions (Ko et al.). Stereotyping is a natural process and does not inherently aim to harm anyone.

However, it is widely understood that stereotypes cause harm by giving rise to prejudice (Marx and Ko, 2019). Prejudice occurs when a negative label is unfairly assigned to a person due to their attributes. For example, the assumption that Muslims are dangerous is a stereotype-facilitated prejudice, and refusing to associate with a Muslim person due to their religious

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beliefs is a form of discrimination. Moreover, stereotypes are believed to lead to stereotype threat. Stereotype threat occurs when a stereotype impacts an individual's identity and forces them to gear their life into the box assigned by the stereotype. For instance, a child who is repetitively told that she is incapable of singing well may internalize the criticism and stay away from music.

The prevalence and harms of stereotypes are explored in Karen McManus' novel *One of Us is Lying*. The story is narrated in turn by four protagonists known as the Bayview Four: Bronwyn Rojas, Addy Prentiss, Cooper Clay, and Nate Macauley. All four characters, who are framed for murder in the book, begin the novel as teenagers who fit perfectly into contemporary teenage archetypes. However, as the novel progresses, McManus shows how the characters' identities are not innate but a result of society's stereotyping. McManus also reveals that the Bayview Four's imposed identities impact their psychology and behavior throughout the book until they eventually attempt to break free from these stereotypes, conveying the hopeful message that stereotypes are dangerous but can be broken.

2.4. Thesis Statement

Deleuze's concept of "becoming-woman" can be instrumental in analyzing how teenagers in McManus' *One of Us Is Lying* break free from stereotypes. In Deleuze's philosophy, "becoming-woman" is a process of transformation that moves individuals away from fixed identities and embraces fluidity and change. This idea extends beyond gender, challenging any form of rigid identity or hierarchical structure, including those related to race, class, and sexuality.

The characters start as typical high school stereotypes: the brain, the beauty, the criminal, and the athlete. However, as they navigate the intense triggers of murder, secrecy, and interpersonal conflicts, they undergo significant personal growth. Applying Deleuze's "becoming-woman" to these characters reveals how they each break away from their initial identities. For example, Bronwyn, the brain, discovers her rebellious side, while Nate, the criminal, reveals his vulnerability and depth.

This deconstruction of stereotypes aligns with Deleuze's idea of deterritorialization, where fixed categories dissolve, allowing for a more fluid understanding of identity. By transcending their labels, the characters in McManus' novel embody the process of "becoming," moving toward a more open-ended and dynamic sense of self. This analysis highlights how Deleuze's concept can provide a deeper understanding of character development and the rejection of societal stereotypes in literature.

3. Character Analysis

3.1. The Harms of Stereotypes Exposed

Despite her use of clichés, McManus also implies that none of these tropes reflect her characters' true selves. Instead, societal or external pressures forced the characters to live as their archetypes. After internalizing these external pressures, the Bayview Four try to make choices that align with their stereotypes, even when such choices are toxic. In this process, the Bayview Four, with the arguable exception of Nate, all try to hide the aspects of themselves that contradict their perceived archetype.

McManus implies that Bronwyn's identity as an overachiever stems from her relationship with her father and sister. Bronwyn's father is an immigrant from Colombia, who became successful despite facing stereotyping and prejudice. Feeling that she might tarnish her father's reputation, Bronwyn feels that she cannot make any mistakes. In chapter 11, she explains: "[My dad is] always pushing against stereotypes because he's not from here. He built this great reputation, and I could tarnish the whole thing with one stupid move." The struggles Bronwyn's father faces reflect the discrimination surrounding non-whites in real society. Ironically, Bronwyn's father's

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attempts to break through these stereotypes enforce the pressures on his daughter to conform to an archetype of perfection, which reflects how difficult it is to escape from stereotyping. Meanwhile, Bronwyn's identity as an overachiever also stems from society's view of siblings. Generally, older siblings are expected to exhibit responsibility within a family. Presumably in conforming to this social expectation and in trying to protect her formerly leukemia-ridden sister Maeve, Bronwyn tries to "join the clubs, win the awards, and get the grades" to satisfy her parents and prevent them from expecting too much from Maeve. Ultimately, Bronwyn's urge to achieve excellence, and by extension, her identity as an overachiever, comes more from external pressures than herself.

McManus illustrates the strong impact of socially-enforced expectations on an individual's behavior through Bronwyn. Despite achieving near-perfect grades, Bronwyn still felt as though receiving a single D in chemistry would " ruin [her] whole future." The pressure to maintain perfection was strong enough to impel Bronwyn to cheat so that she could maintain her status as a perfect student. Her behavior demonstrates how external pressures placed upon a person can be so strong that they often compel the person to choose compliance over morality. Furthermore, McManus also writes in chapter 10 that Bronwyn maintains her "excellent" schedule even when framed for potential murder. She explains: "I get ready for school on Monday the way I always do. Up at six so I can run for half an hour. Oatmeal with berries and orange juice at six-thirty, a shower ten minutes later. Dry my hair, pick out clothes, put on sunscreen. Scan the New York Times for ten minutes. Check my email, pack my books, make sure my phone's fully charged." The fact that Bronwyn maintains such a rigorous schedule even under life-altering pressure illustrates the strong impact of enforced identities on behavior. Seemingly, nothing can overcome the pressure to become a stellar student for people like Bronwyn.

McManus conveys a critique of stereotyping and social pressure through the character of Cooper. Cooper lives under similar pressure as Bronwyn. Cooper's father consistently criticizes his baseball performance, pressuring Cooper to play even better. Cooper's father's incessant criticism demonstrates the way external pressures such as condemnation condition individuals to conform to external expectations. Moreover, Cooper's father calls him "Cooperstown," the name of the location of the US National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, which honors prominent baseball players (The Editors, 2024). Through this name, Cooper's father conveys his expectation for Cooper to enter the hall every time he talks to Cooper. The way Cooper's father incessantly applies pressure on Cooper to excel also reflects the way society constantly reinforces their expectations upon an individual. Furthermore, another reason why Cooper feels pressure to maintain high levels of performance is his family's sacrifice. Cooper's family spends an unspecified but presumably high amount of money so that Cooper can attend the baseball program at Bayview. Their sacrifice makes Cooper feel morally obliged to live up to their expectations. This detail reflects the way that even well-intentioned sacrifices that families make for their children can stop the latter from wanting to disalign with an archetype. Somewhat ironically, baseball scouts start to speculate that Cooper used performance-enhancing steroids when he appeared to improve his fastball speed unreasonably quickly. This detail reflects the toxicity of social expectations: individuals are expected to conform, but conforming too much causes as many complications as non-conformity.

Predictably, Cooper felt pressured to live up to the archetype of a conventionally masculine "jock." Consequently, he tries to hide his homosexuality throughout the book. When in public with his boyfriend Kris, Cooper admits his reluctance to reveal his identity: "I found myself keeping my distance from Kris when we walked from my car to the coffee shop, because I didn't want people guessing what we are to each other. I hate that part of me. But it's there." Cooper's attempts to conceal his own identity are a reflection of the way that social expectations to fit into a stereotype can force people to hide their individuality.

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McManus uses Bronwyn and Cooper to demonstrate the potentially harmful impacts of social pressure to conform to a high-profile stereotype. Meanwhile, McManus uses Addy to show how some individuals are pressured into giving up their individuality and aspirations. Addy's mother constantly insists that Addy must rely on men. She tells Addy that Addy is "hardly college material" and must find "a decent boy with a good future who's willing to take care of [Addy]." She also berates Addy for distancing herself from her classmate TJ: "You should consider yourself lucky he wanted to spend time with you at all…Have a few dates with a boy like TJ, even if you're not interested, and other boys at school might see you as desirable again. You don't want to end up on a shelf…" During this speech, Addy's mother objectifies Addy as an item that can "end up on a shelf" for others to choose. Addy's mother's attitude resembles a mesocosm of misogynist social pressures insisting that girls should not aim for independence and their dreams, but should make themselves attractive so that they can rely on a man. In addition, Addy's classmates also force Addy into the figure of an archetypical "brainless beauty." Throughout the book, other characters repetitively describe Addy as "shallow" and "useless," thereby enforcing a toxic, stereotypical identity upon Addy. In contrast to the pressure exerted upon Bronwyn and Cooper, which expects them to achieve perfection, the pressure exerted on Addy expects her to give up on her own talents, accept her own "uselessness," and look for a partner. Through Addy, McManus strengthens her critique of stereotyping.

Under exposure to heavy stereotyping, Addy internalizes the pressure and stays in a relationship with Jake even though the relationship hurts her. In chapter five, Jake makes Addy wear a pair of high heels and a form-fitting sweater to the beach even though the clothes are clearly not warm enough. This detail of Addy abiding by her boyfriend's will illustrates the life that she feels pressured to live under the expectation that she should become a stereotypical "brainless beauty." The stereotype imposed on Addy contrasts with her true will; Addy is not innately a willing subordinate to Jake. Instead, she is capable of getting drunk and cheating on him by accident. However, Addy feels pressured to hide this anti-Jake part of herself. She restricts her conscious identity to the context of her relationship, as she indicates when she asks herself, "If I'm not Jake's girlfriend, who am I?" The fact that Addy asks this question illustrates how being Jake's girlfriend was one of the only aspects of her identity, so when this identity is stripped away, she is left with blankness, a sense of void underneath an identity imposed by the society that she lives in.

Like the other three narrators, Nate also lives under the "juvenile delinquent" stereotype, which those around him expect him to conform to. At school, other students describe him as a "walking STD," assuming that Nate must live a promiscuous life from his disheveled appearance. The police commit stereotyping by viewing Nate as more suspicious than the rest of the Bayview Four after all four students became suspects for murder; for a while, his house is the only one that the police searched. Even though several people around Nate try to make him abandon his life of crime, they ironically expect Nate to continue living as a criminal, which presumably exerts a negative influence on Nate. Through Nate, McManus shows how stereotypes permeate social life, even when people actively try to encourage others to abandon them.

From another perspective, Nate is also the outlier among the Bayview Four. All the other narrators have secrets that contradict their archetype—Bronwyn cheated in chemistry, Cooper is homosexual, and Addy cheated on her boyfriend. Meanwhile, Nate's secret is that he continues to sell drugs after getting caught, which supports rather than contradicts his "criminal" archetype. Perhaps, Nate and the other characters represent different sides of a spectrum. Bronwyn, Addy, and Cooper are pressured by society to live up to archetypes that may seem somewhat toxic but are nevertheless a part of society. Meanwhile, Nate is seen as an outcast. Rather than forcing Nate to actively conceal parts of his identity that contradict his archetype, as happened to Bronwyn, Addy, and Cooper, stereotyping made Nate conform more

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closely to his archetype—Nate chooses drug dealing over a legal job, exhibiting a different form of internalization as he conforms to society's expectations by not helping himself.

From a psychological perspective, the Bayview Four all exhibit the effects of stereotype threat. According to this concept, repetitive exposure to a label will impact a person's self-identity. For example, a child who grows up hearing that their race cannot excel at academics is likely to identify as a non-academic, to feel less compelled to pursue academia, and ultimately perform less well on standardized tests, which ultimately perpetuates the stereotype that impacted the child in the first place. Psychologist Allport aptly describes this phenomenon, writing: "one's reputation, whether false or true, cannot be hammered, hammered, and hammered into one's head without doing something to one's character" (1954). Through the Bayview Four, who initially conform to their stereotypes, McManus illustrates the destructive power of stereotyping.

3.2. Breaking the Norms

McManus does not merely illustrate the act of stereotyping and its harmful impact. She communicates a more hopeful message by communicating that individuals can break through their stereotypes. Indeed, throughout the novel, the initially hyper-stereotypical Bayview Four slowly break through their stereotypes one by one.

After recovering from her post-breakup depression, Addy embarks upon a life marked by unconventionality and dismissal of others' judgments of her. Addy cuts her hair short and dyes it purple. Through this act, she symbolically and physically rejects the "blond, brainless beauty" stereotype. Her short hair further rejects the expectation of conforming to conventional femininity, symbolically announcing her independence. Moreover, Addy becomes willing to challenge others as the novel progresses. When she first breaks up with Jake, Addy still timidly approaches Jake and asks, "Are you ever going to talk to me again?" This question indicates a level of emotional reliance on Jake, and hence Addy's acceptance of her identity as Jake's girlfriend. In contrast, after undergoing character development, Addy reacts to a barber's refusal to cut her long hair by shearing a handful of her hair off and assertively telling the barber to "fix it." Later, when Jake comments that he is not used to her short hair in chapter 17, Addy retorts: "Well, I am." All these behavioral details indicate that Addy ends up rejecting her "princess" archetype and dependency on males. In fact, she grows into what Nate describes as a "badass ninja." Ultimately, Addy shows the world that she is not "useless" at all. Instead, she grows into an independent woman who can extend a helping hand to others, as she did for her friend Janae.

Meanwhile, Cooper also grows to become more accepting of his homosexual identity toward the end of the novel. After being forced to confess his identity in chapter 22, the other members of the Bayview Four stand up for him against discrimination at school. During this episode, Cooper is left vulnerable and forced to accept assistance from others, an act that contradicts the masculinity he is usually expected to uphold. Eventually, Cooper manages to publicly kiss his boyfriend Kris in chapter 28. This action involves Cooper actively declaring to those around him that he identifies as homosexual and does not plan to hide his identity any longer. Hence, Cooper rejects society's expectations through this kiss.

Concomitantly, Nate and Brownyn also reject society's expectations. Bronwyn openly admits her cheating behavior in chapter thirty. Meanwhile, Nate stops selling drugs and actively comes to Cooper's defense by attracting his classmates' attention away from Cooper while his classmates where disparaging Cooper for homosexuality. Thus, Nate abandons his identity as a drug dealer and turns to more positive actions—actions that society did not expect him to take. Thus, Cooper also rejects his stereotype.

Moreover, Nate and Bronwyn also foster a romantic relationship. They begin to regularly call each other in the middle of the night, having lengthy talks and watching movies together. Even

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though Bronwyn's parents do not approve of Nate, she nevertheless sneaks him into her house in chapter nineteen so that they can kiss and watch Ringu. Likewise, in chapter 17, Bronwyn and Nate visit Marshall's Peak, where they flirtingly promise never to kill each other. During this process, both characters allegedly break their stereotypes by associating with the "good girl" and "bad boy," respectively. The effectiveness of this "unconventional" pairing is undermined by its prevalence in literature.

In any case, Bronwyn and Nate's relationship is not an easy one. Toward the end of the novel, Nate is framed for murder and put into prison. Even after the true culprit is revealed and Nate is released, Nate's insecurities overtook him, and he begins to reject Bronwyn, until they speak to each other again in the final chapter. McManus deliberately makes their romance an unstable one. This choice not only adds drama to the plot but also illustrates the difficulty of rejecting a stereotype and hanging out with "the other."

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Gilles Deleuze's concept of "becoming-woman" offers a profound framework for analyzing the character development in McManus' *One of Us Is Lying*. By challenging fixed identities and embracing fluidity and change, Deleuze's philosophy illuminates how the novel's teenagers break free from their stereotypical roles. The characters' journeys from rigid labels to multifaceted individuals exemplify the process of deterritorialization, where traditional boundaries dissolve to reveal deeper, more dynamic identities. This transformative experience not only enriches the characters' personal growth but also encourages readers to question and move beyond societal stereotypes. Ultimately, the application of "becoming-woman" in this context underscores the novel's message that identity is not static but an ever-evolving construct, shaped by experiences and challenges. Through this lens, One of Us Is Lying becomes a powerful narrative about the potential for self-reinvention and the liberation found in transcending societal expectations.

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